

Gandhi's Emergence and Transformation of Indian Nationalism (1915–1922)

In the history of nationalism, it is often tempting to associate the making of a nation with the work of a single individual. In the case of India, Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi has frequently been regarded as the “Father of the Nation.”

Yet, as the chapter makes clear, while Gandhi profoundly shaped the nationalist movement, his ideas and methods were equally shaped by the historical and social conditions in which he operated.

Gandhi returned to India in January 1915 after spending over two decades in South Africa. These years were crucial in the formation of his political philosophy.

It was in South Africa that he developed the technique of **satyagraha**, a form of non-violent resistance rooted in truth and moral force. He also began advocating religious harmony and raised concerns about caste discrimination and gender inequality.

Thus, by the time he returned to India, Gandhi had already transformed from a lawyer into a moral and political leader.

However, the India he returned to was very different from the one he had left. The Indian National Congress had expanded its reach, especially after the Swadeshi movement, and political activity had intensified.

Leadership was divided between Moderates, who believed in gradual reform, and Extremists, who advocated more assertive resistance. Gandhi, guided by his mentor Gopal Krishna Gokhale, initially adopted a cautious approach, spending time travelling across India to understand its people and conditions.

A turning point came with Gandhi's speech at the Banaras Hindu University in 1916. Speaking before an audience of princes, landlords, and elites, Gandhi criticised their indifference to the suffering of the poor.

He highlighted the stark contrast between the “richly bedecked noblemen” and the millions of impoverished Indians who were absent from the gathering. This speech was significant not only as a critique of elite nationalism but also as a declaration of Gandhi's intent

to transform the nationalist movement into one that truly represented the masses.

This intent was soon put into practice. Between 1917 and 1918, Gandhi led a series of localised struggles that brought him into direct contact with peasants and workers. In Champaran, he fought for indigo peasants oppressed by European planters.

In Ahmedabad, he supported mill workers demanding better conditions. In Kheda, he led peasants seeking tax remission after crop failure. These struggles marked a significant shift in Indian nationalism—from an elite-driven movement to one rooted in the experiences of the poor.

The next major phase began with the Rowlatt Act of 1919, which extended wartime repressive measures such as detention without trial. Gandhi responded with a nationwide satyagraha, calling for hartals and protests. This was one of the first attempts to mobilise people across regions and classes.

However, the movement took a tragic turn with the Jallianwala Bagh massacre, where hundreds of unarmed civilians were killed. This event exposed the brutality of colonial rule and intensified anti-British sentiment.

Building on this momentum, Gandhi launched the **Non-Cooperation Movement** in 1920. The movement was based on the idea that British rule depended on Indian cooperation, and if this cooperation was withdrawn, colonial rule would collapse.

People were urged to boycott government institutions, refuse titles, and avoid paying taxes. Gandhi also allied with the Khilafat Movement, hoping to unite Hindus and Muslims in a common struggle.

The movement witnessed unprecedented participation. Students left government schools, lawyers boycotted courts, workers went on strike, and peasants refused to pay taxes.

However, the movement also revealed the complexities of mass mobilisation. Different groups interpreted non-cooperation in their own ways, often acting independently of central leadership.

The movement came to an abrupt end in 1922 after the Chauri Chaura incident, where a violent clash led to the death of policemen. Gandhi, committed to non-violence,

immediately withdrew the movement, arguing that moral discipline was more important than political success. This decision highlighted his ethical approach to politics, even at the cost of losing momentum.

By 1922, Gandhi had fundamentally transformed Indian nationalism. What had once been an elite movement had now become a mass movement involving peasants, workers, and ordinary people.

He had introduced new methods of struggle, rooted in non-violence and moral authority, and redefined the relationship between leadership and the masses.

By encouraging people to spin their own cloth, he sought to promote dignity of labour and reduce dependence on foreign goods.

Gandhi's connection with the masses was further strengthened by the way he was perceived among them. In many rural areas, people attributed miraculous powers to him. Stories circulated about his ability to perform wonders or punish wrongdoers.

While such beliefs may seem irrational, they reveal the deep emotional and cultural connection people felt with Gandhi. To many peasants, he appeared as a saviour who would free them from oppression and restore justice.

At the same time, the expansion of nationalism under Gandhi was not spontaneous but carefully organised. The Congress was restructured to reach rural areas, and new institutions such as Praja Mandals were established in princely states. The use of vernacular languages instead of English made nationalist ideas accessible to a wider audience. As a result, nationalism spread to regions and social groups that had previously remained untouched.

Gandhi's nationalism also had a strong social reform dimension. He campaigned against untouchability, child marriage, and other social evils, arguing that India must reform itself to be worthy of freedom. He emphasised Hindu-Muslim unity and believed that economic self-reliance, symbolised by khadi, was essential for true independence.

After a brief withdrawal from active politics, Gandhi re-entered the national stage towards the end of the 1920s. The Lahore session of the Congress in 1929 marked a decisive shift, with the declaration of **Purna Swaraj**, or complete independence. This was followed by the observance of Independence Day in January 1930, signalling a new phase of struggle.

The most significant event of this phase was the **Salt Satyagraha**. Gandhi chose salt as the focal point of protest because it was a basic necessity used by all, yet heavily taxed and controlled by the colonial state. By challenging the salt monopoly, Gandhi was able to connect with people across classes and regions.

The Dandi March, which began in March 1930, was both a symbolic and practical act of resistance. Walking from Sabarmati to the coastal village of Dandi, Gandhi and his followers broke the salt law by producing salt. This



Gandhian Mass Politics and Civil Disobedience (1922–1934)

By the early 1920s, Gandhi had emerged not merely as a political leader but as a figure deeply connected with the masses. Unlike other nationalist leaders who maintained a certain distance from the people, Gandhi consciously identified himself with them.

His simple attire—a dhoti and loincloth—his use of the spinning wheel, and his emphasis on manual labour symbolised his commitment to the poor.

The **charkha** became a powerful symbol in Gandhian politics. Gandhi viewed it not merely as a tool of economic self-reliance but as a critique of industrial capitalism, which he believed displaced labour and concentrated wealth in the hands of a few.

simple act transformed into a powerful challenge to colonial authority.

The movement quickly spread across the country. Peasants violated forest laws, workers went on strike, students boycotted institutions, and women participated in large numbers. The involvement of women was particularly significant, marking a new dimension in the nationalist movement.

The British responded with repression, arresting thousands of people, including Gandhi himself. However, the movement had already achieved its objective of demonstrating the widespread discontent with colonial rule. It also attracted international attention, with global media portraying Gandhi as a moral leader challenging imperial power.

The subsequent Gandhi-Irwin Pact and participation in the Round Table Conferences marked a shift from confrontation to negotiation.

However, these negotiations exposed internal divisions within Indian society. Leaders such as B.R. Ambedkar challenged Gandhi's claim to represent all Indians, particularly the oppressed castes. The debate over separate electorates highlighted the complexities of representation and the limits of nationalist unity.

Thus, this phase of the movement combined mass mobilisation with political negotiation. It demonstrated both the strength of Gandhian methods and the challenges of accommodating diverse interests within the nationalist framework.

Final Phase, Partition, and Gandhi's Legacy (1935–1948)

The later phase of the nationalist movement was marked by increasing political complexity. The Government of India Act of 1935 introduced limited provincial autonomy, and the elections of 1937 brought the Congress to power in several provinces. However, the outbreak of the Second World War in 1939 created a new crisis.

The British decision to involve India in the war without consulting Indian leaders led to the resignation of Congress ministries.

Meanwhile, the Muslim League began to assert itself more strongly, demanding autonomy for Muslim-majority regions. The nationalist struggle was no longer simply

between Indians and the British but had become a three-way contest involving the Congress, the Muslim League, and the colonial state.

Efforts to reach a compromise, such as the Cripps Mission, failed due to disagreements over the extent of power to be transferred. In response, Gandhi launched the **Quit India Movement** in 1942, calling for the immediate end of British rule.

Although the leadership was quickly arrested, the movement spread across the country, with strikes, protests, and acts of sabotage.

The Quit India Movement demonstrated the depth of nationalist sentiment, particularly among the youth. In some regions, parallel governments were established, indicating the weakening of colonial authority. However, the movement was eventually suppressed through force.

As the war came to an end, negotiations for independence resumed. Elections in 1946 revealed a deep political divide, with the Congress dominating general constituencies and the Muslim League securing overwhelming support among Muslims.



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Attempts to create a united federal structure failed, and communal tensions escalated.

The call for Direct Action Day in 1946 led to widespread communal violence, which spread across different regions. Faced with an increasingly volatile situation, the British decided to transfer power but also to partition the country.

India achieved independence on 15 August 1947, but it came at the cost of Partition and massive communal violence. Significantly, Gandhi did not participate in the celebrations. Instead, he spent the day fasting and working to restore peace, reflecting his deep anguish over the division of the country.

In the months that followed, Gandhi travelled through riot-affected areas, appealing for harmony and reconciliation. He emphasised the need for a secular India where all citizens, regardless of religion, would enjoy equal rights.

His efforts during this period are often regarded as his “finest hour,” as he sought to uphold his principles in the face of immense violence.

Despite his efforts, tensions remained high, and Gandhi was assassinated in January 1948. His death marked the end of an era but also solidified his legacy as a moral force in Indian politics.

Gandhi’s contribution to the nationalist movement was immense. He transformed it into a mass movement, introduced non-violence as a political strategy, and linked political freedom with social reform.

At the same time, the events of Partition revealed the limitations of his vision, particularly in addressing communal divisions.

