



NON-COOPERATION MOVEMENT AND THE COLONIAL STATE

Gaurav Sanjay Gadgil

Assistant Professor, Department of History,
K.J. Somaiya College of Arts and Commerce (Mumbai)



ABSTRACT

Non-Cooperation Movement, launched under the leadership of Gandhi and the Indian National Congress was indeed the first successful mass upheavals against British colonialism. This pitched the Congress organisation against the colonial state in which the latter resorted to repressive methods to suppress the movement.

KEYWORDS: - Non-Cooperation Movement, Gandhi, Colonial State, Police Repression.

INTRODUCTION

The period beginning from 1900 was a tumultuous period in the Indian history. It marked the beginnings of political agitations from Bengal spreading to the rest of the country; the advent of Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi on the national political scene with the launch of the Khilafat and the Non Cooperation Movements; beginnings of the activities of armed revolutionaries and communists; and the burning communal question which manifested itself in numerous riots. Police which is supposed had to play the primary role of detection and prevention of crime, henceforth focussed more on 'extracting loyalty to the regime and to punish political dissent'.¹ Police, which has always been, continued to be a part of the state structure trying to subvert and suppress all types of political and social opposition that came to the dominant order, in this context the British Raj.

NON-COOPERATION MOVEMENT AND THE RISE OF GANDHI:

The arrival of Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi on the political scene of India in 1915 begins a new era of Indian history and politics. It not only marks the change of guard within the Indian National Congress led national movement, but also heralds in a new phase in the anti-colonial struggles by bringing in the masses for the first time. Though he hailed from the province of Gujarat, he soon captured the national leadership and became the most prominent leader of the anti-colonial movement of India.

Gandhi, under the advice of his political Guru Gopal Krishna Gokhale, acquainted himself with the socio-economic situation of the people of the Indian sub-continent from 1915 to 1917. He took extensive tours and met with numerous leaders and people to know their plight, their grievances and understand the political situation at the grass root level. It was after that he became active politically at Champaran, Kheda and Ahmedabad. It was a steady build up to the national leadership role which Gandhi was to take.

In 1919 Gandhiji started his agitation, of non-violent variety, against the draconian Rowlatt Acts that were passed by the British Government despite criticism and opposition from Indian leaders. It was here that the innovative method of political action, termed as 'satyagraha', by Gandhi was first put to practice on an All-India level mass agitation. This satyagraha was not only insistence on the truth that every human should have the basic right of independence but also had the feature that it should be used with the principle of 'ahimsa' or non-violence.

Gandhiji was on his way to address a meeting in Punjab, when he was asked on April 8 to de-board the train at Palwal, near Mathura, and return to Gujarat. This incident led to rumours in Ahmedabad that Gandhiji was arrested and resulted in a flash strike by the working classes who were joined by other segments of the society. There was resistance to the march of the workers shown by two Europeans, which led to clashes with the police in which an Indian policeman was killed. On 11th April the situation worsened when another false rumour spread that Ansuyaben had been arrested by the police leading to further rioting in Gujarat. Crowds as large as 1000 people marched to the police stations, collector's office and other government buildings with inflammatory materials which were then attacked and burned.ⁱⁱ It is reported that 51 government buildings were burnt down by rioters consisting mainly the textile workers of the Ahmedabad city.ⁱⁱⁱ It led to a severe law and order crisis as the people started attacking the very places that were the symbol of the colonial state. It was a natural response of the people to attack the police stations and government offices as they were seen by the masses as not only the symbols of the colonial state but also edifices of colonial exploitation. Hence, they became the principal sites of taking their long standing grievances and hatred in the form of attacks. This, quite logically, resulted in the colonial backlash when the police and military combined their forces to put down this open riot and restore law and peace in the Ahmedabad region. However, this resulted in further clashes between the two leading to numerous injuries and deaths. In the firing done by the police and military 28 people were killed and 123 wounded.^{iv} It was assumed by the police and the colonial state that this would be a good lesson to the people to withdraw the riot, however things turned differently. The news of police firing on the people of Ahmedabad and killing more than 20 people resulted in similar riots and violence in Viramgad and Nadiad. The people cut the telegraph line of Ahmedabad and Kheda districts, and the agitation took a radical turn. A train carrying troops was derailed near Nadiad Junction, and Martial Law was declared in Ahmedabad to restore order. The peaceful agitation of Gandhi and spontaneously turned violent. Gandhi was thoroughly displeased with the turn of event and resorted to a 3 day penitential fast. It was this that brought the violent actions of the public to an end.^v It not only showed that the people were not threatened by the armed might of the state or by the state violence that was unleashed on them with all the fury that was humanly possible, but also the fact that Gandhi was the undisputed leader whose commands were obeyed by the people at large. This began the rise of Gandhi in the national movement, and the process of the failing state control over the people with the help of force.

The final catapult to the role of national leadership came with the launch of the Khilafat and the Non-Cooperation Movement in 1920. The background of the movement, as is well known, was provided by the Khilafat issue dealing with the Turkish Caliphate and the wrongs done to Punjab under Martial Law. The Central Khilafat Committee that was established under the leadership of Maulana Mohammad Ali and Maulana Shaukat Ali, famously known as the 'Ali Brothers', had taken up the Khilafat issue and had turned it into an anti-colonial ideology with the support of the Ulema. They had managed to convince the *ulema* that the satyagraha principle was not anti-Islamic. Meanwhile, Gandhiji was readying his organisational base to launch the first anti-colonial mass movement in India. He had taken over the presidentship of the Home Rule League after the resignation of Annie Besant in April 1920. This provided him with the organisational base that was much needed. Besides, he also strengthened his position in the Gujarat Congress Committee by asking it to support his plan of launching a nation-wide campaign to liberate India from colonial rule and take up the Khilafat issue with the British Government. Though theoretically, a provincial committee could not take a policy decision without it being earlier ratified by the Indian National Congress in its annual session, The Gujarat Congress Committee gave its approval to Gandhi to launch his movement. The movement was launched on the 1st of August 1920 espousing the cause of Islamic Caliphate, opposing the grave injustice done to the people of Punjab, and for the national demand of Swaraj. The Congress conducted a special session in September 1920 to decide its stand on the Non Cooperation Movement of Gandhi and adopted a resolution in its favour, despite opposition coming from the camp of respected Bengal leader C.R. Das and that of Motilal Nehru. The annual session of the Congress ratified the earlier decision and gave its entire

support to Gandhi, with C.R. Das and Motilal Nehru also in favour of the movement. Gandhi's ascendancy to the top of Congress leadership was complete. He was now the master of Congress and the national movement.^{vi}

The peasants of Gujarat were the ones that actively participated in the movement. Krishna Das, a close associate of Gandhi, has stated that the peasant awakening in Gujarat was "at once massive and tightly-controlled and disciplined".^{vii} The discipline of non-violence fitted in perfectly with the Patidar peasant proprietors as a more revolutionary movement could have raised concerns over how to establish and maintain control over the lower caste and/ or tribal agricultural labourers.^{viii} The mass movement touched a large segment of the population which was till recent times out of the political arena. The greatest contribution of Gandhi, arguably, would be to bring politics to the interiors of the Indian society.

The British administration initially adopted the policy of non – intervention in the non-cooperation movement as they thought, from their early experiences in Ahmedabad, that repression would further fuel the movement. So, ignoring the movement at least in the initial phase would be the best option. This as a policy measure was adopted by the provincial administration of Bombay Presidency, which included most of western Maharashtra and Gujarat in it. The police in the Presidency were directed to avoid using means of suppressing the anti-colonial non-cooperation movement launched under Gandhian leadership. However, this stand was modified once the annual Nagpur Session of the Indian National Congress decided to extend unconditional support to the movement. The fears of the colonial regime had come to the fore. The disillusioned sections of the populace, namely the working classes and the peasantry, were for the first time brought into mainstream political agitation under the Congress banner. A new directive was issued to the Police and provincial administration wherein limits were introduced to the tolerance that the Police will bear to the nationalist upsurge. It was stated that anyone incited the public to violence through print media or through speeches or through any form of seditious propaganda tried to wave the loyalties of the Police or the Army were to be dealt with severely. There were to be no exceptions to this rule, even though the concerned person was close associate of Gandhi.^{ix} Though the arrest of the leaders comes in the late stages of the movement, the foot soldiers of ahimsa were routinely picked up by the police and were given inhuman treatment in the lock ups that often included measures like beating and flogging. The property of farmers, participating in the movement, was often confiscated by the state under some pretext in order to demoralise the people from supporting the anti-colonial upsurge.

Gandhiji, in his letter to the Viceroy has stated the issue of police atrocities,

"The looting of property, assaults on innocent people, the brutal treatment of prisoners in the jails including flogging cannot be described as legal, civilised or in any way necessary. This official lawlessness cannot be described in any other term but lawless repression..."

... But this lawless repression (in a way unparalleled in the history of this unfortunate country) has made the immediate adoption of mass civil disobedience an imperative duty."^x

VIOLENCE AT CHAURICHAURA AND WITHDRAWAL OF THE MOVEMENT

The next stage of the movement was to be reached with a civil disobedience of the tax laws from Bardoli in Surat District of Gujarat, wherein the peasants would refuse to pay the land revenue to the British regime. The planning was in advanced stages and the launch of the next, more aggressive, more radical stage was eagerly awaited when the anti-climax struck. The entire Non-Cooperation movement was withdrawn after the Chauri-Chaura incident of 5th February 1922. The Congress Working Committee under the advice of Gandhi passed the resolution on 12th February, from Bardoli, to withdraw the movement with immediate effect. This caused dissatisfaction, disillusionment and frustration for the rank and file of the Congress. However, as it has been argued that 'Gandhi was protecting the movement from likely suppression and the people from demoralization'.^{xi} The British administration was waiting eagerly for the movement to lose its discipline and rigid control over the principle of ahimsa, and then the colonial police along with the state administration would have all the reasonable means to launch the massive suppressive

measures on the movement and unleash its fury on the Congress. This can be seen from the Home Department files of 1921 in which it is argued that the colonial police only had one alternative to stop the movement, and that was all out repression and arrest of leaders. But they believed that it too early to use such stringent measures.^{xii} In addition if the police had used all possible means to suppress the non-violent protests, this would have tarnished the moral image of the British Empire as the 'civilising' force in the Indian subcontinent. Hence, they were patiently waiting for an act of violence against the state or representatives thereof, after which the state would have a 'just' reason to launch the massive suppression of the movement.

CONCLUSION

Non-Cooperation Movement, launched under the leadership of Gandhi and the Indian National Congress was indeed the first successful mass upheavals against British colonialism. Though the movement failed in its basic objective to attain Swaraj, it did make the Congress a mass based political organisation. The withdrawal of the movement in 1922 did hurt many nationalists, but in hindsight it can be argued that the decision was not altogether a blunder. The withdrawal of the movement, though unpopular at that stage was a master stroke of Gandhi by which he saved the nascent mass organisational base of the Indian National Congress from brutal suppression by the police forces of the colonial state. As Mridula Mukherjee argues, "The retreat that was ordered on 12 February, 1922 was only a temporary one. The battle was over, but the war would continue."^{xiii}

ⁱ K.S. Subramanian, *Are the Indian Police A Law Unto Themselves? A Rights Based Assessment*, Social Watch India Perspective Series, Vol. 3, New Delhi, 2011, p.42

ⁱⁱ S.B. Rajgor, *History of Gujarat*, S. Chand and Co. Ltd., New Delhi, 1982, p. 464

ⁱⁱⁱ SumitSarkar, *Modern India*, McMillan India Ltd., New Delhi, 1983, p. 193

^{iv} S.B. Rajgor, *Op.cit.*, p. 464

^v *Ibid.*, pp. 464 – 465

^{vi} Jim Masselos, *Indian Nationalism: A History*, Sterling Publishers Private Limited, New Delhi, 2010, pp. 161 – 163

^{vii} Quoted in SumitSarkar, *op. cit.*, pp. 211 – 212

^{viii} SumitSarkar, *op. cit.*, p. 212

^{ix} M.S.A./ Home Department (H.D.) Special, *Secretary to Government of India*, Demi-Official, L. No. 399, 28 January 1921, pp. 1 – 7

^x Mahatma Gandhi, *Letter to Viceroy (Bardoli, February 1, 1922)*, The Selected Works of Mahatma Gandhi, Vol. IV, Navjivan Publishing House, Ahmedabad, 2011, pp. 87 – 88

^{xi} BipanChandra, et. al., *India's Struggle for Independence*, Penguin Books India (P) Ltd., New Delhi, 1997, p. 193

^{xii} M.S.A./ H.D. (Special), *Secretary to Government of India*, Demi-Official, L. No. 399, 28 January 1921, pp. 1 – 7

^{xiii} Bipan Chandra, et. al., *op. cit.*, p. 196



Gaurav Sanjay Gadgil

Assistant Professor, Department of History, K.J. Somaiya College of Arts and Commerce (Mumbai)