



Research Paper

An Impression of the Advent of Gandhi in the Indian National Movement

Dr Soumen Dhar Choudhury

Associate Professor

Mahatma Gandhi revolutionised the national movement by shaping struggle and leadership, which was the moment's need. He introduced the masses to nonviolent struggle and ahimsa. He raised the national consciousness by touring the country, infusing the spirit of nationalism, and aroused the sentiments of the people against colonial rule.

KEYWORDS: Gandhi, satyagraha, Caliphate, no-changers, Swarajist, struggle

Received 09 June, 2021; Revised: 21 June, 2021; Accepted 23 June, 2021 © The author(s) 2021.

Published with open access at www.questjournals.org

The year 1919 was a critical and influential moment in the history of India's struggle for freedom. It saw the entry of Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi into the arena of Indian politics. With him came a new technique and a new orientation of the spirit. Gandhiji's emergence as a leader was complimented by the circumstances of the day. It was the revolutionary situation in India caused by the Montague Declaration, Home Rule Movement, the spread of plague and influenza resulting in the death of millions of people, forcible recruitment of Indians in the army, Rowlatt Act, Jallianwala Bagh tragedy, Morley-Minto Reforms of 1909, and the Khilafat agitation which necessitated a man, having the trust of his people in him. Gokhale and Tilak could have been the men of the moment, but the former died in 1915, and the latter passed away in 1920, thus turning the people's attention towards Mahatma Gandhi. He was probably the only man to realise the importance of the masses in an anti-imperialist struggle. But he recognised the divisive forces that were at work simultaneously, which were counter-acting against the growing nationalist consciousness in the country. With this knowledge, he developed a schedule that would involve not only the masses in the fight against British imperialism but also act as an organised force to hold together assorted social groups in their progression to achieve Swaraj, that is, emancipation from the alien rule as well as from social and economic handicaps. Once this became clear important communities, classes, ethnic groups, etc., rallied behind him accepting his leadership. He was the leader which the country needed when the Government was arming itself with extraordinary powers to check the rising tide of nationalism. When his appeal was ignored, he came to the forefront and started the passive resistance movement as a challenge to the Government.

The people were called upon to disobey the new law by nonviolent resistance. Gandhiji's call to *satyagraha* met with a remarkable response. It led to mass demonstrations and strikes, and riots in many parts of the country. Punjab was soon aflame, and there were disorders in Delhi, Gujranwala and Amritsar. The Government hit back by firing and killing. Matters came to a crisis in the massacre of Jallianwala Bagh, where people assembled in a prohibited meeting were ruthlessly fired on by the troops under General Dyer on 13th April 1919. Gandhiji's call to *satyagraha* was sealed and sanctioned by the blood that was shed at Jallianwala Bagh.

About this time, there were stirrings among the Muslim populace also. Turkey joined Germany and fought against England and Allied forces. Turkey was defeated along with the Axis powers and compelled to submit to very harsh terms. The (Turkish) Ottoman empire was dismembered. Under the Treaty of Sèvres, territories such as Palestine, Syria, Lebanon, Iraq, Egypt were severed from the empire. The humiliation thus inflicted on the Turkish Sultan, who was the spiritual head (*Kaliph/Caliph*) of the Islamic world, shocked the religious sentiments of the Indian Muslims (and other Muslims globally). They resented the anti-Islamic attitude of England and started the Khilafat movement (andolan) under the leadership of the Ali brothers (Maulana Shaukat Ali and Muhammad Ali). Gandhiji also joined the movement, and so for a time, the Hindus and Muslims were united together in a common struggle for their political regeneration. Political happenings

and widespread uproar on behalf of the Caliphate developed across the Islamic world, and the most prominent activities took place in India. A celebrated Oxon journalist, Maulana Muhammad Ali Johar, had spent four years in prison for advocating struggle with the British and support for the Caliphate. At the commencement of the Turkish War of Independence, Muslim religious leaders feared for the Caliphate, which the European powers were unenthusiastic to protect. To a number of of the Muslims of India, the vision of recruitment by the British to contest against fellow Muslims in Turkey was nothing short of hatred. The Khilafat movement was not a religious movement but rather a commonality with their fellow Muslims in Turkey. In 1920 a union was made between Khilafat leaders and the Indian National Congress, the principal political party and trailblazer of the nationalist movement. Mahatma Gandhi and the Khilafat leaders assured to work and fight collectively for the causes of Khilafat and Swaraj. On the lookout for to increase pressure on the British, the Caliphates became a significant part of the Non-cooperation movement — a countrywide campaign of mass, peaceful civil disobedience. The support of the Caliphates helped Gandhi, and the Congress ensured Hindu-Muslim unity during the struggle. Khilafat trailblazers such as Dr. Ansari, Maulana Azad and Hakim Ajmal Khan became generally devoted to Gandhi. These influential leaders founded the Jamia Millia Islamia in 1920 to encourage independent education and social transformation for Muslims. The Khilafat movement evoked debate and strong sentiments. The critics regarded it as a political agitation founded on a pan-Islamist, fundamentalistic platform and being largely uninterested to the cause of Indian independence. Critics of the Khilafat saw its blending with the Congress as a blending of expediency. Advocates of the Khilafat saw it as the catalyst that led to the non-cooperation movement in India and a chief breakthrough in improving Hindu-Muslim relations. The collective Khilafat Non-Cooperation movement was the first all-India agitation against British rule. It saw an unparalleled degree of Hindu-Muslim collaboration, and it recognised Gandhi and his technique of nonviolent protest (*satyagraha*) at the centre of the Indian nationalist movement. Mass mobilisation using religious signs was strangely effective, and the British Indian government was stunned. In late 1921, the Government moved to overwhelm the movement. The leaders were arrested, tried, and confined. Gandhi put off the Non-Cooperation movement in early 1922. Turkish nationalists dealt the final blow to the Khilafat movement by abolishing the Ottoman sultanate in 1922 and the Caliphate in 1924.

In his famous book, *Hind Swaraj* (1909), Mahatma Gandhi declared that British rule was established in India with the cooperation of Indians and had survived only because of this cooperation. With the emergence of Gandhiji as the leading personality in the nationalist movement in 1920, the nationalist movement transformed. The Non-Cooperation Movement took place under his leadership and the Indian National Congress from September

1920 to February 1922, revolutionising a new chapter in the Indian Independence Movement. After a sequence of events, including the Jallianwala Bagh carnage, the Mahatma realised that there was no scene of getting any reasonable dealing at the hands of the British, so he planned a mass program to awaken the people of India from the morass of hopelessness, educate them politically and throw a challenge to the British Government, thus launching the Non-Cooperation Movement and thereby spoiling the administrative set up of the country. This movement was a great success as it got massive encouragement from millions of Indians. This movement almost shook the British authorities.

A special session of the Congress met at Calcutta in 1920. It supported Gandhiji's plan for non-cooperation till Punjab and *Khilafat* wrongs were redressed. It adopted the programme of non-cooperation under the leadership of the Mahatma. The people were asked to proscribe government educational institutions, law courts and legislatures while using khadi. This decision was endorsed by the Congress session at Nagpur in 1920. It was resolved at the session to form a Congress Working Committee to enable the Congress to function as a continuous political organisation. The provincial Congress Committees were organised on a linguistic basis. Besides, membership was thrown open to all men and women on payment of four annas as an annual subscription fee. By then, a very important development occurred on the national scene. The All-India Khilafat Conference held in 1919 decided to withdraw all cooperation from the Government if their demands were not met.

Moreover, both Muslims and Hindus were against the Rowlatt Acts. Swami Shardhanand, an Arya Samajist, was asked by the Muslims to preach from the pulpit of the Jama Masjid at Delhi, and Dr Saifuddin Kitchlu was given the keys of the Golden Temple in Amritsar. There was such an understanding amongst Hindus and Muslims in the context of the Rowlatt Acts that it looked as if both the communities would equally share the burden of freeing the country from the foreign yoke. Logically, the Khilafat resolution of November 1919 encouraged Gandhiji to work for Hindu-Muslim unity. Immediately after the Nagpur session, there was an unprecedented national awakening among the people. The majority of the electorate refused to cast their votes in 1920. Students withdrew from schools. Many educational institutions on national lines came into existence--- Aligarh, Jamia Milia, Gujarat Vidyapeeth, Kashi Vidyapeeth, Tilak Maharashtra Vidyapeeth, etc., women showed greater enthusiasm and gifted away their jewellery. Bonfires of foreign cloth were made. Khadi became

the symbol of the freedom struggle.

Taking a cue from the popular response, Congress empowered its Working Committee to start civil disobedience. The Government reacted. All-important national leaders, except Gandhiji, were arrested in 1921. People demonstrated against the visit of the Prince of Wales. The annual session of the Congress at Ahmedabad in December 1921 reaffirmed its faith in nonviolent, non-cooperation till Punjab and Khilafat wrongs were redressed and Swaraj established. People waited impatiently for the call from Congress. In Punjab, the Sikhs started the Akali Movement. In Malabar, the Moplahs started the anti-zamindari movement, strikes of workers and peasants' struggles became common, and no tax campaigns in the Midnapore district. In February 1922, Gandhiji proposed mass civil disobedience, including non-payment of taxes, unless all political prisoners were released within seven days and the Press made free. Within four days occurred the ugly incident at Chauri Chaura in February 1922. The incident led to the Working Committee meet at Bardoli. The Non-Cooperation Movement was withdrawn.

One of the points in the resolution stated that the peasants should not withhold rent payments to zamindars. Even when the *ryots* had grievances, they should seek redress by mutual consultation and arbitration. Further, the Working Committee forgetting the earlier disappointments in implementing programmes, adopted a constructive programme of charka, prohibition, and establishment of national educational institutions. Motilal Nehru and Lala Lajpat Rai objected to the withdrawal of the movement. The former said, "Why should a town at the foothill of the Himalayas be penalised if a village at Cape Comorin failed to observe non-violence". Looking at the situation, the Government decided to come down heavily. Gandhiji was arrested in March and sentenced to imprisonment for six years. He invited the highest penalty to be imposed on him in court. Soon the Khilafat movement lost its importance because of the changes within Turkey. Kamal Pasha of Turkey abolished the Caliphate in 1924. Since the non-cooperation movement petered out, the critics within Congress felt outraged. The worst thing was that communalism raised its ugly head. Things went on like this for five years. But from 1927 onwards, the situation began to change.

The suspension of the mass civil disobedience movement led a section of Congress people to organise a new party known as the Swaraj Party. The Swaraj Party was founded as the Congress-Khilafat Swaraj Party. It was a political party established in January 1923 after the annual conference of the National Congress at Gaya in December 1922, which sought better self-governance and political freedom for the Indian people from the British Raj. The concept of Swaraj inspired it. Its leaders were Deshbandhu Chittaranjan Das (President) of Bengal and Pandit Motilal Nehru (Secretary). They opined that the nationalists should enter the Legislative Councils and their non-cooperation with the Government. The Swarajists wanted more representation in the Congress offices and an end to the compulsory obligation for Congresspeople to spin khadi cloth and do social service as a precondition for office. Gandhi's supporters opposed this, men like Vallabhbhai Patel, Jawaharlal Nehru and Rajendra Prasad, who became known as the "No Changers" instead of the Swarajists. Gandhiji grudgingly relaxed the rules on spinning and named some Swarajists to important positions in the Congress Party. He also encouraged Congress to support those Swarajists elected to the councils to not embarrass them and leave them rudderless before the British authorities. This idea was opposed by the "No-Changers" led by Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel, Rajendra Prasad, and Chakraborty Rajagopalachari. The 'No-changers' contested council entry, advocated concentration on constructive work, and continued stay away from and non-cooperation and started quiet preparation for the resumption of the suspended civil disobedience programme. But at the same time, both sides (that is, the "No Changers" and the Swarajists) wanted to circumvent a 1907- type split and kept in touch with Gandhiji, who was in jail. Both sides also comprehended the implication of putting up a joint front to get a mass crusade to force the Government to announce reforms, and both sides acknowledged the necessity of Gandhiji's guidance of a unified nationalist front.

Das and Nehru accepted the Congress programme but would take part in Council elections. The bitter verbal battle broke out between the Swarajists and the "No-Changers", and even Gandhiji could not help it. The Swaraj Party aimed to destroy the reforms from within the legislatures by continuous obstructions. Swarajists had the support of the followers of Jinnah in the Central Assembly, but in the provinces, their success was greater, especially in Bengal, Bihar, the United Provinces, The Central Provinces and Bombay. The Swaraj Party decided on re-entering the Councils with the declared object of offering systematic obstruction to the Government to make the constitution of 1919 unworkable. They did much to discredit the Dyarchy. They kept alive the spirit of opposition at a time when there was a pause in the political activity of Gandhiji. At the Kakinada Congress session of 1923, the Swarajists were permitted to enter the Councils. The Belgaum Congress session presided over by Gandhiji approved the compromise formula agreed earlier, which allowed the Swarajists to carry on their work inside the legislature on behalf of the Congress party. Keeping these issues in mind, a conciliation was reached at a meeting in Delhi in September 1923. By 1924, the Swarajists position had

faded because of extensive communal riots, split among Swarajists themselves into communal and responsive-non-responsive lines, and the death of C.R. Das in 1925 enfeebled it further. They blamed the non-responsivists like Motilal Nehru of being 'anti-Hindu' and a 'beef-eaters'. Thus, the top leadership of the Swarajya Party restated faith in mass civil disobedience and pulled out from legislatures in March 1926, while another section of Swarajists went into the 1926 elections as a party in disorder did not fare well. By the end of 1926, the Swarajists mislaid much of their enthusiasm. The members who supported wrecking the Government from within and those who advocated uniform, continuous and consistent obstruction against the Government decreased. The transformation in the attitude of the Swarajist party gave a new vivacity to the organisation, though not much, and it seemed that for some time, the British imperial machinery could be given some trial. At the same time, certain Indians also got an opening to expose the susceptibilities of the British Government and their tyrannical arrogance while governing and dispensing with the people of India.

The British could not be shaken, and the Swarajists also grew disillusioned. Some of them left the party to join the ministries. But it has to be recognised that some of the Swarajists joined the legislatures now and then cooperated with the Government instead of wrecking the Government from within. The Indian business groups and the Swarajists cooperated well. The latter proved extremely beneficial in nudging the Government to grant protection to the Tata Steel industry in 1924 under the new policy of discriminating protection laid down by the Fiscal Commission of 1921. The Steel Production Bill of 1924 gave subsidy to the Tata Steel industry without protecting the interests of the workers.

Furthermore, as Congress captured local bodies and municipalities all over the country, they proved valuable in some areas for doing limited welfare work and as a source of valuable patronage of funds. Although the elected ministers in the Dyarchy had little power, they had control of considerable patronage, which came with the capture of executive posts. The Swarajists made it problematic for the British rulers to get the permission of the legislatures for their policies and suggestions. They outvoted the Government several times with coalition partners, even on matters relating to budgetary grants, and passed adjournment motions. In 1928, the Government presented a bill, called the Public Safety Bill ironically, in the legislative assembly to empower the Government to deport unwanted and dissident foreigners. The bill was defeated. When the Government introduced this bill again, Vithalbai Patel, who was the President of the assembly, refused to allow it. The debates in the legislatures, in which Indian members often outsmarted the Government and condemned the Government, were read with curiosity and eagerness all over the country. In 1925, Congress handed over political work to the Swaraj Party. This party primarily demanded free industrial expansion and the development of heavy industries. The Swarajists succeeded in exposing the evil machinations of the Imperial Government in India, promoted the cause of Indian freedom selflessly and added parliamentary dimension to the freedom struggle in India after 1922. It cannot be denied that the Swarajists provided a viable substitute to the Gandhian mode of struggle and also a very successful alternate to mass movements.