

Gandhi, Mohandas Karamchand (1869–1948)

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Mohandas Karamchand (Mahatma) Gandhi was a foremost Indian nationalist and considered by many as the founder of modern non-violent resistance. Born in Porbandar, Gujarat State in 1869, Gandhi was married to Kasturbai when he was 13 and she slightly younger, an experience that turned him into a bitter opponent of child marriage. Gandhi left for England in 1888 to study law, after which he went to South Africa in search of a job. In 1907, fighting against a Transvaal law imposing the compulsory registration and fingerprinting of Indians, Gandhi developed a unique non-violent method of agitation known as *satyagraha*. This non-violent form of protest involved the peaceful violation of specific laws, courting mass arrests, occasional *hartals* (a form of general strike or closing shops and markets), and spectacular rallies. The protest was followed by another *satyagraha* of Indian women and miners against the imposition of a poll tax, refusal to recognize Indian marriages, immigration regulations, and indentured labor. In 21 years in South Africa, Gandhi's ideas were formulated, inspired by Ruskin, Tolstoy, and Thoreau. Motivated by Ruskin, Gandhi lived an austere life in a commune, first in Phoenix Farm in Natal, and then in Tolstoy Farm just outside Johannesburg. During this period certain experiments involving diet, childrearing, nature cure, and his personal and professional life convinced Gandhi that a political leader must also be morally pure.

The Gandhian Style

The peculiar conditions of South Africa made possible the unity of Hindus, Muslims, Christians and Parsis, Gujaratis and South Indians, upper-class merchants and lawyers as well as mineworkers. This made Gandhi, by the time he returned to India, much more of an all-India figure than any of his predecessors. The basic Gandhian style, worked out in South Africa, included *satyagraha*, meticulous attention to organizational and specifically financial details, training of disciplined cadres, a readiness to



Mahatma Gandhi is, for many, the embodiment of non-violent peaceful popular resistance. Here he marches with Indian poet and politician Sarojini Naidu and 77 others to protest the British monopoly on salt production. This “Salt March” protest covered 241 miles in 24 days in 1930 and has inspired a number of peaceful protests since, including Martin Luther King Jr.’s Civil Rights marches in the United States. Hulton Archive / Getty Images

negotiate and to call off movements unilaterally even when it was unpopular, the cultivation of vegetarianism, experiments in sexual self-restraint, and so on. During World War I Gandhi campaigned for military recruitment, in the hope of winning postwar political concessions. Pre-Gandhi nationalist politics had oscillated between the “moderate” politics of “mendicancy” (petitions, meetings in halls, editorials in nationalist journals, and so on) and “terrorism” (individual violence). Working-class strikes in Bombay after Bal Gangadhar Tilak’s arrest in 1908 or on other occasions made mill owners fearful. Gandhian techniques promised to bind the mass movement to a leader whose social ideas, especially ideas about property rights, were impeccable. Non-violence made Gandhi and the Gandhi-led Indian National Congress able to mediate internal social conflicts so that they did not transgress bourgeois limits, thereby assuming the character of an

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umbrella-type organization that straddled all social divides.

Another aspect of Gandhi's appeal lay in his program of social regeneration, which was combined with the political struggle for independence. This enabled him to work out a model of hegemony. Taking over and extending the Romantic critique of industrialism from Ruskin, Gandhi argued that mere political *swaraj* (self-rule) would mean English rule without the English. His alternative was a small peasant utopia, as outlined in his book *Hind Swaraj* (1908). Gandhi argued that railways had spread plague and produced famines by exporting food grain, and western medicine was costly and ruined natural health measures. All this, he averred, had to go, and the upper classes had to live the life of a peasant. He concretized this vision by the programs of *khadi* (handspun coarse cloth), village reconstruction, and later welfare of the Harijan (lower caste or untouchables). None of these were programs capable of challenging fundamental social relations, so the upper classes could be happy. Noted Indian Marxist historian Sumit Sarkar has used this feature to argue an imperialist, Cambridge School-style interpretation, seeing Gandhi as principally a broker between different factions; however, this misses the nature of his mass appeal. Given the diverse social matrix of India, a Gandhi-type leadership was historically necessary. On one hand, peasant participation was giving a radical twist to Gandhi's program. On the other hand, when he called off movements, they had no alternative leadership to carry the struggles forward: they still could not represent themselves but had to be represented. This fact of ultimate peasant limitation as regards centralized leader-centric politics has possibly been ignored by scholars of the subaltern school such as Ranajit Guha, who in their romanticization of the spontaneous revolutionary potential of the peasantry tend to overestimate the possibility of localized peasant resistance.

The Rise to Leadership

Gandhi returned to India in 1915 and gained a political reputation through three local struggles. In Champaran, a village in Bihar, the key role was played by rich and middle peasants who had invited Gandhi, local moneylenders who resented planter competition, and some village teachers. Gandhi's role lay in giving indigo planter oppres-

sion in Champaran wide publicity through an inquiry. In the Kheda district of Gujarat, there was a struggle for rent reduction in times of poor harvest by the *patidars* (peasant proprietors). Though the initial movement had limited success, Gandhian methods were appreciated because the peasants, as property owners, did not want a violent revolution. But the peasants had their own views and were far from mindless puppets manipulated by Gandhi and his "subcontractors." In the same Kheda area, Gandhi's campaigns for war recruitment met not just with refusal but with outright hostility. The Ahmedabad struggle was one of Gandhi's rare interventions in urban working-class protests. Textile workers in this city in Gujarat were demanding a 50 percent wage hike in a period of rising prices, but owners were unwilling to give more than 20 percent. However, the textile magnate Ambalal Sarabhai had been a follower of Gandhi and had contributed substantially to the Sabarmati Ashram (retreat) that he had set up in Gujarat. Gandhi used the tactic of the hunger strike for the first time and the workers got a 35 percent wage rise. This outlook never spread beyond Ahmedabad, and unlike other bourgeois nationalist leaders, Gandhi kept himself aloof from the All-India Trade Union Congress when it emerged a few years later.

Gandhi made his debut in all-India issues only after creating this reputation and wide base for himself, when the Rowlatt Act (1919) continued the suspension of civil rights even after the war. While all sections of Indian political opinion opposed the Rowlatt Act, it was Gandhi who showed the way to mass protest without leaving the terrain of elite control. The initial plan of courting arrest by public sale of prohibited works was expanded by Gandhi to include the novel and radical idea of an all-India *hartal*. Trouble broke out in Punjab, where Lieutenant Governor Michael O'Dwyer, who already had a bad reputation, imposed martial law. On April 13, 1919, General Dyer ordered his troops to open fire on an unarmed gathering without warning, in the enclosed ground named Jallianwalabagh. Nearly 2,500 men, women, and children were killed or injured. This unprecedented violence seems to have frightened most politicians, including Gandhi. Seeing widespread violence in retaliation, Gandhi confessed that he had made a "Himalayan blunder" in introducing *satyagraha* to Indian agitation, as people were not yet

prepared for non-violent confrontation, and he unilaterally called it off.

Non-Cooperation

Gandhi hoped to cement Hindu–Muslim unity by calling for support for the Khilafat movement, which demanded that the Turkish sultan, as the khalifa (religious head of the Sunni Muslims), should retain control over Muslim sacred places, with enough territory to enable him to defend the Islamic faith. The movement had a moderate and a radical wing. Lower-middle-class journalists and *ulama* (Muslim legal scholars) with considerable influence in small towns and villages, led by Mohammed Ali and Shaukat Ali, wanted countrywide *hartals*. It was this group that first demanded non-cooperation at the Delhi all-India Khilafat Conference on November 22–3, 1919. According to Brown (1972), Gandhi emerged as an important broker between Khilafatists and Hindu politicians. After the Treaty of Sèvres, the radicals became dominant in the Khilafat movement and Gandhi sided with them. He now began pressing the Congress to adopt a plan of campaign around three issues: the “Punjab wrong,” the “Khilafat wrong,” and the nebulous concept of “*swaraj*.” Between September and December 1920, Gandhi was emerging as the supreme leader of the Congress, which approved a program of surrendering titles awarded by the British, boycotting schools, courts, and councils, boycotting foreign goods, and encouraging national schools, arbitration courts, *khadi*, and a no-tax campaign. Even Gandhi’s main opponent, Chittaranjan Das, dramatically changed sides. Crucial structural changes, made at Gandhi’s insistence, included expansion of the Congress’s mass base so that it was possible to recruit beyond the middle classes; a hierarchy of village *taluka* (district or town) committees; reorganization of provincial Congress committees on a linguistic basis (laying the foundations for the future states reorganization principle in independent India); and the creation of a small Congress Working Committee (CWC) as executive head.

Gandhi received mass support on the crest of a popular upsurge. At the biggest ever Congress session in Nagpur (December 1920), his supporters included the countrywide network of Marwari (People from Northwestern India) businessmen and traders, Muslim Khilafatists,

and the Andhra delegates, whose linguistic identity was submerged. Muslims below the elite category gave Khilafat a social dimension absent in the original. In addition, there was a rising tide of labor and peasant struggles. The Congress-sponsored non-cooperation movement assumed a more militant phase of black flag demonstrations against the visit of the Prince of Wales in November 1921. Angered by the arrest of the Ali brothers, Khilafat leaders like Maulana Hasrat Mohani were demanding complete independence at the Ahmedabad Congress in December 1921. By February 1922, Gandhi decided to begin a no-revenue campaign at Bardoli, in Gujarat, on the issue of infringed liberties of speech, press, and association. But on February 5, 1922, angry peasants at Chauri Chaura, in Gorakhpur district of the United Provinces, burned 22 policemen alive. Gandhi immediately called off the entire movement unilaterally, greatly alienating the Khilafatists and completely disregarding the mood of the masses.

Despite attempts to contain the movement to a narrowly anti-British line, excluding social dimensions, popular response tended to go over the line. This was why Chauri Chaura was, for Gandhi, not a single incidence of violence but the capstone of an entire edifice. British alarm at the incident is recorded by the fact that initially 172 of the 225 accused were sentenced to death (eventually 19 were hanged). But neither Gandhi nor any other leaders condemned this. Gandhi’s self-justification revealed his political orientation. While stressing absolute non-violence he argued, in *Young India* on February 16, 1922, that if the country became independent, such violent people would pose a problem. Gandhi was now arrested and given a six-year jail term. The next few years saw realignments. Motilal Nehru, C. R. Das, and others formed the Swarajya Party within the Congress and pressed for participation in elections with the radical purpose of “wrecking the constitution from within.” After his release from jail, Gandhi, who was noncommittal about this proposal, concentrated on constructive programs like impressive relief work in emergencies (floods), in building national schools, the promotion of *khadi* and other cottage crafts, anti-alcohol propaganda, and work among the untouchables. As a program for India’s social problems, the effort was a failure. National schools were never successful except in brief periods of political excitement.

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Even Gandhi's program for the untouchables was very limited. In rejecting basic land reforms, he ignored the deeply exploitative agrarian system that was at the base of the poverty of most of the Dalits (oppressed: the term former untouchables prefer to Gandhi's term Harijan). Radical anti-casteists, like E. V. R. Naicker of Tamil Nadu, were disappointed when Gandhi defended the *Varnashrama* ideals (caste ideals as formulated in the *Vedic* literature). Gyanendra Pandey (2002) and other modern studies confirm that the constructive program was valuable in building political linkages and establishing Congress hegemony. But Gandhi never parted company with Madan Mohan Malaviya, founder of the Hindu Mahasabha (a Hindu fundamentalist organization), and his followers, who had never fought British imperialism.

Civil Disobedience

In November 1927, the British government announced the all-white Simon Commission to look into the question of further constitutional and administrative changes. A Simon Commission boycott movement generated radical political developments. But given Congress softness toward the Mahasabha, the Congress was largely responsible for the aloofness and hostility of Muslim leaders toward the next round of the Gandhian movement two years later.

Throughout 1928 and 1929, Gandhi sought to limit pressure for a fresh round of all-India mass struggle aimed at complete independence. Despite repeated Congress resolutions on *purna swaraj* (complete independence) from 1927 to 1929, Gandhi emphatically demanded a moderate proposal for dominion status. Gandhi's hesitations reflected business reluctance and ambiguity. In a March 1929 speech, Homi Mody, chairman of the Bombay Mill Owners' Association, focused on the "unprecedented general strike" organized by the communist-led Girni *Kamgar* (Worker) Union. In 1929, Dorabji Tata, Cowasji Jehangir, and Ibrahim Rahimtulla, the most pro-government capitalists who were dependent on state contracts and patronage, sought to develop a business-oriented party distinct from the Congress. Rather different was the strategy of Ghanshyam Das Birla, seeking to use Gandhi's influence to counter growing radicalism. On November 2, 1929, Gandhi, Motilal, the Liberals, and Malaviya joined in

accepting Viceroy Irwin's offer of a Round Table Conference on the condition of discussing amnesty and the details of dominion status among other issues. Subhas Bose, one of the radical leaders, objected, but Jawaharlal Nehru ultimately went along. With the viceroy rejecting Gandhi's conditions, however, negotiations broke down. Then in the Lahore Congress of 1929 with Jawaharlal's presidential address attacking capitalism and trusteeship theory, Gandhi emerged fully in control at the sessions. Subhas Bose's proposals for non-payment of taxes and general strikes were rejected. Gandhi pushed through the main resolution so that it ultimately had a word of praise for Irwin, and endorsed initial acceptance of his offer. Nonetheless, despite the hesitant leadership, a qualitative leap forward was taken in the anti-colonial struggle. Delegates welcomed the unfurled tricolor which displayed not only the traditional slogan *Bande Mataram* (salutations to the motherland), but also *Inquilab Zindabad* (long live the revolution).

Gandhi neutralized the radical turn in the Congress by launching a new program of *satyagraha* against the tax on salt involving a 400-kilometer march from Ahmedabad to Dandi (March 12–April 6, 1930). Though his 11-point ultimatum to Irwin seemed a climbdown from the demand for complete independence, this charter reflected his expertise in harmoniously combining bourgeois issues with peasant ones couched as a national demand. Demands included 50 percent cuts in military-bureaucratic expenses as well as three specific bourgeois demands (lowering of the rupee–sterling exchange ratio, textile protection, and reservation of coastal shipping for Indians) and two basically peasant themes (the lowering of land revenue and the abolition of the salt tax). Gandhi clearly had no intention of endorsing Jawaharlal's suggestions for anti-*zamindar* (landlord) no-rent campaigns. The salt tax had the effect of being a peasant issue which targeted only the government.

Popular pressure was evident when village officials began resigning along Gandhi's route, and *patidars* in the Borsad *taluk* of Kheda district demanded permission to start non-payment of revenue – a demand Gandhi conceded with great reluctance. However, it was no longer possible to restrict everything as Gandhi would have liked. A few instances of violence occurred, such as the armed rising and seizure of the Chittagong armory organized by Surya Sen

in April 1930 and the refusal of upper-caste Hindu soldiers sent by the British government to attack the Khudai Khidmatgar organized by Khan Abdul Gaffar Khan in Peshawar, thwarting British hopes of creating a communal divide. Gandhi repudiated this action, saying that as soldiers they ought to have obeyed their superiors. Finally, in Sholapur, an industrial city in Maharashtra, news of Gandhi's arrest sparked off a textile strike which turned violent. Order was restored only through martial law after May 16.

The stated goal of the civil disobedience agitation was nothing short of complete independence. Brutal violence was used on the most peaceful of agitators. Purushottamdas Thakurdas bitterly complained about the beating of women and children by the police. The no-rent campaign was highly successful in the Gandhian base at Bardoli. Negotiations at this stage, with Gandhi and Nehru demanding a complete national government with control over defense and finance, broke down. From September 1930 onwards, both traders and mill owners were showing signs of strain. In the countryside, purely Gandhian forms of struggle, based on relatively prosperous peasants, were losing potency, while socially dangerous forms such as no-rent campaigns and tribal rebellions were emerging. Mass movements from below stimulating capitalist pressure from above led to Gandhi's sudden shift. By a formal pact in March 1931, the British government agreed to set all political prisoners free in return for the suspension of the civil disobedience movement. Furthermore, Gandhi was invited to attend the Round Table Conference in London as the sole representative of the Indian National Congress. Radicals in the leadership felt badly let down by these constitutional concessions. Gandhi made little attempt to save the life of Bhagat Singh, who had been sentenced to death on March 23, 1931. This was just before the Karachi Congress, and the Naujawan Bharat Sabha (Young India Association) organized a demonstration against Gandhi at the Karachi station, with the slogan *Naujawan ko kya mila? Bhagat Singh ko phansi milla* (What did the youth gain? The hanging of Bhagat Singh). But at the Karachi session, Gandhi's left-wing critics failed. Jawaharlal again surrendered to Gandhi, a pattern that would be seen repeatedly. Gandhi emerged as the victor once more.

The British had been compelled to treat Gandhi as a national leader and negotiate with

him. After the Gandhi–Irwin Pact, the Congress expanded. The assumption of office by a Tory-dominated National Government, headed by the renegade Labourite Ramsay MacDonald, meant a further shift to the right. At the second Round Table Conference in 1931, offers concerning central power were minimized. Meanwhile, at the level of provinces, the Hindu Mahasabha was intransigent about not giving Muslims majority seats in Bengal and Punjab, two Muslim-majority provinces. This alienated the Muslim delegates. Now separate electorates were demanded by diverse groups, including the depressed castes. Along with Indian Christians, Anglo-Indians, and Europeans, they came together in a “minorities pact.” Gandhi fought against this trend, arguing that the solution to the communal question would crown the constitution rather than be its foundation. Gandhi then, as later in 1945–6, would offer to accept most of the Muslim demands if they accepted the demand for full independence, but given the Mahasabha intransigence about not providing any guarantees to Muslim sensibilities, this was a meaningless gesture. Gandhi eventually returned empty-handed to India. The one gain for Gandhi was a dubious one. In 1932, through the campaigning of the Dalit leader B. R. Ambedkar, the government granted untouchables separate electorates under the new constitution. In protest, Gandhi embarked on a six-day fast in September 1932, successfully forcing the government to adopt a more equitable arrangement via negotiations mediated by the Dalit cricketer turned political leader Palwankar Baloo. At the same time, the Harijan welfare work of Gandhi and his associates did help in taking Congress hegemony to those castes, and for several decades, including in independent India, they would remain part of the core Congress vote bank. But this reform work was a bid to establish hegemony over more radical struggles, like E. V. R. Naicker's Self-Respect movement in Tamil Nadu. The militant atheism and resistance to upper-caste oppression of such movements steered some of their members in the direction of communism.

In 1937, when elections were held under the new Government of India Act 1935, the Congress gained 711 out of 1,585 provincial assembly seats, winning absolute majorities in five provinces out of 11. The Muslim League cut a sorry figure, even in the Muslim-reserved seats, as did the Hindu Mahasabha in general seats.

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Only in Bombay did Ambedkar's Independent Labor Party win 13 out of 15 seats reserved for Harijans, showing that on the Dalit question there existed a real challenge to the Hindu communalist as well as Gandhian alternatives. The All-India Congress Committee (AICC) session of March 1937 accepted a resolution on conditional acceptance of office, moved by two old Gandhians, Patel and Rajendra Prasad. Jayaprakash Narayan's left amendment rejecting office was defeated by 135 to 78 votes. Gandhi himself played a less than glorious role, his task being to persuade Nehru to toe the line.

The election of Subhas Bose in 1938 as Congress president posed a problem. While less internationalist than Nehru, Bose was also less likely to toe Gandhi's line. Before the Tripuri Congress, in 1939, Subhas was reelected president by defeating Patabhi Sitaramayya, Gandhi's candidate. But Gandhi aided the Congress right to snatch victory out of defeat. On February 22, 13 out of the 15 members of the old CWC resigned, including Nehru. At the Tripuri Session in March, the right won a vote on a resolution moved by Govind Ballav Pant, asking Bose to nominate his new executive in accordance with the wishes of Gandhi. Ineptness and internal discord within the left enabled Gandhi to control the Congress. When Gandhi told Bose he was free to choose his own committee, Bose failed to take up the challenge against this cultism and resigned. By 1940, he was hounded out of the Congress.

Gandhi, Women, and Sexuality

Gandhi's emergence as a mass leader had a partially positive impact on women's participation in politics. He was not a believer in equality, but he did believe that men and women were complementary. He stressed the need to draw women into the freedom struggle, upwardly valuing the kind of work women could do for the nationalist struggle, such as spinning cloth at home, and bringing about a feminization of politics. He also tactically approved women's violation of the law to shame more men into joining the movement. But he was reluctant to accept full equality of women in the movement, and during civil disobedience, it was only after pressure from women like Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay and Sarojini Naidu that he accepted women's participation in the salt *satyagraha*.

At the same time, Gandhi had a very troubled vision of female sexuality. He wanted women in his movement to be chaste, and flew into a rage when some prostitutes took part in constructive Gandhian work. While arguing that women were sisters (thereby shifting to a non-sexual identity), he also felt women's sexuality to be threatening for men. He opposed Sucheta Kripalani's proposed marriage to his follower J. B. Kripalani, saying that she would be breaking his right arm. Finally, his sexual experiments, including sleeping in the nude with a number of women to find out how far he could control his sexuality, were done without any evident regard for what the women felt.

World War II and Quit India

When World War II broke out, Gandhi's initial response had been to offer "non-violent moral support" to the British effort, but other Congress leaders objected to the unilateral declaration that India too was in the war, without consulting the people's representatives. And Gandhi's moderate line of individual *satyagraha* only contributed to the petering out of the movement. The aim was clearly to register a token protest without making serious trouble for the government. Gandhi was more concerned by the appeal of communism to youth than with fighting imperialism. As often before, when he took the decision to move to a more militant struggle, the reason may well have been a desire to defeat the left.

Initially, capitalist circles in India were happy with a war that brought profits. It was the left that saw the war as an imperialist one. But the Communist Party of India (CPI) decided that after Hitler's invasion of the USSR the war had become an anti-fascist "people's war." Nehru sought for a compromise to enable Indian support for the war during the Cripps Mission negotiations. Subhas Bose viewed the war as an opportunity to strike at a weakened enemy.

Gandhi's perspective was different to that of the Congress right wing. As the war progressed, Gandhi increased his demands for independence, drafting a resolution calling for the British to quit India. In his famous "do or die" speech on August 8, 1942, Gandhi said that every Indian should consider himself to be a free person, and for the first time in an interview, he even considered the weapon of the general

strike. But the Quit India resolution was kept suitably vague as a bargaining counter. It was turned into an upsurge not by the Congress high command, which was promptly arrested, but by socialists and other radicals. By the arrest of the leadership, the British thought they would provoke Indians and crush them. Instead they had to confront an upsurge, described by Viceroy Lord Linlithgow as the most serious rebellion since 1857.

Gandhi could gauge the popular mood better than others, including the communists. The defeat at the hands of Japan had taken a tremendous toll on British prestige. It also revealed once more the gross racism of the rulers of India. The result was a combination of anti-white anger and a belief that English rule was about to end. Sumit Sarkar suggests that the United Provinces and Bihar, scenes of some of the most powerful unrest in August 1942, were also areas from where migrant labor went to Southeast Asia. Losses incurred in Southeast Asia possibly also led to a change in attitude within the business communities. *Hartals*, strikes, and clashes with police and army occurred in many places. From the middle of August, the struggles shifted from the towns to the countryside. Parallel governments were formed, as in Satara and Midnapore, respectively in Maharashtra and Bengal. Gandhi was held for two years in the Aga Khan Palace in Pune. He was released on May 6, 1944, because of his failing health: the Raj did not want him to die in prison and enrage the nation.

Freedom and Partition of India

In July 1945, the Labour Party, the soft imperialists, swept to power after the elections. The objective situation was such that no alternative existed to getting out of India. But the decisive shift came from the postwar upsurge. A restive army and navy (the navy actually revolted) and mass civilian unrest nearly on the scale of 1942 showed Labour that it had to act. On February 20, 1946, Clement Attlee announced that a Cabinet Mission would be sent to India. At this point, Gandhi, Nehru, right-wing leader Patel, and Muslim League supremo Jinnah stood shoulder to shoulder, condemning the mass movements. Gandhi condemned the display of interreligious unity by the rebel Royal Indian Navy ratings, saying that a combination

of Hindus, Muslims, and others for the purpose of violent action was unholy. However, once the battle of the barricades was discarded, Gandhi found there was no place for him either. The elections of 1946 were held in a communally charged situation. Astute moves by the Muslim League after the 1937 drubbing had enabled it to emerge as the voice of Muslims. The Congress did well in the non-Muslim seats, winning 57 out of 102 seats in the Central Assembly. In the provinces it won everywhere except Bengal, Sind, and Punjab. It was in this context that the Congress gave up its slogan of a Constituent Assembly elected by universal suffrage. Only the communists raised this demand seriously. Congress leaders, including Gandhi, accepted the election of the Constituent Assembly by the indirect method of election from the Legislatures, themselves elected by very restricted franchise. This was not an abstract issue.

So when the British Cabinet Mission came to India in 1946, imperialism and Indian bourgeois leaders were united in their desire to halt any further progress of radicalism, whether of the CPI variety or any other. The strike wave of 1946 involved 1,629 stoppages, 1,941,948 workers, and 12,717,762 labor days. This time negotiations were serious on both sides. But the situation further changed with the rise of the most fascistic form of communalism, both that of the Muslim League and that of the Hindu Mahasabha and the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (National Volunteers' Association or RSS). The Cabinet Mission had proposed a scheme of a weak central government with three groups of states, the Hindu majority center and the Muslim majority northwest and northeast. When Nehru refused to accept that the groupings would be permanent (Bengal and Assam, for example, would be united into a permanent Muslim majority state), Jinnah called on Muslims for direct action. Direct Action Day, August 16, 1946, was a day of mass riots in Calcutta. Hindu rioters hit back. Soon, the entire country seemed engulfed. To many, including Nehru, partition now seemed the lesser evil so that communal peace could be restored. But for Gandhi this was not the case. He even proposed the seemingly quixotic suggestion that Jinnah be made prime minister and the British stay on for a while to protect the majority. But with power so close, the bourgeoisie did not want to let it go. The Hindu bourgeois politicians also had little time

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for the utopian old man who did not want power. Isolated from the Congress leadership, Gandhi at the age of 77 decided to stake everything in a bid to vindicate his lifelong principles of non-violence and change of heart. Sarkar calls this “the Mahatma’s Finest Hour.” He spent his time in the riot-torn villages of Noakhali in East Bengal, followed by Bihar, and then in Calcutta. He lived with a handful of companions in hostile Muslim-dominated villages, threatened a fast-to-death if Hindus in Bihar did not change their attitudes, and walked barefoot through Noakhali, singing the Rabindranath Tagore song *Jadi tor dak shune keu na aashe tabe ekla chalo re* (if none heeds thy call, walk alone). At a moment when all forms of political power could have been his, had he uttered a word, he shunned it all and fought on for communal amity, rethinking strategy and principles at this stage of his life. Congress leaders prevailed upon him not to oppose partition, and he accepted their pressure with a heavy heart. But he did not return to Delhi, staying on in Beliaghata in Kolkata to halt rioting.

The Final Period

After India’s independence, Gandhi focused on Hindu–Muslim peace and unity. When riots began in Delhi, with a massacre of Muslims as revenge for the Punjab, Gandhi’s fast in January 1948 had a temporary impact. This last fast seems also directed in part against the increasingly communal attitudes of his erstwhile disciple, Sardar Patel, who was thinking in terms of a total population transfer in the Punjab and was refusing to honor a prior agreement according to which India was obliged to hand over Rs. 550 million as Pakistan’s share of the pre-partition government of India’s assets.

The post-partition period saw the Hindu communal forces who had always acted as loyal subjects of the empire now become increasingly vocal. The RSS at that time openly expressed its admiration for Hitler. V. D. Savarkar, head of the Hindu Mahasabha, was implicated in a conspiracy to kill Gandhi. This was part of a general attempt to destabilize the new government and make a bid for Hindutva power. On January 30, 1948, when Gandhi was on his way to a prayer meeting, Nathuram Godse, who had renounced his RSS membership to keep the organization out of trouble, confronted Gandhi and shot him.

Godse and Narayan Apte were condemned to death and executed. What is significant is that the Delhi and Bombay police had had ample warning that a conspiracy was being hatched, but had done nothing. Gandhi’s last words as he was shot are said to have been *He Ram* (roughly translated as “Oh God”).

SEE ALSO: Bose, Subhas Chandra (1897–1945); Dalit Liberation Struggles; India, Civil Disobedience Movement and Demand for Independence; India, Non-Violent Non-Cooperation Movement and Council, 1918–1929; India, Post-World War II Upsurge; Jinnah, Muhammad Ali (1876–1948); Khuda-i Khidmatgar; Pashtun Non-Violent Resistance Force (1929–1948); Narayan, Jayaprakash (1902–1979); Nehru, Jawaharlal (1889–1964); Quit India Movement

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