



## **A HISTORICAL STUDY OF POLITICAL STRATEGIES OF INDIAN NATIONAL MOVEMENT**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Indian National Movement was the struggle between colonialism and anti-imperialistic forces that developed in India in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. These forces were developed by the untiring activities of Nationalists. It remained as a forum of debate and rather than an instrument of action. Some remarkable changes occurred with the entry of Gandhi. He entered the Indian political scene in 1917 by organizing some local movements. It was with the Rowlatt Satyagraha and Noncooperation movement that he emerged as a national leader and also started associating with the Congress. From then onwards Gandhi became one of the most significant leaders of the National Movement and National Congress as well. Gandhi led the Non-cooperation movement of 1920-21, Civil disobedience movement of 1930, Quit India movement of 1942 against the colonial authority. These were the periods when Gandhi acted as the ultimate authority of the Congress. The period in between were the periods of political oblivion in which Gandhi confined himself to Constructive Programme and social reform activities. Indian National Movement entered its important phase during the Gandhian period.

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### **Keywords:**

*Political Strategies, Indian National Movement, anti-imperialistic forces, Gandhian period*



## **Introduction**

A basic aspect of the dynamics of the national movement was the strategy it adopted in its struggle against colonial rule. This study attempts to highlight Gandhian political strategy in the context of the National Movement. We believe that mass mobilization an important aspect of his strategy. Here we propose to take up a detailed study of the mobilization of the various sections of the society undertook by Gandhi in order to organize a mass movement against an Imperialist Government. What is intended is not an evaluation of the specific programmes of Congress or an episodic narrative of the National Movement. The objective is to evaluate the political strategy adopted and applied by Gandhi in the National Movement. A focus on the overall strategy of the Indian National Movement has been lacking in almost all the existing studies of the movement and it might thus appear that the Indian National Movement had no clear-cut strategy. But in our study, we are trying to establish that the whole movement was based on a specific strategy. Though large elements of this strategy of struggle evolved during the Moderate and Extremist phases of the movement, it was structured and completed during the Gandhian phase of the movement and in Gandhi's political practice. So, this study focuses on the period, 1917-1947. Gandhi's contribution to Indian - and perhaps world history - is as a political leader whose political strategy and tactics and techniques of struggle moved millions into political action. It is this aspect which has to be evaluated in detail. An effective critique of Gandhian leadership and its tactics at any specific period of time or its stand on political issue could be made only if the critique extended to and was based on an understanding of the Gandhian strategy. The study is both interpretative and analytical. Since in this study the primary importance is given to the critical examination of Gandhian Strategy, secondary works are also of great importance. For the present work the sources which we consulted are: the Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi, the Private Papers that are available in National Archives and Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, home political files (NAI), AICC files (NMML) and also published works and a wide range of journals.



## **NATIONALIST PERSPECTIVES**

Nationalist history of India was started as a reaction against the imperialist historiography. Till 1947 the nationalist school contributed very little to the study of the national movement because the colonial authorities never allowed them to express their anti-colonial feeling. So, they had to confine themselves to the glorification of the Indian past. Even after 1947, however, the nationalist school has failed to make a major contribution at the analytical or historiographical level. R.C. Majumdar finds it difficult to draw a line between nationalist and other national historians. Therefore, he considers it is better to restrict the use of the term to those Indians who are not purely or merely actuated by a scientific spirit to make a critical study of an historical problem concerning India, like any other country, but whose primary or even secondary objects include an examination or re-examination of some points of national interest or importance, particularly those on which full or accurate information is not available or which have been misunderstood, misconceived or wrongly represented. Such an object is not necessarily in conflict with a scientific and critical study, and a nationalist historian is not, therefore, necessarily a propagandist or a charlatan." According to I.D. Gaur ". . . those who glorify India's past and eulogize the role of Indian National congress as the sole representatives of India's struggle for freedom are the nationalist historians?" For our convenience we try to analyze the works of those Indian historians who in their attempt to write the history of the freedom movement, do not follow any rigorous ideology like the Marxists and those who write the Indian National Movement as a struggle between British imperialism on the one hand and the Indian people on the other. All those historians, who have elaborated the role of the elitist group and who never gave any importance to the role of the masses also belong to this group.

The third volume of R.C. Majumdar's History of the Freedom Movement in India begins with the history of the emergence of Mahatma Gandhi as the leader of the movement in 1919. He says that Gandhi combined in himself the dual role of a saint and an active politician and according to him it poses a serious problem to the historian.) He criticizes the followers of Gandhi for giving too much importance to the saintly character of Gandhi. In his work he is attempting to make a distinction between the political and saintly aspect of the Gandhian leadership - "I have necessarily to view his life and activities, thoughts, and feelings primarily from a narrow angle, namely as a politician and



statesman leading a great political organization which was not intended to be a humanitarian association or World Peace Society, but had been formed for a definite political object, namely to achieve India's freedom from political bondage."4 Majumdar splits Gandhian personality into two: Gandhi as a saint and Gandhi as an active politician. He says that a historian has nothing to do with the first and so is concerned only with the second aspect. From his arguments itself, it proves that his work forms only a partial aspect of the movement because it is impossible to judge Gandhi without considering the saintly qualities of Gandhi. And it also becomes clear from his own arguments that "...Gandhi's magic personality and saintly character which has always a great appeal to Indian masses, transformed the latent energy of the people into strenuous political activity in an astonishingly short period of time." From his arguments itself it becomes clear that it was such a personality of Gandhi played a dominant role in his political movements.

### **MARXIST PERSPECTIVES**

Marxist historians give us an altogether different view of Gandhism and the method of struggle Gandhi adopted, his role in the politicization of Indian masses. They also consider the Indian National movement as a bourgeois led movement and Gandhi as the leader of bourgeoisie. Even though one may find it difficult to agree with some of the views of the Marxist historians, it sometimes provides a very objective analysis of certain aspects of Gandhism. They bring out the limitations of Gandhism and some of the techniques of Gandhi and also tried to analyze some of the aspects which the nationalist historians and Gandhians usually tried to exaggerate for example about the mobilization of the masses during the Gandhian phase of the Indian National movement. Some of the basic questions which the Marxist historians had undertaken in their studies were whether Gandhi's leadership limited the scope of the National Movement? Even after the active mobilization of masses why certain sections of the population remained aloof from the mainstream of Indian National Movement? What made Gandhiji to follow a policy which ultimately helped the class interests of the bourgeoisie? Even though, S.A. Dange made a comparison of Gandhi and Lenin in 1920s itself, "M.N. Roy was the first Marxist to evaluate Gandhi's role in Indian politics strictly from the Marxist perspective."38 S.A. Dange in his study tries to place the role of masses in the national movement on lofty plane and also analyzed the part played by the actions of the masses in bringing



forth Gandhi's innate qualities of leadership. To quote him "Gandhi learnt from the masses and led them."39 According to him it was the actions of masses which helped in formulating the techniques that is to be adopted in the coming movements. Dange criticizes the way Gandhi had withdrawn the Non-cooperation movement. But once he understood the mistake he had committed and how the British took advantage of his policy of nonviolence, he never repeated the similar mistake in his political career. He never made non-violence a necessary pre-condition of any of his later movements. Another Marxist historian, A.R. Desai in his analysis tried to establish that Indian Nationalism was governed by bourgeois class outlook and Gandhi's policies and that methods always helped the bourgeois in safeguarding their class interests. From his view it seems that Gandhi formulated his policies in such a way as to serve the aims and interests of bourgeoisie - "The ideology of Gandhi, its political theory, economic doctrine, and ethical views, arose out of the historical needs of the national bourgeoisie.' In spite of pointing out the limitation of Gandhi he wanted to signify the role Gandhi played in mass mobilization - "He was the first national leader who recognized the role of the masses and mass action in 1942 the struggle for national liberation in contrast to earlier leaders and making national movement a multi class movement. "He made, for the first time, the Indian nationalist movement a multi-class and mass nationalist movement in spite of its limitations due to his ideology.'

### **SUBALTERN PERSPECTIVES**

The history written by Subalternist historians is different from the elitist historiography. Subalternist's demand the "de-elitization" of history. It assumes that the elitist bias, open or insidious, has placed history at the service of the dominant or hegemonic classes and banished the rest from history or rendered them aphonous. Subalternist historians claim that their analysis is entirely different from the elitist historiography. In some of its analysis it stands close to Marxist type. Marxists and Subalternists enjoy a somewhat similar view regarding the importance of the Gandhian leadership and also about the role assigned to the common people in the National movement. Subalternist in their work gave importance to the attitude of the common people towards the movement and the rural base of the movement. So, they took local issues, which were confined, to a particular region to show the spontaneous nature of the movement. While the nationalist leaders trying to give



importance to the educated elites in organizing and leading the movement there by considering the common people as passive elements, the Marxists were of the opinion that the mass mobilization was not at the initiative of the educated upper class alone but a response coming from the socio-economic structure of the colonial Indian society. But the Subalternists tried to depict how the traditional, religious, conservative, orthodox community reacted against the exploitation and they tried to analyze the influence of the nationalist ideology with their narrow outlook. Ranajit Guha in his introductory essay in *Subaltern Studies I* criticized the nationalist historians' view that the entire movement was organized at the behest of the educated urban intelligentsia and it was these people who mobilized the masses. According to him "The history of Indian nationalism is thus written up as a sort of spiritual biography of the Indian elite."

He says that the politics of the people "was an autonomous domain, for it neither originated from elite politics nor did its significance depend on the (Here one has to consider whether the breaking of the limit set by the politician and elites can be taken as an autonomous domain). In fact, Ranajit Guha forcefully argued that "onesided and blinkered historiography" which projected Indian nationalism as "a sort of spiritual biography of the Indian elite" has "failed to explain Indian nationalism for us." That is elitist historiography failed to understand the problem of mobilization. His main reproach against the elitist historiography is that it fails to admit or record the failure of the Indian bourgeoisie to speak for the nation.<sup>75</sup> The Subalternist historians' claim that the mass mobilization took place not just because of the activities of the elite. They want to consider it as a spontaneous development or independent of any outside manipulation. Sumit Sarkar says that "The 'Cambridge' assumption that factions explain everything since local 'patrons' have a kind of inherent and automatic capacity for mobilizing their 'clients', as well as the standard nationalist interpretation in terms of mobilization from the top by the patriotic leaders or ideologies share in common a serious under estimation of the popular. According to Gyan Pandey . . . many of the most important peasant insurrections in the country were largely autonomous and the intervention of 'outside' leaders was a marginal and often, a late phenomenon." But one will find it very difficult to agree with the view of the Subalternists that the several local movements were spontaneous. We can't deny the fact that it was this educated upper class who gave political education to the rural masses and it was these people who took the initiative



in waking them up from their deep slumber, it was they who taught the people to react against the domination. But the way they acted, the way they interpreted the ideology of these elites were different and once they were initiated they did everything according to their independent thought but even then it was restricted from the top. Gyan Pandey in his article, 'Peasant Revolt and Indian Nationalism, 1919-1922' which deals with the revolt of the peasants of Awadh, comments on certain limitations of Gandhism, the 'anti-peasant' attitude of Gandhi and the instructions that he had given to the peasants to be followed while participating in a movement.

### **OTHER WORKS**

Judith Brown's *Gandhi's Rise to Power - Indian Politics 1915- 1922*, is an effort to trace Gandhi's emergence as a leader during the period, 1915-22. Her attempt is to see the changes that were brought about by him and his "role in politics and to see what forces of change he was either creating or exploiting. Brown says that Gandhi during his political career in South Africa "rarely delegated responsibility for the organization and preferred to rely on his own influence and actions. According to her, one of the reasons for Gandhi's refusal to link the Champaran struggle with conventional politics was "If he threw his lot with a particular political group he would be sucked into the vortex of political alliances, and his independence would vanish. She holds that it was the charismatic leadership of Gandhi which appealed in almost messianic terms to those at the very bottom of society. In Kaira Gandhi worked on two main lines "external publicity and internal consolidation" and a "tightly knit band of associates" formed the spearhead of his movement. In both Champaran and Kaira "Gandhi took up an issue which was comprehensible and important to peasant cultivators, basing his campaign of support in the villages, while articulating rural discontent through the better and educated urban groups, who had some overt political awareness and public expertise. His strength lay in being the mediator between these groups.

On the issue of Rowlatt Bills Gandhi's 'subcontractors' failed him because Satyagraha threatened their basic local interests. By mid-1919 he had no reliable group of subcontractors. Hence, he involved in an alliance with the Muslims. The observance of 'Khilafat Day' shows "the extent to which Gandhi had begun to create and tap a network of organization and loyalty by his espousal of a



Muslim cause. Gandhi depended much on his 'subcontractors' for the success of the movements he organized. Thus, Gujarat and Bihar where Gandhi had "built up a local reputation and a network of sub-contractors, swung powerfully into all-India politics for the first time solidly in support of him" during the Non-cooperation movement. log Gandlu7s dependence on the 'subcontractors' was considered as weakness for Gandhi and Congress, because they entered the movement to "improve their position in their local power structure."~ Judith Brown describes three types of 'sub-contractors' upon, whom Gandhi depended. At the top were the western educated elite. Below them were the educated either in the vernacular or in English, small town lawyers, traders, village priests etc. According to Brown this second tier of sub-contractors are extremely important as it was "on their reaction Gandhi's power stood or fell." Beneath them were the real 'masses' of India, the illiterate, low-paid workers and the unemployed of town and countryside. From this 'lower class people' Gandhi in fact elicited no truly political response." Her work denied the role of the masses that "the Mahatma activated, and whose participation was too significant to be ignored."

Judith Brown's Gandhi and Civil disobedience movement: The Mahatma in Indian politics 1928 - 34 traces Gandhi's career from the Calcutta Congress session in the last days of 1928, when he was refashioned as a potential all India leader, to the Bombay congress October 1934, when again Gandhi withdraw from active politics. The primary aim of the book was to chart "Gandhi's personal political career in one of its most remarkable phase." This is its main drawback. In the words of Christopher Baker, the work is a political biography rather than a political history arranged around a biography. Judith Brown's study of "Gandhi's role as civil disobedience leader in the 1930's investigates a particular example of the phenomenon of continental political leadership." It was during the phase from 1928 - 34 "occurred the creation of his new continental leadership position, the exercise of that leadership role, and its disintegration as the context changed and Gandhi could no longer perform the fictions which had been his passport to prominence. It shows that Gandhi's leadership position was no static phenomenon but one which altered over time as the context changed and his peculiar ambition and aptitudes meshed with and served the interests of other people and groups. '





## CONCLUSION

When Gandhi entered the Indian political scene, he was well established as a leader of the Indian community in South Africa. There he succeeded in welding the different sections of Indians into one and united community. There also he had to deal with the British government. Still in 1915 he was impressed by the British sense of justice and believed that the British would listen to Indian demands which were 'just'. At that time, he was ready to cooperate with the British government. It was in 1915 that Gandhi entered the Indian political scene. It was during this period that Gokhale predicted, "this man is going to play a great part in the future history of India. . . .There is something in him which at once enchains the attention of the poor man and he establishes, with a rapidity which is his own, his affinity, with the lowly and the, distressed. . . . . It was the Indian National Congress which led the National Movement. But it was only a middle-class organization without a mass base at that time. It remained more as a forum for debate than as an instrument of action. It was characterized by the ideology of Moderates under the leadership of Gopala Krishna Gokhale and the ideology of Extremists under the leadership of Bal Gangadhar Tilak. They bequeathed to Gandhi their views on the nature and method of protest in the colonial state. Gandhi made a critical borrowing from them and continuously improvised upon them to make the protest against the colonial regime more effective.

The early Indian Nationalists had much faith in the British rule. This made them follow the path of constitutionalism. Gandhi by the late 1920s lost all such faith and so he abandoned the path of constitutionalism. He had much faith in the masses and he believed that masses are the ultimate source of power. The constitutional method adopted by the Congress during these years did not make the leaders of the Congress feel the necessity of the mass support. The westernized elite which controlled the Congress were not for mobilizations of the masses yet. British repression made the Extremists methods ineffective. Colonial power tried to seek the support of the Moderates with small concessions and reforms. Masses remained largely inert with no part to play in the movement. But Gandhian technique of non-cooperation needed mass participation for its success. His methods were not in tune with the prevalent methods of the Congress. In stark contrast to the politics of the early Congress which were accessible only to the highly educated and the English-speaking Gandhi's



campaign incorporated all sections of the population. He brought about qualitative changes in Indian politics by changing the national movement from a middle-class movement to a mass movement. His style of politics bewildered some of the Congress leaders of the time as well as the British government. Gandhi constantly tried to broaden the mass base of the Indian National Movement. He became successful in drawing the masses to the political forefront. This aspect of movement did not get much attention from the historians.

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