

## **In what ways and how far did Gandhi transform the Indian national movement in the interwar years?**

At the time when Gandhi landed in India from his long sojourn in South Africa, the Indian national movement he was already so involved with from overseas had been becalmed by the long years of split after the acrimonious Nagpur Congress of 1906. He also arrived at the moment when most of the prominent leaders who had sustained it in the first decades of the century were either dead or on the verge of death. The Congress still had not managed to find solutions to the most common objections thrown at it by the British administrators - that it was highly elitist and composed of a small faction of babus. Viceroy Curzon's comment that 'The party contains a number of intelligent, liberal-minded and public-spirited men . . . but as to their relationship with the people of India, the constituency which the Congress Party represents cannot be described as otherwise than a microscopic minority of the total population.'<sup>1</sup> The creation of Home Rule Leagues - by Tilak and Annie Besant may have presaged more populist methods than those used previously by the localised and conservative Congress, but the sentiments raised remained Western ideals. Annie Besant's tract of 1917 said that 'India demands Home Rule for two reasons, one essential and vital, the other less important but weighty: first, because Freedom is the birthright of every Nation: secondly, because her most important interests are now made subservient to the interests of the British Empire without her consent, and her resources are not utilised for her greatest needs.'<sup>2</sup> Highly relevant no doubt to the liberal elite who made the strongest supporters of Congress - but not relevant to 'the *ryots* and the peasants whose life is not one of political aspiration but of mute penury and toil.' Indeed, Gandhi made this point within a year of returning from Africa: 'the system of education at present in vogue is wholly unsuited to India - it is a bad copy of the Western model. It has dried up all originality, the vernaculars and has deprived the masses of the benefit of higher knowledge which would otherwise have percolated to them through the intercourse of the educated classes with them. The system has resulted in creating a gulf between educated India and the masses.'<sup>3</sup>

One of the first tasks which Gandhi therefore set himself on rejoining his political career was to make moves to create a real national unity - and to fuse together previously local or sectional interests into a genuine national movement. Indeed, he recalled of first political organ with which he chose to involve himself - Gujarat Sabha - that 'for me the value of it lies in the education that the masses will receive and the unity that the educated men and women will have of coming in close touch with the people.'<sup>4</sup> Gandhi spoke to the peasants of Champaran in 1917 not of political demands, not of home rule nor for reformed legislatures and voting rights, but of the troubles which the rural folk poured out to him - how they were forced to grow indigo on their best lands, of the weight of the money payments in place of the indigo obligation, how the planters' servants bullied them, and how the planters enforced illegal demands on them.<sup>5</sup> Throughout all of this time that Gandhi was involved in Congress, the movement was largely characterized by its new responsiveness to the needs for links with these dominant peasant communities. This began with Gandhi - though his travels across the country meant that he himself never acquired exclusive links with any particular groups in the countryside. His chief collaborators came from across the country, and themselves became involved in rural issues: Vallabhbhai Patel was a *Patidar* lawyer from Gujarat; Rajendra Prasad, a small landowner lawyer

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<sup>1</sup> Judith M. Brown, *Modern India: the origins of an Asian Democracy*, (Delhi, 1985), p.139

<sup>2</sup> ed. CH Philips, *The Evolution of India and Pakistan: select documents*, (London, 1962), p.205

<sup>3</sup> Judith M. Brown, *Gandhi: Prisoner of Hope*, (New Haven, 1989), p.107

<sup>4</sup> Judith M. Brown, *Gandhi: Prisoner of Hope*, (New Haven, 1989), p.114

<sup>5</sup> Judith M. Brown, *Gandhi: Prisoner of Hope*, (New Haven, 1989), pp.110-111

from Bihar; Rajagopalachari the small town lawyer from Tamil Nadu; Abdul Ghaffar Khan, a small landowner from the Frontier. Peasant communities were also encouraged to make connections with Gandhi and his collaborators: he went to Champaran and Kheda in 1917-8 after direct requests from local leaders. For the first time, as well, there were genuine moves to create a political community involving Hindus and Muslims, with Gandhi's involvement with the Khilafat movement in 1920-1. As he said, 'I hope by my 'alliance' with the Mahomedans to achieve a threefold end - to obtain justice in the face of odds with the method of Satyagraha and to show its efficacy over all other methods, to secure Mahomedan friendship for the Hindus and thereby internal peace, also, and last but not least to transform ill-will into affection for the British and their constitution which in spite of its imperfections has weathered many a storm.'<sup>6</sup> The more inclusive religious politics may have faltered later on, but Gandhi still felt confident of telling the Round Table Conference in November 1931 that 'All the other parties at this meeting represent sectional interests. Congress alone claims to represent the whole of India, all interests. It is no communal organisation; it is a determined enemy of communalism in any shape or form. Congress knows no distinction of race, colour or creed; its platform is Universal.'<sup>7</sup> The Nehru Committee recommendations in 1928 also made so bold as to say '... On the assumption that India is to have the status of a member of the British Commonwealth of Nations there is scarcely any difference of opinion between one section or another of political India. It may be safely premised that the greatest common factor of agreement among the well-recognised political parties in India is that the status and position of India should in no case be lower than that of the self-governing dominions.'<sup>8</sup> A more inclusive set of concerns for national politics did pose problems for the Government of India, who wished to cast the national movement as being as unrepresentative as it had previously been - and it did indeed do so on several occasions, such as the Government of India's resolution on the Non-cooperation movement in 1920: 'The confidence of Government in the good sense of India has already been in great measure justified by the unanimity of her best minds in their condemnation of the folly of non-cooperation. For a most weighty body of educated opinion has rejected this new doctrine as one that is fraught with the most mischievous potentialities for India.'<sup>9</sup> However, as direct action proved a larger and more diverse constituency for national politics, this line of argument was quietly dropped.

Gandhi also provided the national movement with innovative and attractive forms of protest which gained much more attention than the pre-war pamphlets and meetings. Where in the partition of Bengal, the boycott had been used, it had quickly descended into sporadic violence - due to lack of leadership and tacit support for *himsa* methods. Gandhi's addition of symbol and religiosity provided an extra nobility and purity to what otherwise could have descended into *jacquerie*. Even the British *Report of the Committee appointed to investigate the Disturbances in the Punjab*, in April 1919 drew attention to the sacred vow which Gandhi ordered all his followers to take: 'we solemnly affirm that in the event of these Bills becoming law, and until they are withdrawn, we shall refuse civilly to obey these laws and such other laws as a committee to be hereafter appointed may think fit, and we further affirm that in this struggle we will faithfully follow truth and refrain from violence to life, person or property.'<sup>10</sup> Gandhi also brought considerable skill as a publicist and columnist for his ideas - but most importantly of all he chose techniques of protest in which the disenfranchised could also play a prominent role. The campaigns of non-cooperation did not bring the raj to a grinding halt - British administration carried on in its usual cumbersome fashion. However, where the means of protest were as simple as changing spending habits, it was perfectly possible for people to choose the action appropriate to them, from

<sup>6</sup> Judith M. Brown, *Gandhi: Prisoner of Hope*, (New Haven, 1989), p.142

<sup>7</sup> ed. CH Philips, *The Evolution of India and Pakistan: select documents*, (London, 1962), p.243

<sup>8</sup> ed. CH Philips, *The Evolution of India and Pakistan: select documents*, (London, 1962), p.228

<sup>9</sup> ed. CH Philips, *The Evolution of India and Pakistan: select documents*, (London, 1962), p.219

<sup>10</sup> ed. CH Philips, *The Evolution of India and Pakistan: select documents*, (London, 1962), p.213

attending a meeting to closing a shop, staying away from classes, or persuading local to stop selling foreign cloth and liquor. The handspun cloth which Gandhi hailed as the symbol of a swaraj soon became the virtual uniform of Congressmen who in an earlier generation had prided themselves on their semi-Western sartorial elegance. Even some of the more religious actions could have serious consequences for the British - not least the temperance movement which hit British excise revenue hard. For those looking to be yet more active, Gandhi managed to make jail an attractive form of political protest even for such notable and law-abiding Indians as Motilal Nehru, who now went to jail as an honour, though before 1921, they would have considered it a shameful disgrace.<sup>11</sup> Between 1921 and mid-1922, four areas each produced well over 1,000 convictions, arising out of the movement.<sup>12</sup> Yet even despite this popularisation of the political process, in the early 1930s, Congress and British sources seemed to agree that 'the Congress standing army is at most one lac (100,000)'; and although in 1936 'lakhs' was in the plural, it was still not claim millions, or crores (10,000,000).<sup>13</sup>

What allowed such a disparate group of people to nevertheless campaign together was to some extent the fact that Gandhi chose tactics which convinced all of a common enemy in the shape of the British rulers. By picking off targets on particular issues such as tax reassessments and lack of consultation rights, Gandhi's supporters could join together in spite of their apparently insurmountable differences - for example, Gandhi was able to win the support of both millowners and weavers of Ahmedabad. His tactics for action also were designed to place maximum pressure on the legitimacy for British rule - which the Liberals had questioned for decades at home in any case. Mahatma Gandhi's statement on satyagraha in November 1919 stated that 'On the political field, the struggle on behalf of the people mostly consists in opposing error in the shape of unjust laws. The law-breaker breaks the law surreptitiously and tries to avoid the penalty; not so the civil resister. He ever obeys the laws of the State to which he belongs, not out of fear of the sanctions, but because he considers them to be good for the welfare of society. But there come occasions, generally rare, when he considers certain laws to be so unjust as to render obedience to them a dishonour. He then openly and civilly breaks them and quietly suffers the penalty for their breach.'<sup>14</sup> With just 100,000 Europeans in the whole country, it was clear that only a low level of civil resistance to the economic and legal bases of British rule would be sufficient to severely jeopardise the security of British tenure. By going beyond this to question even the British fitness to rule, Gandhi moved decisively beyond the aims of the nineteenth century nationalists - and severely embarrassed the European rulers. For example, the commanding officer of the Amritsar Massacre was condemned by the Government of India, but received great sympathy from the British public. Gandhi's response was to condemn the official report and the government response to it as pages of 'thinly disguised official whitewash' and called on the Indian nation to rise against 'an intolerable wrongs - not by armed rising, but by non-cooperation: 'if we are worthy to call ourselves a nation, we must refuse to uphold the Government by withdrawing co-operation from it.'<sup>15</sup> The 1930 salt march generated great India-wide publicity and drew large numbers to meetings, at which Gandhi appealed to village officials to resign from their posts which buttressed the imperial regime. Resignations began to occur in large numbers, under pressure of publicity and social boycott, and the Viceroy reported to London how grave the situation was as Gandhi challenged the legitimacy of government. In Gujarat 'the personal influence of Gandhi threatens to create a position of real embarrassment to the administration . . . in some areas he has already achieved a considerable measure of success in undermining the authority of Government.' As the

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<sup>11</sup> Judith M. Brown, *Gandhi: Prisoner of Hope*, (New Haven, 1989), p.162

<sup>12</sup> Judith M. Brown, *Gandhi: Prisoner of Hope*, (New Haven, 1989), p.164

<sup>13</sup> D.A. Low, *Congress And the Raj*, (London, 1977), p.1

<sup>14</sup> ed. CH Philips, *The Evolution of India and Pakistan: select documents*, (London, 1962), p.216

<sup>15</sup> Judith M. Brown, *Gandhi: Prisoner of Hope*, (New Haven, 1989), p.144

government of Bombay saw it, the real problem was that more and more people who used to be judged sane and reasonable were joining Gandhi, 'not because they expect any definite results from anti-salt laws campaign but because belief that British connection is morally indefensible and economically intolerable is gaining strength among educated Hindus, Gujaratis mostly but others also.'<sup>16</sup>

Yet in 1934, Gandhi agreed that three years of civil disobedience had served their time, and that the time had come for Congress to return to constitutional politics - to test the forthcoming Government of India Act. Rajagopalachari argued that 'If the magic of the Congress name and memory of its past sacrifices are utilised, then a position of trust and confidence among the masses' could be established, and 'whatever the new constitution may be it can give us the power.', Congressmen released from prisons soon became not just leaders of a political movement, but cadres of a political party seeking to win elections. To the dismay of the British and their supporters they were able to draw on the moral authority which Gandhi and their own participation in satyagraha had won for them. Their campaign was slickly managed, appealing to traditional nationalist themes, as well as highlighting the fruits of full responsible government in the provinces, which the new Government of India Act of 1935 now provided, was, moreover, assiduously fostered. The control this allowed over land revenue administration was particularly emphasised - a key theme for the *zamindar* class who had previously seen their interests best served by the British rather than the nationalists. In the 1926 elections, Congress had not polled very well, but in 1934, on a similarly small franchise, Congress overwhelmingly won the Central Legislative Assembly. It went on to win innumerable district board elections in the next two or three years; and in 1937, at the end was a long three-year campaigns eventually secured legislative majorities in the provincial elections in seven of the eleven provinces of India.<sup>17</sup>

The fact that Gandhi still managed to inspire and to some extent control such levels of political activism - for example the salt march in 1930 and the 1941 individual satyagrahi - was due to a personal magnetism not shared by any other Indian leader of his generation. From the very first political actions he took in India in 1917, a young English ICS man commented that to the peasants Gandhi seemed 'their liberator, and they credit him with extraordinary powers. He moves about in the villages, asking them to lay their grievances before him, and he is daily transfiguring the imaginations of masses of ignorant men with visions of an early millennium.'<sup>18</sup> This personal attraction was not confined to peasants, but even to the members of Congress. As the official record says for 1919, 'In proposing the fifth resolution Mahatma Gandhi made a speech in Hindi He said he was bound to condemn mob excesses. He admitted that these were committed under grave provocation given by the Government, but he wanted that even in grave provocation they should not lose their heads. He wanted true Satyagraha of them.'<sup>19</sup> It also proved that much of the national unity which Gandhi brought into his campaigns such as the Khilafat and Rowlatt Acts in 1920-1 was based on his own personal leadership - after being jailed and subsequently retiring from public life, it seemed to many that the movement he symbolised had died. Yet in response to the Simon and Nehru Commissions, Gandhi returned with a campaign of civil disobedience which brought thousands into active opposition to continued British rule. During the 1937 election campaign, it was reported that '... many villagers observed fast on the day of polling and broke it after exercising their franchise in favour of the Congress candidate... village voters bowed before the Congress candidate's box as a mark of respect to Mahatma Gandhi.'<sup>20</sup> Even the government understood the personal charisma the Mahatma

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<sup>16</sup> Judith M. Brown, *Gandhi: Prisoner of Hope*, (New Haven, 1989), p.238

<sup>17</sup> D.A. Low, *Congress And the Raj*, (London, 1977), p.29

<sup>18</sup> Judith M. Brown, *Gandhi: Prisoner of Hope*, (New Haven, 1989), p.111

<sup>19</sup> ed. CH Philips, *The Evolution of India and Pakistan: select documents*, (London, 1962), p.210

<sup>20</sup> D.A. Low, *Congress And the Raj*, (London, 1977), p.30

brought with him, and had striven not to reinforce this position with martyrdom in 1922 and 1931. His value to both followers and opponents increased, even though he was behind bars, and his year-long prison term was marked by the negotiations with the Viceroy which culminated in the Gandhi-Irwin agreement.

Yet one of the consequences of Gandhi's position atop an alternative source of legitimacy to the British, was to that to some extent he had to take account of the growing radicalisation inside Congress itself. Gandhi's statements on India's place in the Empire chart the progress of his feelings towards the British over a comparatively short space of time. In 1918, Gandhi's commitment to the British Empire was such that he was even recruiting volunteers to fight in the trenches. In December 1924, he said 'In my opinion if the British Government mean what they say and honestly help us to equality, it would be a greater triumph than a complete severance of the British connexion. I would therefore strive for *Swaraj* within the Empire but would not hesitate to sever all connection if severance became a necessity through Britain's own fault. I would thus throw the burden of separation on the British people. I desire the ability to be totally independent without asserting the independence.'<sup>21</sup> Four years later, Gandhi contributed greatly to the workings of the Nehru committee, which called for Dominion status. Just over a year later, Gandhi and Congress pledged 'we believe also that if any government deprives a people of these rights and oppresses them, the people have a further right to alter it or to abolish it. The British Government in India has not only deprived the Indian people of their freedom but has based itself on the exploitation of the masses, and has ruined India economically, politically, culturally, and spiritually. We believe, therefore, that India must sever the British connection and attain Purna Swaraj or Complete Independence.'<sup>22</sup> Finally, in 1931 Gandhi came to a view of self-government which 'contemplates a partnership - the Congress contemplates a connection with the British people - but that connection to be such as can exist between two absolute equals... I would far rather be called a rebel than a subject. But I have aspired - I still aspire - to be a citizen, not in the Empire, but in a Commonwealth.'<sup>23</sup>

Ultimately, despite the great veneration for Gandhi, he failed to convince other nationalists to agree with his Eastern model of *swaraj*. In *Hind Swaraj*, he said 'the present system of education in India perpetuated immoral ideas, bred generations of Indians eager to collaborate in an imperial regime which was importing an evil civilization and threatened to create a widening gulf between the so-called 'educated' and the masses.' He argued trenchantly for the use of vernaculars as opposed to English, and the abandonment of the current over-literary and foreign syllabus in favour of study soundly based on spiritual values in the context of practical labour.'<sup>24</sup> While symbolically Nationalist leaders were in favour of this, divergences became very obvious. So much so that Gandhi retired for a second time from Congress politics, saying in 1934 that 'I have referred to the common goal, but I have begun to doubt if all the Congressmen understand the same thing by the expression 'Complete Independence'. For me Purna Swaraj has an infinitely larger meaning than Complete Independence, but even Purna Swaraj is not self-explained. No one word or compound expression will give us a meaning which all can understand.'<sup>25</sup> Clearly it did not have this meaning to Gandhi's colleagues. Even Gandhi's ideas of *swadeshi* did not create the impression he had intended: 'I put the spinning wheel and *khadi* in the forefront. Hand-spinning by the Congress intelligentsia has all but disappeared. The general body of them have no faith in it. The removal of the *khadi* clause in the constitution would mean removal of the living link between the Congress and the millions whom it has from its

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<sup>21</sup> ed. CH Philips, *The Evolution of India and Pakistan: select documents*, (London, 1962), p.228

<sup>22</sup> ed. CH Philips, *The Evolution of India and Pakistan: select documents*, (London, 1962), p.238

<sup>23</sup> ed. CH Philips, *The Evolution of India and Pakistan: select documents*, (London, 1962), p.243

<sup>24</sup> Judith M. Brown, *Gandhi: Prisoner of Hope*, (New Haven, 1989), p.106

<sup>25</sup> ed. CH Philips, *The Evolution of India and Pakistan: select documents*, (London, 1962), p.246

inception sought to represent; and yet if it remains, it has to be rigidly enforced. But it cannot be, if a substantial majority of the Congressmen have no living faith in it. . .<sup>26</sup> Gandhi's early consideration for the Muslim community did not prevent the Muslim community withdrawing from the Congress actions; and although Gandhi himself was very opposed to the 'two-nation' theory, the Muslim League's demands were never seriously heeded by a Congress whose focus was securely on the British raj. In fact, Congress refused to go into coalition with the Muslim League after the 1937 legislative elections. Even the distinctively Indian conception of self-rule which Gandhi spent his life trying to deliver, did not force out Western political doctrines. Jawaharlal Nehru used his Presidential Address at the 1936 Congress to say 'I am convinced that the only key to the solution of the world's problems and of India's problems lies in socialism, and when I use this word I do so not in a vague humanitarian way but in the scientific, economic sense. . . I see no way of ending the poverty, the vast unemployment, the degradation and the subjection of the Indian people except through socialism. That involves vast and revolutionary changes in our political and social structures, the ending of vested interests in land and industry, as well as the feudal and autocratic Indian States system. . . Some glimpse we can have of this new civilisation in the territories of the USSR.'

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<sup>26</sup> ed. CH Philips, *The Evolution of India and Pakistan: select documents*, (London, 1962), p.245