

The Civil Disobedience Movement led by M K Gandhi, in the year 1930 was an important milestone in the history of Indian Nationalism. There are three distinct phases that mark the development of Indian Nationalism. In the first phase, the ideology of the moderates dominated the political scenario. This was followed by the prominence of the extremist ideologies. In the third phase of Indian Nationalism the most significant incident was the rise of MK Gandhi, popularly known as Mahatma Gandhi, to power as the leader of Indian National Movements. Under his spirited guidance, the National Movements of the country took shape.

The Indians learnt how apparently philosophical tenets like non violence and passive resistance, could be used to wage political battles. The programs and policies adopted in the movements spearheaded by Gandhi reflected his political ideologies of ahimsa and satyagraha. While the Non-Co-Operation Movement was built on the lines of non violent non co operation, the essence of The Civil Disobedience Movement was defying of the British laws. Through his leadership to the National Movements, he not only buttressed his political stance but also played a crucial role in unification of the country, awakening of the masses, and bringing politics within the arena of the common man.

Factors Leading to the Civil Disobedience Movement

The prevalent political and social circumstances played a vital role in the launching of the Civil Disobedience Movement. The Simon Commission was formed by the British Government that included solely the members of the British Parliament, in November 1927, to draft and formalize a constitution for India. The chairmanship of the commission rested with Sir John Simon, who was a well known lawyer and an English statesman. Accused of being an 'All-White Commission', the Simon Commission was rejected by all political and social segments of the country. In Bengal, the opposition to the Simon Commission assumed a massive scale, with a hartal being observed in all corners of the province on February 3rd, 1928. On the occasion of Simon's arrival in the city, demonstrations were conducted in Calcutta. In the wake of the boycott of the recommendations proposed by Simon Commission, an All-Party Conference was organized in Bombay in May of 1928. Dr MA Ansari was the president of the conference. Motilal Nehru was given the responsibility to preside over the drafting committee, appointed at the conference to prepare a constitution for India.

Barring the Indian Muslims, The Nehru Report was endorsed by all segments of the Indian society. The Indian National Congress pressurized the British government to accept all the parts the Nehru Report, in December 1928. At the Calcutta Session of the Indian National Congress held in December, 1928, the British government was warned that if India was not granted the status of a dominion, a Civil Disobedience Movement would be initiated in the entire country. Lord Irwin, the Governor General, after a few months, declared that the final objective of the constitutional reforms was to grant the status of a dominion to India. Following this declaration, Gandhi along with other national leaders requested the Governor General to adopt a more liberal attitude in solving the constitutional crisis. A demand was made for the release of the political prisoners and for holding the suggested Round Table

Conference for reflecting on the problems regarding the constitution of the country.

None of the efforts made by the Congress received any favorable response from the British government. The patience of the Indian masses were wearing out. The political intelligentsia of the country was sure that the technique of persuasion would not be effective with the British government. The Congress had no other recourse but to launch the Civil Disobedience Movement. In Bardoli, the peasants had already taken to satyagraha under the guidance of Sardar Patel in the year 1928. Their non tax agitations were partially successful. The Congress took the decision to use the non violent weapon of satyagraha on a nation wide scale against the government.

The Launch of the Civil Disobedience Movement

MK Gandhi was urged by the Congress to render his much needed leadership to the Civil Disobedience Movement. On the historic day of 12th March 1930, Gandhi inaugurated The Civil Disobedience Movement by conducting the historic Dandi Salt March, where he broke the Salt Laws imposed by the British Government. Followed by an entourage of seventy nine ashramites, Gandhi embarked on his march from his Sabarmati Ashram to Dandi that is located on the shores of the Arabian Sea. On 6th April 1930, Gandhi with the accompaniment of seventy nine satyagrahis, violated the Salt Law by picking up a fistful of salt lying on the sea shore. They manually made salt on the shores of Dandi.

Dandi Salt March had an immense impact on the entire nation. Each and every corner of the country was gripped in a unique fervor of nationalism. Soon this act of violation of the Salt Laws assumed an all India character. The entire nation amalgamated under the call of a single man, Mahatma Gandhi. There were reports of satyagrahas and instances of law violation from Bombay, Central and United Provinces, Bengal and Gujarat. The program of the Civil Disobedience Movement incorporated besides the breaking of the Salt Laws, picketing of shops selling foreign goods and liquor, bonfire of cloth, refusal to pay taxes and avoidance of offices by the public officers and schools by the students. Even the women joined forces against the British. Those from orthodox families did not hesitate to respond to the call of the Mahatma. They took active part in the picketing exercises. Perturbed by the growing popularity of the movement, the British government imprisoned Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru, in a bid to thwart it. Thus, the second struggle for attaining Swaraj launched by the Congress, under the able guidance of Mahatma, served the critical function of mobilizing the masses on a large scale against the British.

Gandhi-Irwin Pact

In the March of 1930, Gandhi met with the Viceroy, Lord Irwin and signed an agreement known as the Gandhi-Irwin Pact. The two main clauses of the pact entailed; Congress participation in the Round Table Conference and cessation of The Civil Disobedience Movement. The Government of India released all satyagrahis from prison.

Renewal of the Civil Disobedience Movement

Gandhi attended The Second Round Table Conference in London accompanied by Smt. Sarojini Naidu. At this Conference, it was claimed by Mahatma Gandhi that the Congress represented more than eighty five percent of the Indian population. Gandhi's claim was not endorsed by the British and also the Muslim representative. The Second Round Table Conference proved to be futile for the Indians and Gandhi returned to the country without any positive result. The political scene in India thereafter assumed an acute dimension. The Viceroy, Lord Willingdon, in the absence of Gandhi, adopted the policy of repression. The Gandhi-Irwin Pact was violated and the Viceroy took to the suppression of the Congress. The Conservative party, which was in power in England, complied with the decision to assume a repressive stance against the Congress and the Indians. The Congress was held responsible by the government to have instigated the 'Red Shirts' to participate in The Civil Disobedience Movement, led by Khan Abdul Ghaffar and provoking the cultivators of U.P to refuse to pay land revenue. Adding to this was the serious economic crisis that took hold of the country. Under such circumstances, the resumption of The Civil Disobedience Movement was inevitable.

The Congress Working Committee took the decision to restart The Civil Disobedience Movement, as the British government was not prepared to relent. Gandhi resumed the movement in January 1932 and appealed to the entire nation to join in. The Viceroy was also informed of the stance assumed by the Congress. Four ordinances were promulgated by the government to deal with the situation. The police was given the power to arrest any person, even on the basis of mere suspicion. Sardar Patel, the President of Congress and Gandhi were arrested, along with other Congressmen. The second phase of The Civil Disobedience Movement lacked the organization that marked its first phase. Nonetheless the entire nation put up a tough fight and the movement continued for six months. Gandhi commenced his twenty one days of fast on May 8th, 1933, to make amends for the sins committed against the untouchables by the caste Hindus. The Civil Disobedience Movement was suspended, when Mahatma Gandhi withdrew mass satyagraha on July 14th 1933. The movement ceased completely on April 7th 1934.

Although The Civil Disobedience Movement failed to achieve any positive outcome, it was an important juncture in the history of Indian independence. The leadership of Mahatma Gandhi had a beneficial impact. The warring factions within the Congress united under the aegis of The Civil Disobedience Movement, led by Mahatma Gandhi. Satyagraha was put on a firm footing through its large scale usage in the movement. Last but not the least India rediscovered its inherent strength and confidence to crusade against the British for its freedom.