

Nationalism in India

The First World War, Khilafat And Non-Cooperation

Effects of First World War: The War led to a huge increase in defence expenditure. This was financed by war loans and by increasing taxes. Customs duties were raised and income tax was introduced to raise extra revenue. Prices of items increased during the war years. The prices doubled between 1913 and 1918. The common people were the worst sufferers because of price rise. Forced recruitment of rural people in the army was another cause of widespread anger among people.

Crop failure in many parts of India resulted in acute shortage of food. Influenza epidemic further aggravated the problem. According to 1921 census, about 12 to 13 million people died because of famines and epidemic.

The Idea of Satyagraha

Mahatma Gandhi advocated a novel method of mass agitation; called satyagraha. This method was based on the idea that if someone is fighting for a

true cause, there is no need to take recourse to physical force to fight the oppressor. Gandhiji believed that a satyagrahi could win a battle through non-violence, i.e. without being aggressive or revengeful.

Some early satyagraha movements organized by Gandhi:

Peasants' movement in Champaran in 1916.

Peasants' movement in Kheda in 1917.

Mill workers' movement in Ahmadabad in 1918.

The Rowlatt Act(1919):

The Rowlatt Act was passed by the Imperial Legislative Council in 1919. The Indian members did not support the Act, but it was passed; nevertheless. The Act gave enormous powers to the government to repress political activities. It allowed detention of political prisoners without trial for two years.

On 6th April, 1919; Gandhiji launched a nationwide satyagraha against the proposed Rowlatt Act. The call of strike on 6th April got huge response. People came out in support in

various cities, shops were shut down and workers in railway workshops went on strike. The British administration decided to clamp down on the nationalists. Several local leaders were arrested. Mahatma Gandhi was barred from entering Delhi.

Jallianwalla Bagh

On 10th April 1919; in Amritsar; the police fired upon a peaceful procession. This provoked widespread attacks on government establishments.

Martial law was imposed in Amritsar and the command of the area was given to General Dyer.

The infamous Jallianwalla Bagh massacre took place on 13th April; the day on which Baisakhi is celebrated in Punjab. A crowd of villagers came to participate in a fair in Jallianwalla Bagh. This was enclosed from all sides with narrow entry points.

General Dyer blocked the exit points and opened fire on the crowd. Hundreds of people were killed in the incident. Public reaction to the incident took a violent turn in many north Indian towns. The government was quite brutal in its response. Things took highly violent turn. Mahatma Gandhi called

off the movement as did not want violence to continue.

Need of Wider Spread of Movement: The Rowlatt satyagraha was limited mainly to the cities and towns. Mahatma Gandhi felt the need of a more broad-based movement in India. He was convinced that it could be only possible by bringing the Hindus and Muslims on a common platform.

Khilafat Movement

The Khilafat issue gave him the opportunity to bring the Hindus and Muslims on a common platform. The Ottoman Turkey was badly defeated in the First World War. There were rumours about a harsh peace treating likely to be imposed on the Ottoman emperor; who was the spiritual head of the Islamic world (the Khalifa). A Khilafat committee was formed in Bombay in March 1919 to defend the Khalifa. This committee had leaders like the brothers Muhammad Ali and Shaukat Ali. They also wanted Mahatma Gandhi to take up the cause to build a united mass action. At the Calcutta

session of the Congress in September 1920, the resolution was passed to launch a non-cooperation movement in support of Khilafat and also for swaraj.

Non-Cooperation Movement

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. If Indians refused to cooperate, British rule in India would collapse within a year, and swaraj would come. Gandhiji believed that if Indians begin to refuse to cooperate, the British rulers will have no other way than to leave India.

Some of the proposals of non-cooperation movement:

Surrender the titles which were awarded by the British government.

Boycott civil services, army, police, courts, legislative councils and schools.

Boycott foreign goods.

Launch full civil disobedience campaign, if the government persisted with repressive measures.

Differing Strands within the Movement: The Non-Cooperation-Khilafat Movement began in January 1921. Various social groups participated in this movement, each with its own specific aspiration. All of them responded to the call of Swaraj, but the term meant different things to different people.

The Movement in the Towns:

The movement started with good participation from the middle-class in the cities.

Thousands of students left government-controlled schools and colleges, headmasters and teachers resigned, and lawyers gave up their legal practices.

The council elections were boycotted in most provinces except Madras. In Madras, the Justice Party, the party of the non-Brahmans, felt that entering the council was one way of gaining some power – something that usually only Brahmans had access to.

Foreign goods were boycotted, liquor shops picketed, and foreign cloth burnt in huge bonfires. The import of foreign cloth halved between 1921 and 1922, its value dropping from Rs 102 crore to Rs 57 crore. The boycott of foreign cloths helped in increasing the demand of cloths made in India.

Reasons for Slowdown of Movement:

Khadi was more expensive than mill-made cloth.

The poor people could not afford to buy khadi.

Boycott of British institutions posed a problem of lack of alternative Indian institutions. Such institutions were slow to come up. Students and teachers began coming back schools. Similarly, lawyers resumed their work in the courts.

Rebellion in the Countryside: From the cities, the Non-Cooperation Movement spread to the countryside. It drew into its fold the struggles of peasants and tribals which were developing in different parts of India in the years after the war.

Awadh

The peasants' movement in Awadh was led by Baba Ramchandra. He was a sanyasi who had

earlier worked in Fiji as an indentured labourer.

The peasants were against the high rents and many other cesses which were demanded by talukdars and landlords. The peasants demanded reduction of revenue, abolition of begar, and social boycott of oppressive landlords.

Jawaharlal Nehru began touring the villages in June 1920. He tried to understand the problems of the peasants. Oudh Kisan Sabha was set up by October. It was headed by Jawaharlal Nehru, Baba Ramchandra and a few others. By associating itself with the peasants' movement, Congress was able to integrate the movement in Awadh with a wider non-cooperation movement. At many places, people stopped paying rents by invoking the name of the Mahatma.

Tribal Peasants

Tribal peasants gave their own interpretation of Mahatma Gandhi and the idea of swaraj. The tribals were prevented from entering the forests to graze cattle, or to collect fruits and firewood. The new forest laws were a threat to their livelihood.

The government forced them to do begar on road construction.

Many rebels from the tribal areas became non-violent and often carried guerilla warfare against the British officials.

Swaraj in the Plantations

The plantation workers were not permitted to leave the tea gardens without permission; as per the Indian Emigration Act of 1859. When the news of Non-Cooperation Movement spread to the plantations, many workers began to defy the authorities. They left plantations and headed towards their homes. But they got stranded on the way because of a railway and steamer strike. They were caught by the police and brutally beaten up.

Many analysts are of the opinion that the vision of the movement was not properly defined by the Congress. Different people interpreted the term 'swaraj' in their own ways. For them, swaraj meant an end to all their problems. However, people from various strata of society began to chant the name of Gandhi and the slogan of Swatantra Bharat. In

some way or the other, they were trying to relate to the wider movement which was beyond their comprehension.