

Role of Mahatma Gandhi in freedom struggle of India

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Abstract

One of the greatest men in the history of India is unarguably Mahatma Gandhi. The way he gave shape and character to India's freedom struggle is worthy of a standing ovation. He sacrificed his own life for the sake of his country. The respect that he earned for himself despite leading a simple lifestyle is much appreciable. Mahatma Gandhi played a pivotal role in the freedom struggle of India. His nonviolent ways and peaceful methods were the foundation for gaining independence from the British.

Keywords: struggle of India, sacrificed, appreciable, peaceful methods

Introduction

Mahatma Gandhi was born Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi on 2nd October at Porbandar located in Gujarat. He went off to South Africa after marriage and worked as barrister there for twenty years. In South Africa, he had his first brush with apartheid. Once while he was traveling in a train, he was thrown out of the first class compartment despite having a ticket. This made him swear that he would do his best to erase apartheid from the face of his world. He went back to India only to find that his own country was being ruled by the British and his fellow citizens were being treated harshly by the British.

Some of the major movements and freedom struggles led by him are discussed below.

Non Co-operation Movement

One of the first series of non-violent protests nationwide was the non-cooperation movement started by Mahatma Gandhi. This movement officially started the Gandhian era in India. In this freedom struggle, the non-cooperation movement was basically aimed at making the Indians aware of the fact that the British government can be opposed and if done actively, it will keep a check on them. Thus, educational institutions were boycotted, foreign goods were boycotted, and people let go off their nominated seats in government institutions. Though the movement failed, Indians awakened to the concept of going against the British.

Civil Disobedience Movement

Gandhi again took off with another nonviolent movement known as the civil disobedience movement. This movement was more active than the non-cooperation movement and brought about a revolution of sorts. This movement aimed at bringing the British administration to a stop by withdrawing support from everything. There was agitation against land revenue, abolition of salt tax, cutting down military expenditure, levying duty on foreign cloth, etc. A very important movement was that of Salt Satyagraha where Gandhi undertook the Dandi march as a protest against the

Salt tax.

Quit India Movement

The Quit India Movement was launched under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi in August 1942. The main aim for launching this movement was to bring the British to negotiate with the Indian leaders. It was a call for immediate independence of India and the slogan of "Do or Die" was adopted for the same. However the leaders were arrested soon after Gandhi's speech and were put in jail by British officials. Gandhi went on a fast for 21 days demanding the release of the leaders despite his failing health. The British had to secure the release of the leaders.

India Independence

After the Quit India Movement the freedom struggle got even more intense and passionate. Entire India was united together in the movement for freedom. Everyone contributed what they could in the freedom struggle. The cry of Purna Swaraj or complete independence was raised. After much sacrifices and efforts, India gained its independence on the 15th August, 1947.

British colonization of India began in the second half of the 18th century when the English East India Company took control of Bengal and gradually expanded its territory to other parts of India. In 1858 the British Government replaced the role of the East India Company and became the 'Paramount' ruler of India. It was not until 1947 that India regained its independence - ending nearly 200 years of British rule. During the First World War, the Allies had declared that the War was being fought in defence of democracy and the right of nations to self-determination. But after their victory they showed little willingness to end colonial rule. While the British Government made half-hearted attempt at constitutional reform, it also made it clear that it had no intention to part with political power. Instead of democratic progress had come further restrictions of civil liberties. The Rowlatt Act came like a sudden blow. Unrest spread in the country and a powerful agitation against the Act arose. During

this agitation a new leader, Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, took command of the nationalist movement.

Gandhiji was born in a well to do Hindu family of Porbander in Gujarat on October 2, 1869. He went to England for studies in 1881 and qualified for bar. He returned to India in 1891 and began his practice in Bombay High Court. In 1893 he went to South Africa. He stayed there up to 1914 with two breaks in between. He had evolved in his struggle against racialism [apartheid] in South Africa a new form of struggle- non-cooperation- and a new technique of struggle- satyagraha- which could be practiced against the British in India. He would accept sufferings willingly in the course of struggle against the wrong-doer. He would never bow down before evil whatever the consequences. In Gandhi's eyes non-violence was not a weapon of the weak and the cowardly. Only the strong and brave could practice it.

Another important aspect of Gandhi's outlook was that he would not separate thought and practice, belief and action. Gandhiji had an immense faith in the capacity of the common people to fight. Gandhiji returned to India in 1915 at the age of 46. In 1916 he founded the Sabarmathi Ashram at Ahmedabad where his friends and followers were to learn and practice the ideas of truth and non-violence. He also set out to experiment with his new method of struggle.

Champan Satyagraha [1917]

Gandhiji's first experience in satyagraha came in 1917 in Champan, a district in Bihar. The peasantry on the indigo plantations was excessively oppressed by the European planters. They were compelled to grow indigo on at least 3/20th of their land and to sell it at prices fixed by the planters. Having heard of Gandhi's campaigns in South Africa, several peasants of Champan invited him to come and help them. Gandhiji reached Champan in 1917 and began to conduct a detailed inquiry into the conditions of the peasantry. The district officials ordered him to leave Champan, but he defied the order and was willing to face trial and imprisonment. This forced the Government to cancel its earlier order and to appoint a committee of inquiry on which Gandhiji served as a member. Ultimately the disabilities from which the peasantry was suffering were reduced and Gandhiji had won his first battle of civil obedience in India.

Ahmedabad Mill Strike [1918]

In 1918, Gandhiji intervened in a dispute between the workers and mill-owners of Ahmedabad. He advised the workers to go on strike and to demand a 35% increase in wages. He insisted that the workers should not use violence against the mill-owners during the strike. He undertook a fast unto death to strengthen the workers resolve to continue the strike. His fast put pressure on the mill-owners who relented on the fourth day and agreed to give the workers a 35% increase in wages.

Kheda Peasant Struggle [1918]

In 1918 crops failed in the Kheda district in Gujarat but the government refused to reduce land revenue and insisted on its full collection. Gandhiji supported the peasants and advised them to withhold payment of revenue till their demand for its remission was met. The struggle was withdrawn when it was learnt that the government had issued instructions that revenue

should be recovered only from those peasants who could afford to pay. Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel became Gandhiji's follower during this struggle.

These experiences brought Gandhiji in close contact with the masses whose interests he actively exposed all his life. In time he became the symbol of poor India, nationalist India and rebellious India. Three causes were very dear to Gandhiji's among the masses.

Thousands of peasants in U.P and Bengal responded to the call of non-co-operation. In the Punjab the Sikhs were leading a non-violent movement known as Akali movement, to remove corrupt mahants from the Gurudwaras heart. The first was Hindu-Muslim unity, the second, the fight against untouchability, and the third, the raising of the social status of women in the country.

The Rowlatt Act [1919]

While trying to appease the Indians, the Government of India was ready with repression. The Government decided to arm itself with more far-reaching powers, which went against the accepted principles of rule of rule, to be able to suppress those nationalists who would refuse to be satisfied with the reforms. In March 1919, it passed the Rowlatt Act. This Act authorized the Government to imprison any person without trial. The Act would enable the Government to suspend the right of Habeas Corpus which had been the foundation of civil liberties in Britain.

Satyagraha Against the Rowlatt Act

Gandhiji was aroused by the Rowlatt Act. In February 1919 he founded the Satyagraha Sabha. Its members took a pledge to disobey the Act and thus to court arrest. Here was new method of struggle. Big meetings and demonstrations, refusal to cooperate with the government, boycott of foreign cloth and schools or individual acts of terrorism were the only forms of political work known to the nationalists. Satyagraha immediately raised the movement to a higher level. Nationalists could now act, instead of merely agitating and giving only verbal expression to their dissatisfaction and anger.

Gandhiji asked the nationalist workers to go to the villages. That is where India lives, he said. He increasingly turned the face of nationalism towards the common man and the symbol of this transformation was to be Khadi, which soon became the uniform of the nationalists. The people responded magnificently to Gandhi's call. March and April 1919 witnessed a remarkable political awakening in India. There were hartals, strikes, and demonstrations. The entire country was electrified.

Jallianwala Bagh Massacre [1919]

The Government was determined to suppress the mass agitation. Gandhiji gave a call for a mighty hartal on 6th April 1919. The people responded with unprecedented enthusiasm. The government decided to meet the popular protest with repression, particularly in the Punjab. At this time was perpetrated one of the worst crimes in modern history.

A large but unarmed crowd had gathered on 13 April 1919 at Amritsar in the Jallianwala Bagh, to protest the arrest of their popular leaders, Dr. Saifuddin Kitchlew and Dr. Satyapal.

General Dyer, the military commander of Amritsar decided to terrorise the people of Amritsar into complete submission. Jallianwala Bagh was a large open space which was enclosed on three sides by buildings and had only one exit. He surrounded the Bagh with his army unit, closed the exit with his troops, and then ordered his men to shoot into the trapped crowd with rifles and machine-guns. Thousands were killed and wounded. After this massacre, martial law was proclaimed throughout the Punjab and the people were submitted to the most uncivilized atrocities. Popular shock was expressed by Rabindranath Tagore who renounced his knighthood in protest.

The Non-Cooperation Movement

The Congress met in a special session in September 1920 at Calcutta. The Congress supported Gandhi plan for non-cooperation with the government till the Punjab and Khilafat wrongs were removed and swaraj was established. The people were asked to boycott government educational institutions, law courts and legislatures, to give up foreign cloth and to practise hand-spinning and hand-weaving for producing khadi. Congressmen immediately withdrew from elections, and the voters too largely boycotted them.

The non-co-operation resolution was endorsed in the Nagpur Session of the Congress held in Dec 1920. The annual session of the Congress was held at Nagpur in December 1920. The Nagpur session also made changes in the constitution of the Congress. Provincial Congress Committees were reorganized on the basis of linguistic areas. The Congress was now to be led by a Working Committee of 15 members. The Congress now changed its character. It became the leader of the masses in their national struggle for freedom from foreign rule. Moreover, Hindus and Muslims were marching shoulder to shoulder.

The years 1921 and 1922 were to witness an unprecedented movement of the Indians. Thousands of students left schools and colleges and joined national schools and colleges. It was at this time that the Jamia Millia Islamia [National Muslim University] of Aligarh, the Bihar Vidyapith, the Kashi Vidyapith and the Gujarat Vidyapith came into existence. The Jamia Millia later shifted to Delhi. Hundreds of lawyers including Chittaranjan Das, popularly known as Deshabandhu, gave up their legal practice. The Tilak Swaraj Fund was started to finance the Non Co-operation movement and within six months over a crore of rupees were subscribed. Women showed great enthusiasm and freely offered their jewellery. Boycott of foreign cloth were organized all over the land. Huge bonfires of foreign cloth were organized all over the land. Khadi soon became the symbol of freedom.

The Government took recourse to repression. The activities of the Congress and Khilafat workers were declared illegal. By the end of 1921 all important nationalist leaders, except Gandhiji, were behind bars. In November 1921 huge demonstrations greeted the Prince of Wales, heir to the British throne, during his tour of India. In Bombay government tried to suppress the demonstration killing 53 persons.

The movement had spread deep, their places of worship. On 1st February 1922, Mahatma Gandhi announced that he would start mass civil disobedience, including non-payment of taxes, unless within seven days the political prisoners were released

and the Press freed from government control.

The Chauri-Chaura Incident [1922]

On 5th February 1922 a Congress procession of 3000 peasants at Chauri-Chaura, a village in U.P. was fired upon by the police. The angry crowd attacked and burnt the police station causing the death of 22 policemen. Other incidents of violence by crowds had occurred earlier in different parts of the country.

Gandhiji was convinced that the nationalist workers had not yet properly understood nor learned the practice of non-violence without which, he was convinced, civil disobedience could not be a success. He believed that the British would be able to easily crush a violent movement, for people had not yet built up enough strength to resist massive government repression. He therefore decided to suspend the non-cooperation movement.

The Congress Working Committee met at Bardoli on 12 February passed a resolution stopping all activities which would lead to breaking of laws. It urged the Congressmen to donate their time to the constructive program. The Government arrested Mahatma Gandhi and charged him with spreading disaffection against the government.

Very soon the Khilafat question also lost relevance. The people of Turkey rose under the leadership of Mustafa Kamal Pasha and deprived sultan of his political power. Mustafa Kamal Pasha abolished the Caliphate and separated the state from religion. He nationalized education, granted women extensive rights, introduced legal codes based on European models and took steps to introduce modern industries. All these steps broke the back of the Khilafat agitation.

The Non Co-operation movement had far reaching results. Nationalist movement had now reached the remotest corners of the land. Millions of peasants, artisans and urban poor had been brought into the national movement. Women had been drawn into the movement. It is this politicization of millions of men and women that imparted a revolutionary character to the Indian national movement.

Boycott of the Simon Commission

In 1927, the British government appointed the Indian Statutory Commission, known popularly after the name of its chairman as the Simon Commission, to go into the question of further constitutional reform. All the members of the commission were Englishmen. This announcement was greeted by a chorus of protest from all Indians. What angered them most was the exclusion of Indians from the Commission and the basic notion behind this exclusion that the foreigners would discuss and decide upon India's fitness for self-government.

The national Congress decided to boycott the Commission. The Muslim League and Hindu Mahasabha decided to support the Congress decision. On 3 February 1922, the day the Commission reached Bombay, an all India hartal was organized. Wherever the Commission went, it was greeted with hartals and black flag demonstrations under the slogan Simon Go Back. The government used brutal suppression and police attacks to break the popular opposition. Lala Lajpat Rai succumbed to the injuries which he received in the police lathi charge at Lahore.

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