

# Gandhi and the myth of non-violence

*By Alec Kahn*

The ideas of Mahatma Gandhi have enjoyed a resurgence. The non-violent non-cooperation tactics used in the struggles against the Franklin Dam in Tasmania and the Greenham Common missile base in England owed their inspiration directly to him. Richard Attenborough's Academy Award winning film "Gandhi" further revived the myth that his pacifist tactics won India its independence. Yet socialists have always been quite scathing about Gandhi. Read for example, what George Orwell had to say about him:

*Gandhi has been regarded for twenty years by the Government of India as one of its right hand men. I know what I'm talking about-I used to be an officer in the Indian police. It was always admitted in the most cynical way that Gandhi made it easier for the British to rule India, because his influence was always against taking any action that would make any difference. The reason why Gandhi when in prison is always treated with such lenience and small concessions sometimes made when he has prolonged one of his fasts to a dangerous extent, is that the British officials are in terror that he may die and be replaced by someone who believes less in "soul force" and more in bombs.[1]*

In this pamphlet, we will outline Gandhi's Indian campaigns to show just what Orwell meant. We will argue that Gandhi failed to launch any non-violent campaigns that remained non-violent, at least on his terms. We will argue that when these campaigns started to threaten the interests of the Indian capitalist class, Gandhi always called them off. And we will argue that the British left India for reasons of their own, not anything that Gandhi can take credit for.

## Early days

Gandhi's social views were always reactionary, in the most literal sense of the word. In 1909 he expressed them as follows:

*It is not the British people who are ruling India, but it is modern civilisation, through its railways, telegraphs, telephone, and almost every other invention has been claimed to be a triumph of civilisation ... Medical science is the concentrated essence of black magic ... Hospitals are the instruments that the Devil has been using for his own purpose, in order to keep his hold on his kingdom ... If there were no hospitals for venereal diseases or even for consumptives, we would have less consumption, and less sexual vice amongst us. India's salvation consists in unlearning what she has learnt during the past fifty years or so. The railways, telegraphs, hospitals, lawyers, doctors and such like all have to go.[2]*

But it is Gandhi's political strategy that we are mainly concerned with here. Gandhi developed his methods of non-violent non-cooperation, or "satyagraha" (literally "way of the righteous heart") to fight for civil rights for Indians in South Africa. In this first campaign, he met with some success largely for two reasons. He made considerable use of strike action by Indian workers, and the Indians, being a somewhat peripheral minority in South Africa, could be afforded concessions by the white ruling class that could never be granted to the blacks. Even during this campaign - Gandhi's most creditable effort - the limitations of his pacifism became obvious. In an episode

passed over by Attenborough's film, Gandhi recounts how he *called off* the struggle at one stage, rather than join cause with a "violent" general strike by European workers, and this won the gratitude of the South African ruling class:

*In the course of the satyagraha struggle in South Africa, several thousands of indentured Indians had struck work. This was a satyagraha strike, and therefore entirely peaceful and voluntary. Whilst the strike was going on the strike of the European miners, railway employees, etc. was declared. Overtures were made to me to make common cause with the European strikers. As a satyagraha, I did not require a moment's consideration to decline to do so. I went further, and for fear of our strike being classed with the strike of the Europeans in which methods of violence and use of arms found a prominent place, ours was suspended, and satyagraha from that moment came to be recognised by the Europeans of South Africa as an honourable and honest movement, in the words of General Smuts, "a constitutional movement".[3]*

## **Recruiting for the British**

When Gandhi returned to India in 1915, his qualms about violence suddenly disappeared. He went out recruiting volunteers for the British Army from the Indian population, under the slogan "20 recruits for every village". Gandhi apparently believed that by recruiting cannon fodder to defend the Empire, he could impress the British with Indians' loyalty and thus earn independence. He seemed to have regarded it as a victory that he made recruiting speeches in Hindustani!

Gandhi explained his actions, which went against much of the rest of the independence movements thinking, by saying. "I discovered the British Empire had certain ideals with which I have fallen in love." Later, defenders of Gandhi were to justify his recruiting drive by saying that he "only" raised troops for the medical corps. But of course, medical corps are a vital part of any military machine, and Gandhi's actions freed other recruits for the front line fighting. He certainly made no attempt to raise medical corps for the Germans or Turks, so even if there were elements of misguided humanitarianism in Gandhi's thinking, it was very conveniently one-eyed.

During the years 1917 to 1920, Gandhi made some very important friends amongst the wealthy business families of West India. These included the Sarabhais, textile magnates in his home state of Gujarat, and the Birlas, the second largest industrial group in India. For the rest of his career, Gandhi regularly consulted with them, and they made sure that he never lacked money.

This is not to say that Indian capitalists created Gandhi. But his commitment to the pacifist action suited their interests perfectly. They wanted a *limited* mobilisation of the masses to drive out the British so that *they* could run India instead. They had seen the Russian revolution just to the north, and they realised how important it was to stop the workers and peasants getting arms, or mobilising against their local exploiters as well as the British.

Gandhi was also committed to a capitalist India. He regarded Indians as one big family, exploiters and exploited alike. "I do not regard capital to be the enemy of labour," he said. "I hold their coordination to be perfectly possible." Gandhi came up with a justification of the capitalist's role that many capitalists themselves would smile on as ingenious. He called them "trustees" for the people, and urged the workers and peasants to peacefully persuade "the land-owners and employers to behave ethically as trustees of the property they held for the common good".

Why did Gandhi so quickly gain a mass following in India? The popular impression, reinforced by Attenborough's film, is that it was due to his simple, humble life-style, combined with the work he

did with the peasants' and millhands' grievances. These may have helped, but there were far deeper reasons as well.

Before Gandhi, the Indian independence movement had suffered from two major weaknesses. Its leaders tended to be strongly identified with particular regions, and its activity was hopelessly elitist. One wing busied itself with terrorism, the other with sterile motion-passing, Gandhi had established a *national* reputation for himself through his South African campaign, and thus was able to give the movement a national figurehead that transcended petty regional divisions. And to his credit, he also gave the movement a *mass orientation* at a time when, inspired by the Russian Revolution to the north and the Turkish nationalist movement to the west, the masses were ready to go into action.

But why should Gandhi's "non-violence" have had such particular mass appeal? Leon Trotsky provides a shrewd insight. Trotsky observed exactly the same phenomenon in the early stages of the Russian Revolution. Non-violence, Trotsky argued, reflected the low development of class struggle in the countryside and the peasants' resulting lack of confidence:

*If the peasants during the first period hardly ever resort to open violence, and are still trying to give their activities the form of legal pressure, this is explained by their insufficient trust in their own powers...The attempt to disguise its first rebel steps with legality, both sacred and secular, has from time to time immemorial characterised the struggle of every revolutionary class, before it gathered sufficient strength and confidence to break the umbilical cord which bound it to the old society. This is more completely true of the peasantry than any other class...From the milieu of the nobility itself there arise preachers of conciliation. Leo Tolstoy (the novelist) looked deeper into the soul of the muzhik [peasant] than anybody else. His philosophy of nonviolent resistance was a generalisation of the first stages of the peasant revolution. Mahatma Gandhi is now fulfilling the same mission in India ...*

## **The 1919 hartal**

In 1919 the British passed the Rowlatt Acts, which extended wartime powers of arbitrary arrest, to keep the independence movement in check. There was massive resentment throughout India, and in February Gandhi formed a Satyagraha League and announced a "hartal" (day of general suspension of business) for April 6. The response amazed everyone. Through March and April, there was a wave of mass marches, strikes, some rioting and violent repression by the British.

The April 6 hartal was a huge success. It was accompanied by sporadic riots in Calcutta, Bombay, Ahmedabad and elsewhere. In Amritsar, the British massacred 379 people at a rally with machinegun fire and wounded another 1200.

The British were clearly alarmed by the upsurge. "The movement assumed the undeniable character of an organised revolt against the British Raj", in the view of British official opinion.[4]

Just as alarmed was Gandhi. Condemning the violence, not of the British but of rioters on his own side who had gone beyond pacifist action, he declared that he had committed "a blunder of Himalayan dimensions which had enabled ill-disposed persons, not true passive resisters at all, to perpetrate disorder." [5]

Within a week, Gandhi suspended passive resistance just as the movement was reaching its height. He subsequently explained in a letter to the Press on July 21 that "a Civil resister never seeks to embarrass the government". [6]

To defuse the movement, Gandhi turned his attention to the Montagu-Chelmsford Reforms passed by the British Parliament, which set up puppet legislatures in India operating on a limited franchise. Gandhi won the Congress Party around to supporting the Reforms against sharp opposition. He urged the national movement "to settle down quietly to work so as to make them a success." [7]

## **The 1920-22 campaign**

The movement did not "settle down quietly". The first half of 1920 saw a huge strike wave. So Gandhi switched over to rejection of the Montagu-Chelmsford Reforms, and evolved the plan of "non-violent non-cooperation" to once again take the head of the movement. The Congress Party was to give leadership but the price of that leadership was once again to be non-violence.

Gandhi had learned from 1919 that mobilising the workers and peasants through a hartal was an explosive business. So this time, despite the more ambitious demand of "swaraj" (self-rule), Gandhi focussed the action entirely on the *middle class*. Voters boycotted elections to the new assemblies - only one third of those eligible under the income rules to vote did so. Students boycotted colleges en masse. An attempt to get lawyers to boycott the courts and set up local arbitration sittings met with much less success.

The only role for the masses of workers and peasants in all this was to be the "constructive task" of "hand-spinning and hand-weaving" A proposal of a tax boycott was held in reserve until "a time to be determined".

Gandhi was extremely vague on how these tactics were to gain victory, or even on what son of gains he was after. Subhas Bose, a future leader of the Congress Party Left, tried to get a clear picture from Gandhi of the strategy:

*What his real expectation was, I was unable to understand. Either he did not want to give out all his secrets prematurely or he did not have a clear conception of the tactics whereby the hands of the government could be forced [8].*

Nehru also had his doubts about Gandhi's goals:

*It was obvious that to most of our leaders Swaraj meant something much less than independence. Gandhi was delightfully vague on the subject, and he did not encourage clear thinking about it either. [9]*

Despite Gandhi's attempts to limit the campaign to the middle class, mass struggles erupted throughout 1921 to accompany it ... the Assam-Bengal railway strike the Midnapore No-Tax Campaign, the Moplah rebellion in the South, and the militant Akali movement in the Punjab. By the end of 1921, all Congress leaders except Gandhi were behind bars.

Amidst all this struggle and enthusiasm. Gandhi got cold feet. Some activists, especially amongst the Muslims, were demanding the abandonment of "non-violence". Gandhi declared that swaraj stank in his nostrils.

In early 1922, various districts began demanding a No Tax campaign. Due to a misunderstanding, Guntur District began one without permission. So great was the enthusiasm of the peasants that less than 5 percent of taxes were collected. Then Gandhi heard of it and ordered that tax-paying resume immediately. Finally, Gandhi decided to embark on "mass civil disobedience" ... in one tiny district.

Bardoli where he had taken special care to ensure "non-violent" conditions. His mass civil disobedience" to win release of the 30,000 political prisoners was to involve the 87,000 people of the district - just one four-thousandth of the Indian population!

## **The Chauri Chaura backdown**

Before the token Bardoli campaign could take off, angry peasants at the village of Chauri Chaura in the United Provinces burned a police station, killing 22 policemen. Gandhi, who five years earlier had happily recruited cannon fodder for Britain to try and win independence, "deplored" the violence and cancelled, not just the Bardoli campaign, but the *entire campaign* of civil disobedience across the country.

Gandhi's decision created fury and dismay in the Congress Party. Subhas Bose recalls:

*To sound the order to retreat, just when public enthusiasm was reaching the boiling point was nothing short of a national calamity. The principal lieutenants of the Mahatma, Deshbandhu dos, Pandit Morilal Nehru and Lala Lajpat Pal, who were all in prison, shared the popular resentment. I was with the Deshbandhu at the time, and I could see that he was beside himself with anger and sorrow. [10]*

Motilal Nehru and Lajpat Rai sent Gandhi long letters of protest. Gandhi coldly replied that men in prison were "civilly dead" and had no say over policy.

Apologists for Gandhi later claimed that the decision was necessary because the movement was "going to pieces." [11] In the sense that Gandhi was losing control, this was true. But the British did not think it was dissipating. The Viceroy cabled London just three days before Gandhi's decision describing the numerous areas of unrest, and concluding:

*The Government of India are prepared for disorder of a more formidable nature than has in the past occurred, and do not seek to minimise in any way the fact that great anxiety is caused by the situation. [12]*

Lord Lloyd, then Governor of Bombay, later recounted how Gandhi had snatched defeat from the jaws of victory:

*He gave us a scare! His program filled our jails. You can't go on arresting people forever, you know not when there are 319 million of them. And if they had taken his next step and refused to pay taxes! God knows where we should have been! Gandhi's was the most colossal experiment in world history, and it came within an inch of succeeding. But he couldn't control men's passions. You know the rest. We jailed him. [13]*

The motion that Gandhi got through the Working Committee at Bardoli calling off the campaign suggests the real reason Gandhi backed down. No less than three of its seven points ordered peasants to pay taxes to the government, and respect landlords' rents and rights. Gandhi was clearly worried that the No-Tax campaign would take off and spread into a No-Rent campaign as well. Neither of these can be classed as "violence" in any way. but they could have turned the movement into a wholesale struggle against the Indian landlords as well as the British. Chauri Chaura only confirmed the increasing restiveness of the peasants. So although not the first outbreak of violence during the campaign, it provided a convenient pretext for Gandhi to call hostilities off before a fullscale *class* war broke out.

## **The movement demoralised**

Gandhi's back down flattened the national movement for several years. The Congress Party, demanding an alternative course, moved to the right and stopped boycotting the puppet assemblies. Communal divisions grew. The active non-co-operators of 1921 now emerged as spokespersons for this and that community. Muslim or Hindu. Violent clashes broke out as the movement turned in on itself and, despite the temporarily soothing effect of a protest fast by Gandhi, continued over time. Since Gandhi had refused to polarise the movement on class lines, in the demoralised atmosphere after 1922 it polarised on religious lines instead.

But a section of the movement took a more radical direction. During the 1920s the working class emerged as an important force. Unions grew, and the All-India Trade Union Congress formed. Many of its leaders turned to radical anti-imperialism. The Workers and Peasants Party formed, and along with other radical nationalists began to demand complete independence rather than mere self-rule.

Against Gandhi's opposition, the Congress Party also took up the demand of complete independence, or Purna Swaraj, in the late 1920s. Gandhi was forced to change his stance, at least on paper. But, as time would show, he was to sign the demand away again at the first opportunity.

## **Salt Satyagraha**

At the end of 1929, the Congress Party decided to take action for Purna Swaraj. Passive demonstrations on January 26, 1930 took a pledge to struggle for complete independence. But Gandhi already had other ideas. On January 9, he told the New York World that "the independence resolution need frighten nobody", a claim he repeated to the Viceroy in a letter in March.[14] And on January 30, he offered Eleven Points to the British for which the Congress Party's civil disobedience campaign would be called off.

These Eleven Points fell way short of independence, or even home rule. The most radical demands were for the release of political prisoners, a halving of military expenditure, a tariff on foreign cloth, and licences for firearms for self-defence. There were no demands for workers or peasants, except a call for the halving of land tax. Clearly, Gandhi saw the demand for independence as just an opening gambit in a haggles for reforms.

When it came to strategy, Gandhi defeated a move by the left wing of Congress to set up a parallel government in the country and mobilise workers and peasants behind it. Instead he launched the Salt March, a three-week march by Gandhi and 78 of his disciples to the sea, where they defied the British monopoly on salt by boiling seawater. Gandhi then called on each village to do the same.

All this was very spectacular for the press. But it was even more carefully limited than his previous two campaigns. The initial action was confined to 78 hand-picked disciples. The ensuing tactic of producing salt provided no role whatsoever for the industrial working class. The peasants' attention was turned away from conflicts with their landlords to producing illegal salt in their villages, and burning and boycotting foreign cloth - a move that mainly benefited Indian textile magnates, a number of whom happened to be on close terms with Gandhi.

Nevertheless, the Salt March sparked another upheaval, way beyond Gandhi's expectations. Strikes and mass demonstrations erupted. Demonstrators raided a police armoury at Chittagong. Peasants

launched No-Rent movements, especially in the United Provinces, where, true to form, the Congress Party tried to mediate for a 50 percent payment of rents.

## **The Gahrwali mutiny**

The most sensational incident took place in Peshawar. After the arrest of local leaders, a crowd burned an armoured car. its occupants escaping unhurt. Troops opened fire on the crowds, killing and wounding hundreds. Two platoons of Gahrwali Hindu troops refused to fire on a Muslim crowd. They broke ranks and fraternised with them, several handing over their guns. The police and military immediately withdrew from Peshawar, and the city was in the hands of the people for ten days until a powerful British force with air support retook it without resistance.

One might think that Gandhi would have hailed the events in Peshawar as a triumph for "nonviolence". But on the contrary, he later **condemned the troops/or refusing to fire on the crowds!** In an interview with a French journalist in 1932, Gandhi said in reply to a question about the Gahrwali men who had been savagely sentenced after a court-martial:

*A soldier who disobeys an order to fire breaks that oath which he has taken and renders himself guilty of criminal disobedience. I cannot ask officials and soldiers to disobey; for when I am in power I shall in all likelihood make use of the same officials and those same soldiers. If I taught them to disobey I should be afraid that they might do the same when I am in power.[15]*

This amazing statement was no momentary aberration. In the Irwin-Gandhi Agreement of 1931, the clause on release of prisoners specifically excluded the Gahrwali soldiers.

Hoping to restore Gandhi's fast-fading control over the movement, the British arrested him to refocus attention on him. Instead, the country exploded. A massive demonstration by textile and railway workers in Bombay forced the police to quit the streets. In Sholapur the workers seized the town and replaced the police with their own administration for a week, until martial law was declared. Hartals and strikes took place all over India. The British dropped 500 tons of bombs on rebellious Pathans in North-West Frontier Province, to little avail. The newly formed Red Shins, a militant North-West Frontier organisation, soared in membership from a couple of hundred to 80,000. A militant Muslim party sprung up in the Punjab.

Despite 60.000 political arrests, innumerable baton charges and continual firing, upon unarmed crowds, the movement raged through 1930. At demonstrations in Bombay, the centre of the industrial working class, red flags began to proliferate and even outnumber Congress flags at mass demonstrations. Alarmed. British businessmen began to demand self-government for India on a Dominion basis.

But once again, Gandhi was just as alarmed as the British at the direction the movement was taking. Professor H.G. Alexander. Professor of International Relations at Selly Oak College in Birmingham, visited him in jail in September 1930 and reported:

*Even in the seclusion of his prison he is acutely conscious that such embitterment is developing, and for that reason he would welcome a return to peace and co-operation as soon as it could be honestly obtained ... his influence is still great, but more dangerous and uncontrollable forces are gathering strength daily. [16]*

## **"Self-rule from within"**

In January 26, 1931, the British released Gandhi as a "goodwill gesture". After a month of negotiations, Gandhi then signed an agreement with Viceroy Irwin. The Irwin-Gandhi agreement did not concede one of Gandhi's Eleven Points. It did not even break the British monopoly on salt. But Gandhi agreed to end civil disobedience and take part in the Round Table Conference of British colonies in London, which Congress had sworn to boycott.

Angry resolutions from youth conferences and organisations condemned the deal. Outraged Bombay workers even staged a demonstration against Gandhi on his departure for the Round Table Conference. Jawaharlal Nehru, whose job it was to move the Agreement to the Congress Party, admitted that he could not do so "without great mental conflict and physical distress". "Was it for this," Nehru asked later, "that our people had behaved so gallantly for a year?" He felt, however, that it would only be "personal vanity" to express his dissent.[xvii]

Gandhi later admitted the movement had shown no signs of breaking up. "The suggestion of the impending collapse of our movement is entirely false: the movement was showing no signs of slackening," he said.[xviii] Instead, he justified his deal with Irwin with the amazing statement to the press on March 5, 1931, that 'The Congress has never made a bid for victory.'[xix] Gloated *The Times* the next day: "Such a victory has seldom been vouchsafed to any Viceroy." The next day, Gandhi argued to the press that Purna Swaraj really meant "disciplined self-rule from within"![xx]

When Gandhi returned empty-handed nine months later from the Round Table Conference, the British immediately rearrested him, banned Congress and its press, and seized its funds and property.

Gandhi's response was to issue orders *against* secret organisation of Congress (the only possible way of proceeding under illegal conditions) and to assure the landlords that no campaign would be approved against their interests, Gandhi then took up the untouchables' cause, which in the circumstances could only be a diversion. Delighted, the British released him.

Gandhi finally closed down the struggle in early 1934, by announcing that from then on, since:

*the masses have not yet received the message of satyagraha, ..., [it] needs to be confined to one qualified person at a time. In the present circumstances only one, and that myself, should for the time being bear the responsibility of civil disobedience.[xxi]*

In other words, a one-man campaign for national independence! As one left-wing critic put it, "such was the final *reductio ad absurdum* of the Gandhist theory of 'non-violent non-cooperation' as the path of liberation for the Indian people." [xxii]

Gandhi was to launch two more campaigns, in 1940-41 and again in 1942. In the meantime, with the collapse of the struggle, Hindu-Muslim rioting again intensified.

## **Individual Satyagraha**

Under wartime conditions in 1940. Gandhi launched a campaign of "individual satyagraha." This was in response to the left in Congress, which wanted the party to launch another mass movement for independence while Britain was tied up by the war. Arguing against causing any discomfort to

Britain, Gandhi replied:

*There is neither the warrant nor atmosphere for mass action. That would be naked embarrassment and a betrayal of non-violence. What is more, it can never lead to independence. [xxiii]*

Gandhi's "campaign" consisted of individuals, where possible selected by himself, getting up in public places, making token statements against the war and for independence, and being arrested. At the same time, Gandhi discouraged mass meetings.

When the campaign finally fizzled out in 1941, 25,069 of Gandhi's followers had been convicted without making any impact, either on the British or the general population.

## **Quit India**

Despite his anxiety not to cause the British "naked embarrassment", pressure from the left forced Gandhi to launch his Quit India campaign in 1942.

Subhas Bose, a militant nationalist from Bengal and long-time critic of Gandhi inside the Congress Party, had split from Congress and launched the Indian National Army. Gandhi feared that if the Japanese, who were using the slogan "Asia for the Asians", invaded, Subhas Bose might align with them against the British and win mass support. So Gandhi launched his Quit India campaign on August 8, 1942.

This time, the British moved immediately. In the early hours of August 9, they arrested Gandhi and the entire Congress leadership. When peaceful protest demonstrations gathered, the British fired on them or broke them up with baton charges. Wholesale rioting broke out within 12 hours.

Despite Gandhi's pleas for calm from his prison cell, 70 police stations were burnt down, 550 post offices attacked, and 85 courthouses and symbols of state authority besieged across the country. The British Army held firm, firing on crowds and even machine-gunning them from the air. Public hangings were introduced for the first time in generations. With Congress refusing to lead or organise armed resistance, and the Communist Party taking a position to Gandhi's right by supporting the British/Russian war effort, the British were able to crush the uprising.

## **The Bombay naval mutiny**

After the war in 1946, the sailors of Bombay, led by the young naval communications ratings, mutinied and seized their ships. Their main aim was to hand the ships over to the Congress leaders until the British quit. A leader of the mutiny, B.C. Dutt, recounted:

*The streets of Bombay resounded to our slogans calling for national unity. It was a strange sight for the people of Bombay. The ratings marching through the streets with party flags of the Congress and the Muslim League tied together to symbolise national unity.*

But Gandhi was horrified by the mutiny. He said he was following it with "painful interest" and denounced the sailors as "setting a bad and unbecoming example for India." [xxiv] He ordered Patel, the most right-wing leader of Congress, to deal with the ratings.

Gandhi's rejection of the mutiny was the signal the British needed. They broadcast the message to the mutineers on February 22 that. "Only unconditional surrender will be accepted."

The working class of Bombay exploded in sympathy with the mutineers. Irrespective of caste or religion, they fought the police and army with rocks and knives. Like the ratings, they carried the two flags tied together. Two hundred of them died in the fighting. Gandhi's response was to denounce this display of militant unity.

*This mutiny in the navy and what is following is not, in any sense of the term, non-violent action...A combination between the Hindus and the Muslims and others for the purpose of violent action is unholy and it will lead to and probably is a preparation for mutual violence - bad for India and the world.[xxv]*

In the end, the ratings were forced to surrender. But the mutiny signalled to the British that no longer could they even rely on their own "sepoys" to keep order for them.

## **Why did the British leave?**

Gandhi's last significant campaign had peaked in 1931. It certainly wasn't his "non-violent noncooperation" that drove the British out sixteen years later. So why did the British leave in 1947. if they had the measure of Gandhi and the nationalist movement?

Barry Paiver, writing in the British *Socialist Review*, provides the most plausible explanation:

*Firstly, the positive reasons for British rule vanished. The economic basis of the Indian empire was the hard currency surpluses earned by the export of commercial crops to other industrial countries. These surpluses were then transferred to London to support the pound. The Depression cut the prices of these crops in half and the surpluses vanished, never to return. For the British state (as opposed to individual companies) this turned India into an economic liability. India's other imperial role was the military foundation of the empire east of Suez. In both world wars the Indian Army fought for the British in the Middle East. But in 1942 the Japanese smashed British power in the East. The British were only saved by American victories in the Pacific. India's military role vanished.[xxvi]*

Paiver argues that there were several pressing reasons for the British to actually leave. Apart from the Bombay Naval Mutiny, the end of the war had seen a general resurgence of anti-British feeling. The trial of officers of the Indian National Army who had fought alongside the Japanese took place in 1945. They got so much support that Congress leaders were forced to assist in their defence. Nehru even donning lawyer's robes for the first time in thirty years.

## **The myth of non-violent action**

Militant peasant struggles led by the Communist Party had also been giving the British trouble since the early 1940s. But the dominant issue after 1945 was religious communalism, which had festered each time Gandhi aborted the mass struggle of earlier days.

After 1945, the Muslim League gained overwhelming support in Muslim areas for its demand for a partition and a Muslim state. This enabled them to disrupt the traditional government to gain their way, which in turn sparked a series of horrendous communal riots.

Given the disappearance of any positive reason for staying, and the other pressures on them to

leave, the British had no desire to try and keep the peace in such circumstances. In the end, they practically ran away.

## **Conclusion**

Mahatma Gandhi made a major contribution to the Indian independence movement in 1919 by turning it to a mass orientation. But his strategy of non-violence soon became a major obstacle to the movement's further development and remained so for the rest of his career.

Gandhi's philosophy of "satyagraha" and his dream of a big happy family of Indian capitalists, land owners and exploited may have appealed to his predominantly middle-class and rich peasant devotees. They certainly suited his upper-class backers who wanted a limited mass mobilisation to win concessions and ultimately independence from the British. But Gandhi's non-violent campaigns rarely ran along the course he had mapped out for them. The oppressed - the workers and poorer peasants - invariably took the campaigns much further than Gandhi intended. They moved towards confronting their own Indian exploiters as well as the British.

When the British used force to repress them, they often responded in kind.

Gandhi's pacifism led him to react in an elitist fashion. He would call off the struggle, censuring the masses for failing to come up to his own pious standards. He would then restrict the active role in the next phase of the campaign to an ever-diminishing circle whom he felt he could trust

Gandhi's non-violent strategy did not drive the British out of India. His last important campaign peaked in 1931-16 years before the British left. The British clearly had Gandhi's measure, and left for reasons of their own.

Gandhi cannot take credit for the departure of the British, but he probably can take some credit for the wretchedly unequal society that they left behind. For by ruining the popular worker/peasant upsurges of the 1919-1934 period, he guaranteed that the Indian capitalist class would remain intact to receive the reins of power from the British. They continue to wield those reins ruthlessly to this day, invoking Gandhi's name as they go.

- [1] *The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters of George Orwell*, Vol 2, p. 136
- [2] M.K. Gandhi, *Hind Swaraj* (1909)
- [3] E.M.S. Namboodiripad, *The Mahatma and the Ism*, (Peoples Publishing House, New Delhi 1959), p. 26-7
- [4] Sir Valentine Chirol, *India* (1926). p.207, quoted in R.P. Dun, *India Today* (1940), p. 304
- [5] R.P. Dull, *India Today* (1940), p. 304
- [6] Dull, p. 305
- [7] M.K. Gandhi in *Young India* 31.12.1919, quoted in Dull, p.302
- [8] Subhas Chandra Bose, *The Indian Struggle 1920-1934*, p. 68
- [9] Jawaharlal Nehru, *Autobiography*, p. 76
- [10] Bose, p. 90
- [11] Nehru, p. 85
- [12] Dutt, p. 315
- [13] Quoted by C.F. Andrews in the *New Republic*. 3.4.1939
- [14] Dutt, p. 327
- [15] Reply to French journalist Charles Petrasch on the question of the Gahrwali Soldiers, *Monde*, 20.2.1932
- [16] *Spectator*, 3.1.1931, quoted in Dun, p. 338
- [xvii] Dutt, p. 339
- [xviii] Dutt, p. 338
- [xix] Dutt, p. 338
- [xx] Dutt, p. 338
- [xxi] Dutt, p. 343
- [xxii] Dutt, p. 343
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