



## Emergence of Gandhiji - National Politics and Its Aftermath

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Gandhiji's emergence in on Indian national scene was an event of highest significance. In the apt and colourful words of Pandit Nehru, it was like "a breath of fresh air" in an otherwise gloomy and choking atmosphere. After having spent nearly a quarter of century in South Africa where he led an extraordinary movement of the Indian settlers for the vindication of their national honour and human rights, Gandhi returned to India in early 1915 and started his Ashram on the bank of Sabarmati river near Ahmedabad.

in 1915, to the Indian people however, Gandhiji was an unknown person. Most Congressmen, too, did not know him. But among the greater ones who knew him and his work in South Africa, he appeared as a man with a future role. "He is without doubt made of the stuff of which heroes and martyrs are made", described Gopal Krishna Gokhale about Gandhiji in December 1912. He even went further and said, "Nay more. He has in him the marvellous power to turn ordinary men around him into heroes and martyrs."

Thus Gandhiji had brought with him high credibility from South Africa. He was fearless, devotional minded and a champion of the weak. He taught his followers to shed fear, resist evil and suffer the consequences cheerfully. By now, Gandhiji had also already discovered the

weapon of non-violent passive resistance which could be handled by men and women, the rich and the poor, the learned and the ignorant.

However, Gandhi was in no hurry to jump into the fray. When he consulted Gopal Krishna Gokhale whom he regarded as his political Guru, regarding his future work, the latter advised Gandhiji not to speak on Indian questions, as India was a 'foreign land' to him due to his long stay abroad. Gokhale further advised Gandhi that he should keep quiet for a whole year and first study the situation in the land after which he could decide on his future course of action. The latter took this advice and decided to first see Mother India as a pilgrim before taking a leap into the stage of politics.

It so happened that this year of enforced silence ended early 1916 at the time of founding of Benaras Hindu University. Pandit Madan Mohan Malavya, the founder of the university had arranged a series of lectures to be delivered by eminent persons who had come for the occasion after the foundation-stone had been laid by the then Viceroy, Lord Hardinge.

It was Mahatma Gandhi's turn one evening, which was the first time that he spoke in public since his arrival in the country a year ago. Big leaders, English Officers, Rajas and

Maharajas were present. Wearing a turban, the future Mahatma was looking like a peasant. As he started to speak, it appeared, as if Mother India was beginning to unfold her long suppressed tales of woe. Asserting that the poor of India were being exploited, he explained how the money for the jewels worn by Rajas and Maharajas was earned by them by sucking the blood of the poor. Ridiculing them for their women-like jest for ornaments, he advised them to sell their jewels and utilize the proceeds for the well-being of the poor. He made similar observations about the capitalists. At last he opened a scathing attack on the English as having started the exploitation of the poor. As some among the audience shouted, "Gandhiji, go on, Gandhiji, go on", the Englishmen, the Rajas and the Maharajas, the Rai Bahadurs and the Khan Bahadurs, all vacated their chairs and walked away. But Gandhiji went on. At last the Maharaja of Darbhanga, a pillar of the British Empire, who was presiding, also left. As the chairs became empty, Gandhiji a firm believer in discipline, despite the request of some of the audience to continue, concluded his speech. It acted, however, as an indication of what was to come.

#### **Lucknow Congress (1916) paves the way :**

Later in 1916, Mahatma Gandhi attended the Annual Session of the Congress held at Lucknow. This session, presided over by Ambika Charan Majumdar, was unique in many respects. It saw the re-uniting of the extremist and moderate groups. It also brought about an understanding between the Muslim League and Congress for joint fight and drew up a Constitution for the Congress which had been without any during the last 30 years of its existence.

However, by this time Gandhiji had been able to enter into many hearts and reserve a

special place for himself there. He had also become able to earn the title 'Mahatma'. All round the pandal where the Subjects Committee meeting of the Congress was being held, there was constant shouting of "Mahatma Gandhi ki Jai".

In this Congress Session, some persons from Bihar met Gandhiji and spoke to him about the hardships the workers were suffering at the hands of British indigo planters.

#### **First Political Acts of Gandhiji (1917) :**

Gandhiji's first venture in the political field was undertaken for the immediate abolition of the evil indenture system of recruiting labourers for the British colonies. Public agitation and fear of Satyagraha finally persuaded the Viceroy to order abolition of the system from April 12, 1917 and thus Gandhiji scored his first victory.

He then turned his attention to the grievances of the cultivators oppressed by the indigo planters in Bihar. But the District Magistrate served on him an order to leave the district immediately. Gandhiji refused to obey the order and was tried for defiance. He pleaded guilty of disobeying the order, but he justified his action on the ground that human authority must yield before the higher authority of conscience. It was a new plea in a court of law. But not altogether so, for in the history, men like Socrates and religious saints and martyrs had taken this line to justify their action in the past. But for the British Magistrate who was utterly unused to such a procedure, the plea was staggering. The Government of Bihar, however, came to his rescue and Gandhiji was allowed to carry on his investigations. Ultimately, the Government recognized the enormity of the indigo planter's oppression and the Champaran Agrarian Bill of 1917 proposed the abolition of the system.

Gandhiji was still at work in Bihar when he received requests to help and guide the peasants of Kheda who were facing difficulties in paying rents owing to failure of crops. However before going to Kheda, he proceeded to Ahmedabad on an urgent call to intervene in the labour trouble there. Applying his two cardinal principles "truth" and "non-violence", he ultimately succeeded in making a satisfactory settlement to both the parties-workers and the mill owners. Then he plunged into the Kheda struggle, which too ended in a compromise.

"These incidents" as Tara Chand aptly puts it, "were like the flapping of wings before the start of flight into high empyrean". However, Gandhiji was yet to be fully disillusioned (with the British) which he became after the betrayal of the British after their victory in the First World War.

When first World War broke out, and the British Government sought the help of Indians, Lokamanya Tilak wanted to help the British in their war efforts on the condition that Home Rule was first granted or atleast promised. Leaders like Annie Besant too led a great agitation for political reforms, their slogan being that "England's difficulty was India's opportunity". But Gandhiji, so far a believer in the sense of justice of the British did not subscribe to that slogan. He said that in this hour of their greatest difficulty, Indians should help them unconditionally and went ahead on their own lines, practically endangering their lives by working very hard to help the British to recruit people for the army. Undertaking the recruitment campaign in 1918, he persuaded the peasants of Kheda District to enroll themselves as soldiers in the British army and even appealed the students of Bombay University to enroll themselves as volunteers

in the Bombay University Corps of the Indian Defence Force, which was started to give military training to Indian students. By doing so, he hoped to win the confidence of the British people and secure the independence of India within the British empire as a result of British confidence in India's loyalty to the empire.

But the sweet dream of Gandhiji was rudely shattered when at the end of the war, the British came out with the Rowlatt Act for dealing with the freedom- loving Indians.

#### **Rowlatt Act :**

During the First World War, India's effort for war was lauded by the British and it appeared as if the status of the country would soon undergo a change. On August 20, 1917, Edwin Montagu, the new Secretary of State for India made a declaration in the British Parliament that "the Policy of His Majesty's Government was that of increasing association of Indians in every branch of administration and the gradual development of self governing institutions with a view to the progressive realization of responsible Government in India as an integral part of the British Empire". The Government of India Act (1919) based on this promise, however, caused widespread disappointment.

But before the Montagu Chelmsford Reform was enacted, the suspicious and guilty-minded Government began to devise measures to avert what it believed was coming-agitation, resistance and defiance. It appointed One-man Commission in 1918 under the Chairmanship of Justice Sir Sidney Rowlatt of England to enquire into seditious activities in India and to suggest how to combat terrorism and treason. Sir Rowlatt, after making enquiry in India submitted his Report to the Government

suggesting steps to suppress political violence and for giving effect to Justice Rowlatt's recommendations, the Government announced its decision to enact two bills for dealing with seditious activities.

As the Defence of India Act was to expire six months after the war, the Government was eager to rearm the executive with drastic powers which it had wielded during war. Under the draconian terms of these bills, which later became Act in March 1919, any police officer could arrest an individual on the mere suspicion of unlawful activity designed against the foreign Government "established by law". Thus this Act framed on the lines of Defence of India Act, curtailed the liberty of the individual to a great extent. Earlier, the arrest of leaders like Annie Besant who refused to help the British during the First World War before the grant of Home Rule to India had made Gandhi indignant. The passage of Rowlatt Acts merely added insult to the injury.

Hence Gandhiji who stood for "unconditional co-operation" with the British subjected himself to rethinking and declared British rule in India to be "satanic". This was the beginning of his transformation from a loyal citizen of the empire into an extreme rebel whose new creed was "The British Empire today represents Satanism, and they who love God can afford to have no love for Satan." Other leaders too denounced the Bills in unequivocal terms.

Agitation against the Rowlatt Bills, however, commenced first in the Central Assembly. All the elected members spoke against the Srinivas Sastri showed his brilliant oratory and Pandit Madan Mohan Malaviya made a marathon speech lasting for six hours. Gandhiji and several other leaders like Acharya J.B. Kripalani were present in the gallery of

the Assembly. However, inspite of all opposition from the Indians, who termed it as Black Act and 'Lawless Law', the adamant Government, through its official majority, passed the Rowlatt Act in the Imperial Legislative Council in March 1919.

The utter heedlessness to public opinion was a sure invitation to trouble and India's self-respect demanded a suitable reply to the challenge of the Government. At this crucial hour, Gandhiji took up the gauntlet and behind him marched a resolute people to defend their honour and to vindicate their natural right to freedom.

His immediate reaction was to give a call to the nation to take the Satyagraha pledge which said, "we solemnly affirm that in the event of these Bills becoming Laws and until they are withdrawn, we shall refuse civilly to obey these laws and such other laws and we further affirm that in this struggle, we will faithfully follow the truth and refrain from violence to life, person or property". Gandhiji's logic was that the ordinary law of the land was adequate enough to deal with the violence of the extremists. Hence to hold the entire nation to task for such activities of a handful few was a demonstration of brute force. Describing the Indian people as the gentlest on earth", he made a last minute appeal to the Viceroy not to pass the Rowlatt Bills. But the Viceroy decided not to yield.

After the Bill became Act, the pledge was followed by a call for a 'hartal' on March 30, 1919 on an all India scale. The date was subsequently changed to April 6. Writing an article in 'Young India' for April, 1919, Gandhiji appealed the people to start 'hartal' on April 6 by observing a fast and offering prayer. All good things are begun by a fast and such other religious observances in this country.

In this way, Gandhiji invested the 'hartal' with a religious and moral sentiment, which appealed to everyone's heart. In a letter, Gandhiji wrote to the Viceroy, "The Satyagraha Campaign constitutes an attempt to revolutionise politics and restore moral force to its original position."

The response to the call was amazing. Towns and villages in every part of the country vied with one another to make the hartal a success, to demonstrate that a common feeling stirred the heart of all Indians. A new confidence was born, and it was the beginning of a new era.

However, as the shifting of the date of hartal or Satyagraha Day could not be communicated to all parts of the country in time, some places observed it on 30th March (1919) while some others on April, 6.

#### **Satyagrah Day in Punjab and Jallianwalla Bagh Massacre :**

While the opposition to the Act was countrywide, condition in Punjab was explosive for many reasons. Pressure had been mounted to recruit soldiers for war-30,000 combatants and 60,000 non-combatants and many villages were deprived of labouring and earning men. Agrarian distress had led to restlessness and outrages which, had been crushed with a heavy hand. Many Punjabi emigrants too had returned to their homes with bitter feelings against the Government which used the provisions of the ingress ordinance to prosecute them.

Thus the province was writhing under a sense of deep frustration and Gandhiji's call had just an electrifying effect on the people. In Amritsar (Punjab), protest meetings had started since February (1919). On March 23, a meeting was held in support of the Satyagraha

movement followed by another six days to announce and explain the hartal on 30th.

The immediate reaction of the authorities was to prohibit one of the leaders, Dr. Satya Pal, from speaking in public. This did not frighten the citizens and on the 30th March, a hartal was observed and a meeting held in Jallianwalla Bagh. On April 4, another leader Dr. Saifuddin Kitchlew was served with a similar notice and a number of others were restrained. On 6th April, a complete hartal was observed, but peace was maintained. On 9th April, there was a Hindu festival and large procession of Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs passed through the streets.

At this juncture, Gandhiji was invited to come to Punjab. But while he was travelling to the Punjab, he was stopped at Palwal and prohibited from entering the province.

The next morning (April 10), Dr. Kitchlew and Dr. Satyapal were deported from Amritsar. These two incidents infuriated and provoked the people. A number of people gathered to see the Deputy Commissioner (i.e. Present day Collector) and urged him to cancel the orders. The military pickets, however, tried to stop them from moving towards Deputy Commissioner's residence. The mounted soldiers then fired on the people causing some deaths and wounding many others. The people became more infuriated and there was a melee. While firing took place from one side, stone-throwing started from the other. More and more people gathered and were hurled with bullets. Then the maddened mob broke all bounds and brutal acts of destruction and arson, plunder and murder followed. In the telling words of Tara Chand, "O' Dwyer (the then Governor of Punjab) by depriving Amritsar of its leaders pledged the massacre of innocents."



Amritsar was handed over to the military authorities on the 11th and General Reginald Dyer took charge the same night. Proclamations were issued on April 12 and 13 giving warning of dire consequences if meetings were held or processions taken out and violence indulged in.

The reaction of the people was to make a protest against these threats. A meeting was summoned at the spacious ground of Jallianwalla Bagh on the afternoon of April 13, the Hindu New Year's day.

The Jallianwalla Bagh was an open enclosure surrounded by buildings with only one narrow entrance through which even an armored car could not pass. There were three or four small openings on the other side. In this enclosure, according to various estimates, fifteen to twenty five thousand people had gathered on that fateful day (April, 13).

Dyer regarded the gathering as a threat to his authority and decided to disperse it by force. A few minutes were left to sun set. As the people were peacefully listening to the speeches of the leaders, suddenly there appeared at the gate of the Bagh General Dyer with Force of 90 soldiers and two armoured cars equipped with machineguns to teach the disobedient people a lesson and through them to the people of whole India what disloyalty meant.

Due to the narrowness passage leading to the Bagh, he left the armoured cars outside. Then he positioned his troops on a raised ground fully commanding the small park and without issuing any warning ordered his soldiers to open fire on this large, innocent mass. As there was no other gate to escape, men fell dead in hundreds and many were crushed in the blind stampede that ensued. And

they did not stop till the entire ammunition (1650 rounds) was exhausted and there was no more shots to fire. In moments, in the twilight of the evening, the Jallianwalla Bagh turned into a valley of death. The ghastly sight, however, failed to move the callous heart of Dyer who deliberately took no steps to provide medical aid to the wounded. He then moved away from the slaughter house proudly surveying his handiwork, unconcerned about the dead and the wounded. While the Government claimed the number of dead and wounded as 379 and 1000 respectively the unofficial figure was three times the official figures.

### **Punjab Wrongs:**

But Dyer was not content with the blood-bath and resorted to even more cruel measures as the Jallianwala Bagh massacre was not an isolated incident,. It was only one among the large number of instances of the general policy of terrorizing the people in Punjab. In Amritsar, the massacre was followed by clamping down curfew, which remained in force for two months. What was worse, water and electricity supply was cut off. Flogging and whipping were common and an order was issued that anyone passing through the lane in which an English woman, Miss Sherwood had been assaulted, should crawl through it on his belly. Again under the Martial Law proclaimed on April 13, numerous people were tried and out of them, a large number were sentenced -many to death, others to transportation for life or to various terms of imprisonment.

### **Repercussions:**

As the news of this national tragedy gradually spread, the entire India was convulsed. There was an outburst of condemnation from every side. As a mark of

protest, Gurudev Rabindra Nath Tagore returned the Knighthood conferred upon him by the British Government. Gandhiji too renounced all the decorations and recognitions he had received from the Government for his services during the First World War, and described the Government, as "Unmixed evil". Demands too were made for the recall of O' Dwyer, Lt. Governor of Punjab and Lord Chelmsford, the Viceroy. Indemnity for the prisoners were pressed and enquiry into the Punjab happenings urged, both in England and India.

In England, on behalf of the Home Rule League and the Liberal Federation, deputations of eminent Indians were at work, giving evidence before the Joint Parliamentary Committee. Among them were Vithalbhai Patel, Bal Gangadhar Tilak Bipin Chandra Pal, Annie Besant, Surendranath Banarjee, Tej Bahadur Sapru, Srinivas Sastri and others. They impressed upon the Secretary of State the urgency of an enquiry into the recent events in order to pacify public opinion.

#### **Enquiry into the incident:**

Lord Montagu knew that the policy of ruling India by sword alone was impossible. Finally he made up his mind and during the Budget Debate on May 22, promised to hold an enquiry. He wrote to Lord Chelmsford that "this method of Government (D'Dwyerism) always brings sooner or later its reward". On July 17, he wrote to the Viceroy about General Dyer. He said, "It was the savage and inappropriate folly of the order which rouses my anger. I cannot admit that any service that Dyer has rendered anywhere can atone for action of this kind, and I am very much worried that he should have escaped punishment for an order the results of which are likely to be permanent". On August 6, 1919, the Under

Secretary of State for India speaking in the House of Lords, also repeated Lord Montagu's promise of May 22.

The Government of India, however, stiffly opposed the proposal for an enquiry. But as the Secretary of State had already committed himself, the Viceroy had no alternative but to yield. On October 14, 1919, he announced the appointment of a Committee with Mr. Hunter as Chairman, four Englishmen and three Indians-Setalvad, Sahibzada Sultan Ahmed Khan and Lala Jagat Narain as members. But the Committee was boycotted by the Congress.

The Committee finally gave its Report, which was not unanimous. While the European members who were in a majority signed one Report, the three Indian members prepared a separate report. The findings of the majority report were:-

1. That the disturbances were of the nature of a rebellion, which might have developed into a revolution;
2. That the outbreaks were the result of the work of a definite organization and were all connected;
3. That the proclamation of martial law in the circumstances was wholly justified and that firing was necessary to put down the mob excesses;
4. That the Government of India was blameless;
5. That Dyer's action was open to criticism for firing without warning and continuing the fire too long and excessively; that Dyer's object of producing a sufficient moral effect was a mistaken conception of duty.

The Minority Report prepared by the Indian members of the Hunter Committee disagreed with the first two findings and agreed

that firing was justified, but punishments like crawling, confiscation of property, flogging, salaaming, etc. were intended to terrorize and humiliate Indians.

On Dyer's conduct, the Indian members commented more harshly than the Europeans. They compared his acts with the acts of frightfulness committed by the Germans in Belgium and France in 1914. They wrote, "we feel that Dyer, by adopting an inhuman and un-British method of dealing with the subject of His Majesty the King Emperor, has done great dis-service to the interest of British rule in India."

The Congress, which had boycotted the Hunter Committee, also had appointed its own Committee of Enquiry. The members were Motilal Nehru (who resigned on having been elected President of Amritsar Congress of 1919), Fazlul Haq (who could not attend owing to important business), M.R. Jaykar (in place of Fazlul), C.R.Das, Abbas Tyabji, and Mahatma Gandhi. They signed their report on 20th February 1920.

The Committee squarely charged O' Dwyer, "who almost invariably appealed to passion and ignorance rather than to reason", and showed how, "serious a responsibility he incurred in misleading both the people and his superiors". They accused him of using oppressive methods in recruiting soldiers for the war, thereby creating the spirit of resistance and disaffection, which culminated in the disturbances of April, 1919. The Report went on to observe, "we feel tempted to say that he (O' Dwyer) invited violence from the people, so that he could crush them. The evidence shows that he subjected the Punjabis to the gravest provocation under which they momentarily lost self-control".

About Lord Chelmsford, the Viceroy, they expressed the opinion, "whilst, therefore, we do not think His Excellency was willingly neglectful of the interest of those who were entrusted to his charge by His Majesty, we regret to say that His Excellency Lord Chelmsford proved himself incapable of holding the high office to which he was called and we are of opinion that His Excellency should be recalled. "

After carefully scruting of all the evidences they came to the conclusions:

1. There was no conspiracy to overthrow the Government in the Punjab.
2. No reasonable cause has been shown to justify the introduction of martial law.
3. The Jallianwalla Bagh massacre was a calculated piece of inhumanity towards utterly innocent and unarmed men including children, and unparalleled for its ferocity in the history of modern British administration. "

The Government of India considered the Hunter Committee Report and came to the conclusion that Dyer's action at Jallianwala Bagh was indefensible, that he went beyond any reasonable requirement of the case and that he misconceived his duty. It was therefore considered unwise to allow him to continue to hold his position. He was consequently retired from service on March 23, 1920.

Thus in the dark tragedy of Jallianwalla Bagh, there dawned a new era of revolution for the liberation of India and Gandhiji emerged for his predestined role.

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