

## Theme 12 Mahatma Gandhi and the Nationalist Movement

Mahatma Gandhi was the most influential and revered of all the leaders who participated in the freedom struggle of India.

### A Leader Announces Himself

- Mahatma Gandhi returned to India in 1915, after 20 years from South Africa.
- Historian Chandran Devanesan has rightly remarked that “South Africa was the making of the Mahatma”. It was in South Africa that Mahatma Gandhi
  - -adopted his technique of non violent protest or Satyagraha,
  - -promoted harmony between religions, and
  - -alerted upper caste Indians for their discriminatory treatment of low castes and women.

### Difference in India that Gandhi left in 1893 and the India Gandhi returned to in 1915

- The India that Mahatma Gandhi came back to in 1915 was different from the one that he had left in 1893.
- Although still a colony of the British; it was far more active in the political sense.
- The Indian National Congress now had branches in most major cities and towns.
- Through the Swadeshi movement of 1905-07 it had greatly broadened its appeal among the middle classes.
- That movement had thrown up some towering leaders -among them Bal Gangadhar Tilak of Maharashtra, Bipin Chandra Pal of Bengal, and Lala Lajpat Rai of Punjab known as “Lal, Bal and Pal”.
- While these leaders advocated militant opposition to colonial rule, there was a group of “moderates” who Preferred a more gradual and persuasive approach. Among these moderates was Goplala Krishna Gokhale as well as Mohammad Ali Jinnah.

### Importance of the speech of BHU

- Gandhi’s first major public appearance was at the opening of the Banaras Hindu University (BHU) In February 1916.
- It was merely a statement of fact that Indian nationalism was an elite phenomena, a creation of lawyers, doctors and landlords.
- Gandhiji charged the Indian elite with a lack of concern for the laboring poor
- Gandhiji chose to remind those present, of the peasants and workers who constituted a majority of the Indian population, yet were unrepresented in the audience.
- The first public announcement of Gandhiji’s own desire was to make Indian nationalism more properly representative of the Indian people as a whole.

### First campaign of Mahatma Gandhi

- At the annual congress ,held in Lucknow in December 1916, Mahatma Gandhi was approached by a peasant from Champaran and he told Mahatma Gandhi about the harsh treatment the peasants received by the British. In **1917**, Mahatma Gandhi organized a **Satyagraha in Champaran** (Bihar) seeking the security of tenure as well as the freedom to grow crops as per their wish.

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## Campaigns launched by Gandhiji in his home state

Gandhiji was involved in two campaigns in his home state of Gujarat.

- Firstly, he participated in the **Ahmadabad textile mill strike** of February-March 1918, demanding better working conditions for the textile mill workers.
- Secondly, he joined the peasants in **Kheda Satyagraha** who demanded remission of taxes from the state following the failure of their harvest. It was in Kheda that Mahatma Gandhi initiate the first Satyagraha revolution.

## Rowlatt Act

- The Rowlatt Act was passed by the British government in India in March **1919**.
- This act authorized the government to imprison, without trial any person suspected of terrorism.
- Gandhiji called for a country wide agitation against the Rowlatt Act.
- On April 6<sup>th</sup> a hartal was declared by Gandhiji. The protests against the Rowlatt Act grew progressively intense reaching a climax in Amritsar in April 1919, when a British Brigadier ordered his troops to open fire on a nationalist meeting.
- More than 400 people were killed in what is known as the **Jalliwala Bagh massacre**.
- It was the Rowlatt Act that made Gandhiji a truly national leader.
- Encouraged by its success, Gandhiji called for a campaign of Non-cooperation with the British rule.

## Non cooperation movement

Factors leading to the Non-cooperation Movement

- The First World War (1914-18) and laws introduced by the British
- Censorship of the Press
- Introduction of Rowlatt Act (1919) which permitted detention without trial
- Campaign against Rowlatt Act
- Gandhiji detained while proceeding to Punjab
- Prominent local congressmen arrested
- Jalliwala Bagh massacre
- Success of Rowlatt satyagraha and Gandhiji's call for Non cooperation Movement

Gandhi decided to couple the khilafat issue with the Non-Cooperation .He wanted to bring Hindus and Muslims collectively to end colonial rule. During non cooperation movement

- Students stopped going to schools and colleges run by the British government.
- Lawyers refused to attend the court.
- The working class went on strike in many towns and cities.
- Hill tribes in Northern Andhra violated the forest laws.
- Farmers in Awadh refused to pay taxes.

- These protest movements were sometimes carried out in defiance of the local nationalist leadership.
- Gandhiji taught the people self discipline, renunciation, self-denial, Ahimsa, Satyagraha through Non cooperation Movement. The aim of the movement was self rule.
- The Movement shook the foundation of the British rule in India. Many Indians including Gandhiji were put in jail.
- In February 1922, a group of peasants attacked and fired a police station at **Chauri Chaura** in U.P. Several policemen were killed. This act of violence prompted Gandhi to call off the movement.

### **Gandhi as people's leader.**

- Gandhiji had transformed the nationalist movement into a mass movement that was more properly representative of the Indian masses.
- In his speech at the opening of the BHU, he reminded people that the peasants and workers were a majority of the Indian population who remained unrepresented in the national movement.
- It was Gandhiji's desire to make Indian nationalism representative of the Indian people.
- The people appreciated the fact that he dressed like them, lived like them, and spoke their language.
- He identified himself with common man. This was strikingly reflected in his dress, while other nationalist leaders dressed formally, wearing a western suit or an Indian bandgala, Gandhiji went among the people in a simple dhoti or loin cloth.
- Meanwhile, he spent part of each day working on the charkha (spinning wheel) and encouraged other nationalists to do likewise.
- The act of spinning allowed Gandhiji to break the boundaries that prevailed within the traditional caste system, between mental labour and manual labour.
- Gandhiji's appeal among poor, and peasants in particular was enhanced by his ascetic life style, and his shrewd use of symbols such as the dhoti and the charkha.
- Gandhi appeared not just to look like them, but also to understand them and related to their lives and work for them and the nation together.

### **Rumours of Gandhiji's miraculous powers**

There were some rumours of Gandhiji's miraculous powers.

- In some places it was said that he had been sent by the king to redress the grievances of the farmers and that he had the power to overrule all local officials.
- Gandhiji's appeal among the poor and peasants, in particular, was enhanced by his ascetic life style.
- It was also claimed that Gandhi's power was superior to that of the English Monarch and with his arrival colonial rulers would flee the district.
- Stories spread of dire consequences for those who opposed him.
- Those who criticized Gandhi found their houses mysteriously falling apart or their crops failing.
- Gandhiji appeared to the Indian peasant as a saviour, who could rescue them from high taxes and oppressive officials and restore dignity and autonomy to their lives.

## The base of Indian National Movement under Gandhiji.

- The base of Indian National Movement broadened under Gandhiji.
- He brought changes in the congress organization. New branches of the congress were set up in various parts of India.
- Prajamandals were established to promote nationalism in the princely states.
- The provincial committees of the congress were based on linguistic divisions rather than the artificial boundaries set up by the British administration.
- Gandhiji advocated the spreading of the nationalist message in the mother tongue, rather than English – language of the British-and thus, nationalist message was carried to parts of India and to social groups previously untouched by it.
- Prosperous businessmen and industrialists were quick to recognize that in free India the favours enjoyed by their British competitors would come to an end.
- So they wasted no time and joined the congress as the Indian entrepreneurs. For example, G.D Birla supported the national movement openly.
- Highly talented Indians attached themselves to Gandhiji.
- Gandhiji was seen as “Mahatma” and he had a huge following from all sections of people all over India.

## Gandhi as a social reformer

- Gandhiji was as much a social reformer as he was a politician.
- He took steps to remove social evils such as child marriage and untouchability.
- He gave emphasis on Hindu Muslim harmony.
- Meanwhile on the economic front Indians had to learn to become self-reliant –hence he stressed on the significance of wearing khadi rather than mill-made cloth imported from overseas.

## The Salt Satyagraha-A case study

### **Background: Major political events from 1928to 1930**

- In 1927 the Simon Commission was appointed to enquire into conditions in the colony.
- In 1928, there was an all India campaign in opposition to the all white commission sent to India.
- Gandhiji did not himself participate in this movement since he was engaged in a peasant satyagraha in Bardoli.
- In the end of December 1929, the congress held its annual session in the city of **Lahore**.
- The meeting was significant for two reasons: the election of **Jawaharlal Nehru** as president, signifying the passing of the leadership of congress to younger generation, and the proclamation of commitment to “**poorna swaraj**” or complete independence. On 26 January 1930, “**Independence Day**” was observed, with the national flag being hoisted at different venues.

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## The Salt March

- Soon after the observance of this “Independence Day”, the state monopoly over salt which was deeply unpopular was made a target.
- Gandhiji hoped to mobilize a wider level of discontent against British rule.
- Salt was an indispensable item in every Indian house. People were forbidden from making salt even for domestic use. British compelled them buy salt from shops at a higher price.
- Gandhiji had given advance notice of his “salt march” to the Viceroy Lord Irwin, who failed to grasp the significance of the action.
- On **12 March 1930**, Gandhi began his march from his **Sabarmati Ashram** towards ocean .He reached **Dandi** three weeks later and made a handful of salt and thereby breaking the law.
- Parallel salt marches and protests were also conducted in other parts of the country.
- Peasants breached the hated colonial forest laws that kept them and then came out of the woods in which they had once roamed freely.
- In some towns, factory workers went on strike while lawyers boycotted British courts and students refused to attend government run educational institutions.
- As in 1920-22, now too Gandhiji’s call had encouraged Indians of all classes to manifest their own discontent with colonial rule.
- During the march Gandhiji told the upper castes that if they want swaraj they must serve untouchables. Hindus, Muslims, Parsis and Sikhs have to unite and these are steps towards Swaraj.
- The police spies reported that all men and women and all castes attended the meetings of Gandhi.
- They observed that thousands of volunteers were flocking to the national cause.
- The Salt March of Gandhiji was reported in the American news magazine, Time.
- In its report on the march the magazine was deeply sceptical of the salt march reaching its destination.
- But shortly it changed its view and saluted Gandhi as a “saint” and “statesman”
- The rulers responded by detaining the dissenters. In the wake of the salt march in 1930, nearly 60,000 Indians were arrested among them, of course, Gandhiji himself.

## Significance of the Salt March

The Salt March was notable for at least three reasons.

- Firstly, this event brought Mahatma Gandhi to world attention. The March was widely covered by the European and American press.
- Secondly, it was the first nationalist activity in which women participated in large numbers. The socialist activists Kamaladevi Chatterjee had persuaded Gandhi not to restrict the protests to men alone. She herself courted arrest by breaking salt and liquor laws.
- Thirdly, it made the British realize that their rule was not to last forever, and they would have to share some power with the Indians. To discuss the same the British tried to hold Round Table Conference in London to get to some kind resolution.

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## Gandhi-Irwin Pact

In January 1931, Mahatma Gandhi was released from jail. After that many meetings were held with the Viceroy and it culminated in the Gandhi-Irwin pact. It was declared to call off Civil Disobedience Movement; all prisoners who were put in jail without trial to be released and to allow salt manufacturing along the coasts. Gandhiji represented the congress at Second Round Table Conference at London.

## The Round Table Conferences

- **The first Round Table Conference** was held in **London** in November 1930 but it ended without any fruitful decision due to the absence of major Indian nationalist leaders.
- A **Second Round Table Conference** was held in **London** in the latter part of 1931. Gandhiji represented the congress and claimed that his party represented all of India three parties, the Muslim League, the Princes, and the lawyer thinker B.R. Ambedkar opposed that claim. The conference in London was inconclusive, so Gandhi returned to India and resumed civil disobedience movement.

## Quit India Movement

### Background: Major events between 1935 and 1945

- The year 1935 saw the coming of the **Government of India Act of 1935**, which promised some form of representative government.
- In **1937, for the first time, elections were held** on restricted franchise and congress party held a majority in the legislature. It won the election in 8 out of 11 provinces.
- In **1939, World War II broke out** and the Indian leaders agreed to support the British as long as they promised to grant Indian Independence after the war.
- The offer was refused and in **October 1939, congress ministries resigned**.
- In protest a series of Satyagraha were organized by the congress to pressurize the British to promise the freedom once the war ended.
- **In March 1940, Muslim League passed a resolution** demanding and planning to create a separate nation for Muslims.
- **In 1942**, worried on the continuous spread of nationalist movement prime minister of England Winston Churchill sent **Sir Stafford Cripps to India** to try to reach to a compromise with Gandhi and the congress. The Cripps Mission failed as no agreement to grant Independence to India could be made.
- **In August 1942, Quit India Movement was launched** and all the major leaders were arrested.
- In 1944, Gandhi was released and he tried to bring the Muslim League and congress together but was not successful.
- In 1945, the British government committed itself to grant Independence to India.

## Quit India Movement

- After the failure of the Cripps Mission, **Quit India Movement was launched in August 1942**, by Mahatma Gandhi.
- It was the third major movement against the British rule.

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- Gandhiji and other important leaders were arrested and jailed.
- The movement went into the hands of younger leaders. They organized strikes and acts of sabotage all over the country.
- Particularly active in the underground resistance were socialist members of the congress such as Jayaprakash Narayan.
- Independent governments were proclaimed in several districts, such as Satara in the west and Midnapur in the east.
- Quit India was genuinely a mass movement, bringing in to its ambit hundreds of thousands of ordinary Indians.
- It especially energized the youth who, in very large numbers, left their colleges to go to jail.
- In 1943, some of the younger leaders in the Satara district of Maharashtra set up parallel government (pratisarkar), with volunteer corps (sebadals) and village units (tufan dals). They ran people's courts and organized constructive work.

### Major developments in the year 1945-47

- In 1945, the Labour Government came to power in Britain. It was committed for Indian Independence.
- In India, the Viceroy Lord Wavell, negotiated with the congress and the Muslim League.
- Early in 1946, the provincial legislative elections were held in which the congress won the General and League won reserved constituencies.
- **A Cabinet Mission was sent to the summer of 1946**, failed to make consensus between congress and League.
- Jinnah called for a **“Direct Action Day”** to force the League's demand for Pakistan on **16 August 1946** leading to bloody riots in many parts of India.
- **In February 1947, Lord Mountbatten appointed as Viceroy**. He too held inconclusive talks and he announced that India would be freed, but also divided. The formal transfer of power was fixed for 15 August.

### The last heroic days

Mahatma Gandhi refused to take part in the Independence Day celebrations in Delhi on 15th August 1947. He was in Calcutta. He did not attend any function or hoist a flag in Calcutta either. The freedom he had struggled so long for had come at an unacceptable price with a nation divided. Gandhi marked the day with a 24 hour fast. Gandhiji went around hospitals and religious camps giving consolation to distressed people.

Gandhiji had fought a lifelong battle for a free and united India. When the country was divided, he urged that the two parts respect and befriend one another. On **30 January 1948**, Gandhiji was shot dead by Nathuram Godse who had denounced Gandhiji as “an appeaser of Muslims”.

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## **Different kinds of sources that can be used to reconstruct the political career of Gandhiji and the history of the National Movement.**

There are different sources through which we can reconstruct the political career of Gandhiji and the history of the National Movement. Some of the important sources are given below.

- **Public voice and private scripts**

One important source is the writings and speeches of Mahatma Gandhi and his contemporaries, including both his associates and his political adversaries. Out of those a distinction is to be made which were for the public and which not. It helped to hear his public voice. Private letters gave a glimpse of his private thoughts. Many letters are written to individuals, and are therefore personal, but they are also meant for the public. The language of the letters is often shaped by the awareness that they may one day be published. Mahatma Gandhi published letters written by others to him in his journal **Harijan**. Nehru edited a collection of letters written to him and published as A Bunch of Old Letters.

- **Autobiographies**

Autobiographies give us an account of the past that is often rich in human detail. These are written very often from memory what the author could recollect. What he thought to write which was important for him but not for all. In autobiography a person presents himself in a way he wants to be seen. But here again we have to be careful of the way we read and interpret autobiographies. Writing an autobiography is a way of framing a picture about oneself. So in reading these accounts we have to try and see what the author does not tell us; we need to understand the reasons for that silence-those willful or unwitting acts of forgetting. The personal reasons why he chooses to omit some facts and publish others.

- **Government records: Police diaries**

Another vital source is government records, for the colonial rulers kept close tabs on those they regarded as critical of the government. The letters and reports written by the policemen and other officials were secret at the time: but now can be accessed in archives. Fortnightly reports prepared by Home department based on police information for example. Home department was unwilling to accept that Gandhi's actions had worked any enthusiastic response from the public, Dandi March was seen as a drama, an antic, a desperate attempt to mobilize people.

- **News papers**

News papers published in English and different Indian languages tracked Mahatma Gandhi's movements and reported on his activities. They represented ordinary Indian thoughts. News paper accounts, however, should not be seen as unprejudiced. People who had their own political opinions and world views published them. These ideas shaped what was published and the way events were reported.



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