

The Role of Mahatma Gandhi in the Indian National Movement

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Abstract

The Indian National Movement was a prolonged and multifaceted struggle aimed at ending British colonial rule in India. Among the leaders who guided this movement, Mahatma Gandhi played a decisive and transformative role. Gandhi introduced new methods of political resistance based on the principles of truth (Satya) and non-violence (Ahimsa), which significantly changed the nature and direction of the freedom struggle. His philosophy of Satyagraha emphasized peaceful resistance against injustice and encouraged mass participation in political activities. Through movements such as the Non-Cooperation Movement, Civil Disobedience Movement, and the Quit India Movement, Gandhi mobilized millions of Indians, including peasants, workers, women, and students, thereby transforming the national movement into a broad-based mass struggle. Gandhi's leadership also strengthened the organizational role of the Indian National Congress and helped unify diverse sections of Indian society under a common objective of achieving independence. In addition to political resistance, he emphasized social reforms such as the promotion of Khadi, rural self-reliance, communal harmony, and the upliftment of marginalized communities. These efforts contributed to strengthening the moral and ideological foundation of the national movement. This study examines the role of Mahatma Gandhi in the Indian National Movement, focusing on his leadership, philosophy, and strategies of non-violent resistance. It highlights how Gandhi's ideas and methods not only played a crucial role in weakening British colonial rule but also left a lasting impact on political movements across the world.

Keywords: Mahatma Gandhi; Indian National Movement; Satyagraha; Non-violence; Civil Disobedience; Non-Cooperation Movement; Quit India Movement; Indian Independence.

Introduction

The Indian National Movement represents one of the most significant struggles against colonial rule in modern world history. During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the people of India gradually organized themselves to challenge British imperial authority and demand political, economic, and social rights. Initially led by moderate leaders of the Indian National Congress, the movement focused on constitutional reforms and petitions to the colonial government. However, with the passage of time, the limitations of these methods became evident, and the demand for complete independence gained momentum. A decisive turning point in the national movement came with the emergence of Mahatma Gandhi as a prominent political leader. After returning to India from South Africa in 1915, Gandhi introduced new methods of political struggle based on the principles of truth (Satya) and non-violence (Ahimsa). Through his philosophy of Satyagraha, he transformed the nature of the Indian freedom struggle by encouraging peaceful resistance and mass participation. His

leadership brought peasants, workers, women, and other sections of society into the national movement, thereby converting it into a broad-based popular struggle.

Under Gandhi's guidance, several significant movements such as the Non-Cooperation Movement, Civil Disobedience Movement, and Quit India Movement were launched, which played a crucial role in weakening the foundations of British colonial rule in India. His emphasis on moral politics, social reform, and national unity also contributed to strengthening the ideological basis of the freedom struggle.

Therefore, the present study aims to examine the role and contribution of Mahatma Gandhi in the Indian National Movement, with particular focus on his leadership, strategies of non-violent resistance, and their impact on India's struggle for independence.

Historical Background of the Indian National Movement

The Indian National Movement developed gradually as a response to the political, economic, and social policies of British colonial rule in India. During the nineteenth century, the consolidation of British power under the British East India Company and later the direct administration of the British Raj led to widespread economic exploitation, administrative centralization, and social transformation. These developments created growing dissatisfaction among different sections of Indian society, which eventually gave rise to organized political resistance.

The establishment of the Indian National Congress in 1885 marked an important stage in the development of the national movement. In its early phase, the Congress was dominated by moderate leaders such as Dadabhai Naoroji, Gopal Krishna Gokhale, and Surendranath Banerjee. These leaders believed in constitutional methods and sought gradual reforms through petitions, resolutions, and dialogue with the British government. Their demands mainly included greater representation of Indians in administration, protection of civil rights, and economic reforms.

However, by the beginning of the twentieth century, dissatisfaction with the moderate approach began to grow. A new group of nationalist leaders, often referred to as extremists, advocated more assertive methods of protest and demanded self-rule (Swaraj). Prominent among them were Bal Gangadhar Tilak, Bipin Chandra Pal, and Lala Lajpat Rai. Their efforts helped to broaden the scope of the national movement and inspire greater public participation.

In addition to political developments, several revolutionary organizations also emerged during this period, particularly in Bengal and Punjab, which sought to challenge British rule through militant activities. Although these efforts reflected the rising nationalist sentiment, the movement still lacked a unified leadership and a comprehensive strategy capable of mobilizing the masses on a national scale.

It was in this context that the arrival of Mahatma Gandhi in Indian politics brought a new direction to the freedom struggle. Gandhi's emphasis on non-violent resistance, mass mobilization, and moral politics transformed the character of the Indian National Movement and prepared the ground for a broader and more effective struggle against colonial rule.

Arrival of Gandhi in Indian Politics

The entry of Mahatma Gandhi into Indian politics marked a new phase in the history of the Indian National Movement. After spending more than two decades in South Africa, Gandhi returned to India in 1915. During his stay in South Africa, he had successfully organized the Indian community against racial discrimination through peaceful resistance. It was there that he developed and practiced the method of Satyagraha, which later became the central strategy of India's freedom struggle.

Upon his return to India, Gandhi initially avoided direct involvement in national politics and instead traveled extensively across the country to understand the social, economic, and political conditions of the people. During this period, he was greatly influenced and guided by Gopal Krishna Gokhale, a prominent leader of the Indian National Congress. Gokhale advised Gandhi to study Indian society carefully before actively participating in political activities. Soon after, Gandhi began to involve himself in local struggles that reflected the grievances of ordinary people. His leadership in these movements demonstrated that political action could be combined with moral principles and non-violent methods. Through these early initiatives, Gandhi gradually gained the trust and support of peasants, workers, and other marginalized sections of society.

Thus, Gandhi's arrival in Indian politics not only introduced new techniques of political resistance but also transformed the nature of the national movement by emphasizing mass participation, non-violence, and moral leadership. His approach laid the foundation for the subsequent nationwide movements that played a decisive role in India's struggle for independence.

Early Movements Led by Gandhi

After entering Indian politics, Mahatma Gandhi began his political career by addressing the grievances of peasants and workers through peaceful and non-violent methods. These early movements were important because they demonstrated the effectiveness of Satyagraha and established Gandhi as a leader who represented the interests of the common people. The first major success of Gandhi in India was the Champaran Satyagraha. The peasants of Champaran were forced by British planters to cultivate indigo under oppressive conditions. Gandhi investigated their problems and organized a peaceful protest against the unjust system. As a result of this movement, the colonial government agreed to reforms, and the peasants received relief from the exploitative practices. This event greatly enhanced Gandhi's reputation as a national leader.

Another important movement was the Kheda Satyagraha. During a severe crop failure in the Kheda district of Gujarat, the peasants demanded suspension of land revenue. Under Gandhi's leadership, the farmers refused to pay taxes until their demands were accepted. Eventually, the government conceded and granted relief to the affected peasants. This movement further strengthened the confidence of the masses in Gandhi's leadership. In the same year, Gandhi also led the Ahmedabad Mill Strike, which focused on the rights of industrial workers. Gandhi supported the workers in their demand for fair wages and encouraged them to maintain

discipline and non-violent protest. The successful settlement of the strike showed that non-violent resistance could also be effective in labor disputes.

These early movements were significant because they introduced a new form of political struggle based on non-violence, moral courage, and mass participation. They also helped Gandhi gain widespread support across different sections of Indian society and prepared the ground for larger national movements in the coming years.

Non-Cooperation Movement (1920–1922)

The Non-Cooperation Movement marked the first nationwide mass movement led by Mahatma Gandhi against British colonial rule. The immediate background of this movement was the widespread anger among Indians after the repressive policies of the British government, particularly the Rowlatt Act and the tragic Jallianwala Bagh Massacre. These events deeply shocked the nation and strengthened the demand for stronger resistance against colonial authority. In 1920, under the leadership of Gandhi and the Indian National Congress, the Non-Cooperation Movement was launched with the objective of attaining Swaraj (self-rule) through peaceful and non-violent means. Gandhi urged Indians to withdraw their cooperation from British institutions and policies. The movement included the boycott of government schools and colleges, law courts, foreign goods, and titles conferred by the British government. At the same time, people were encouraged to promote Swadeshi, use Khadi, and strengthen indigenous industries. The movement quickly gained widespread support across the country. Students left government institutions, lawyers gave up their legal practices, and people organized peaceful protests and demonstrations. For the first time, large sections of peasants, workers, women, and youth actively participated in the national movement, transforming it into a truly mass struggle.

However, the movement was suddenly suspended in 1922 following the violent Chauri Chaura Incident, where protesters set fire to a police station, resulting in the death of several policemen. Gandhi strongly opposed violence and believed that the movement should remain strictly non-violent. Consequently, he decided to withdraw the movement, emphasizing that moral discipline and adherence to non-violence were essential for the success of the national struggle.

Civil Disobedience Movement (1930–1934)

The Civil Disobedience Movement was another significant phase of the Indian National Movement under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi. This movement aimed at openly defying unjust colonial laws while maintaining strict adherence to non-violence. It represented a more advanced stage of mass struggle against British rule and sought to intensify the demand for complete independence. The movement began in 1930 with the historic Salt March, also known as the Dandi March. Gandhi marched about 240 miles from Sabarmati Ashram to the coastal village of Dandi in Gujarat to protest against the British monopoly on salt production and taxation. By symbolically producing salt from seawater, Gandhi openly violated the colonial salt law. This act became a powerful symbol of resistance and inspired people across the country to participate in the movement.

Following the Salt March, thousands of Indians joined the Civil Disobedience Movement by refusing to pay taxes, boycotting foreign goods, and violating various colonial laws. The movement witnessed active participation from different sections of society, including peasants, workers, students, and women. As a response, the British government resorted to severe repression and arrested many national leaders, including Gandhi. In 1931, negotiations between Gandhi and the British government led to the Gandhi–Irwin Pact, which temporarily suspended the movement and allowed Gandhi to attend the Second Round Table Conference in London. However, the conference did not produce satisfactory results, and the movement resumed later.

Although the Civil Disobedience Movement did not immediately achieve independence, it significantly weakened the legitimacy of British rule and strengthened the nationalist movement. It also demonstrated the power of organized, non-violent resistance in challenging colonial authority.

Quit India Movement (1942)

The Quit India Movement was one of the most significant and final mass movements of the Indian National Movement led by Mahatma Gandhi. It was launched in 1942 during the period of World War II, when the British government had involved India in the war without consulting Indian leaders. This decision created widespread dissatisfaction among the Indian population and intensified the demand for complete independence. In August 1942, the Indian National Congress held its session in Bombay (now Mumbai) and passed the historic Quit India Resolution, demanding the immediate withdrawal of British rule from India. During this session, Gandhi gave the famous call of “Do or Die,” urging the people of India to continue the struggle until independence was achieved. This movement is therefore also known as the Quit India Movement.

Soon after the launch of the movement, the British government arrested Gandhi and other major leaders of the Congress. Despite the absence of national leadership, the movement spread rapidly throughout the country. Students, workers, peasants, and ordinary citizens organized strikes, protests, and demonstrations against British authority. In many places, people attempted to establish parallel governments and challenged colonial administration. Although the British government suppressed the movement through severe repression, the Quit India Movement had a profound impact on the course of the freedom struggle. It clearly demonstrated that the British government could no longer maintain control over India without facing massive resistance. The movement also strengthened the determination of the Indian people to achieve independence, which ultimately led to the end of British rule in 1947.

Gandhi's Philosophy and Methods

The leadership of Mahatma Gandhi was unique because it was based not only on political strategies but also on strong moral and ethical principles. Gandhi believed that the struggle for independence should be conducted through truth (Satya) and non-violence (Ahimsa). These principles formed the foundation of his political philosophy and guided the methods he used in the Indian National Movement. One of Gandhi's most important contributions was the concept of Satyagraha, which means the force of truth or soul-force. Through Satyagraha, Gandhi encouraged people to resist unjust laws and policies peacefully without resorting to violence.

According to him, non-violent resistance had the power to transform both the oppressor and the oppressed by appealing to moral conscience. This method was widely used in several movements of the Indian National Movement and proved to be an effective tool for mass mobilization.

Gandhi also emphasized the importance of civil disobedience, which involved the deliberate violation of unjust laws in a peaceful manner. Through this method, he encouraged people to challenge colonial authority without hatred or violence. Movements such as the Salt Satyagraha and other campaigns demonstrated the strength of this strategy in mobilizing large sections of society. In addition to political resistance, Gandhi promoted several constructive programmes aimed at social and economic reform. He encouraged the use of Khadi, the development of village industries, and the promotion of self-reliance among Indians. Gandhi also worked actively for the removal of untouchability and the upliftment of marginalized communities, whom he referred to as Harijans. Furthermore, he emphasized communal harmony and unity among different religious communities in India.

Impact of Gandhi on the Indian National Movement

The leadership of Mahatma Gandhi had a profound impact on the direction and character of the Indian National Movement. Before Gandhi's emergence, the movement was largely limited to educated elites and political leaders. Gandhi transformed it into a mass movement by actively involving peasants, workers, women, students, and other sections of society in the struggle against British rule. His ability to connect with the common people made the national movement more inclusive and widespread. Another important impact of Gandhi's leadership was the introduction of non-violent resistance as a powerful political weapon. Through methods such as Satyagraha, non-cooperation, and civil disobedience, Gandhi demonstrated that peaceful protest could effectively challenge colonial authority. These methods not only mobilized millions of Indians but also gained international attention and sympathy for India's cause.

Gandhi also strengthened the role of the Indian National Congress by transforming it from a limited political organization into a mass-based national movement. Under his leadership, the Congress adopted new strategies that encouraged grassroots participation and promoted national unity. His emphasis on Swadeshi, self-reliance, and constructive programmes also helped to strengthen India's social and economic foundations during the freedom struggle. Furthermore, Gandhi's efforts to promote communal harmony, social equality, and the upliftment of marginalized communities added a broader social dimension to the national movement. By linking political independence with social reform, he gave the struggle a deeper moral and ideological basis.

Conclusion

The role of Mahatma Gandhi in the Indian National Movement was both significant and transformative. Through his leadership, the struggle against British colonial rule evolved from a limited political agitation into a broad-based mass movement involving various sections of Indian society. Gandhi's commitment to the principles of truth (Satya) and non-violence (Ahimsa) provided the movement with a unique moral foundation and distinguished it from

many other contemporary political struggles. Gandhi successfully introduced innovative methods such as Satyagraha, non-cooperation, and civil disobedience, which mobilized millions of Indians and challenged the authority of the British colonial government in a peaceful yet powerful manner. Movements such as the Non-Cooperation Movement, the Civil Disobedience Movement, and the Quit India Movement played a crucial role in weakening the foundations of British rule in India and strengthening the demand for independence.

In addition to political leadership, Gandhi emphasized social reform, self-reliance, and communal harmony. His constructive programmes, including the promotion of Khadi and the upliftment of marginalized communities, contributed to the broader goal of building a just and self-sufficient society. Gandhi's vision of freedom was therefore not limited to political independence but also included social equality and moral development.

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