



Gandhi : The Star Strategist Of Freedom Movement in India

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Abstract

Mohan Das Karamchand Gandhi was a master strategist and tactician of India's Freedom Struggle. Gandhi had tremendous faith in the potential of common people of India. His objective was to make Indian National Movement a mass movement, for he knew from the beginning that a mass movement could move the mighty British empire. He was also aware of the power structure of the colonizers. Violence could be crushed by greater violence of the powerful colonial state. Hence, Gandhi aimed at building a nonviolent mass movement in India. For this, his Satyagraha was apt with its core being non violence, which Gandhi conceptualized as a dynamic concept. Additionally, he devised his detailed plan in each of the three major Satyagraha movements that he had led towards India's freedom. Indian National Movement was transformed into a mass movement through the phases of Non Cooperation Movement (1920-22), Civil Disobedience Movement (1930-34) and Quit India Movement (1942) under the leadership of Gandhi. These three Gandhian movements consecutively eroded the British hegemony in India leading to her freedom in 1947. The paper mainly explores the various dimensions of the strategy which Gandhi planned out in details during these three movements.

Key Words: Satyagraha, non violence, mass movement, Non cooperation movement, Civil Disobedience movement, Quit India Movement, strategy, hegemony

Introduction; Rise of Gandhi as leader

It was under the umbrella leadership of Mohan Das Karamchand Gandhi that India was ushered into the era of freedom after passing through centuries of colonial bondage. He was one of the most prominent figures who emerged during the freedom movement, a man who is often hailed as the star strategist of the Indian Freedom Movement. His approach to achieving independence was unique and deeply rooted in his principles of non violence, satyagraha and strategic activism. Earlier to his rise, Indian freedom movement had passed through two phases and the politics of Moderates and Extremists had spent their force post world war I. The Indian National Movement was in search of a new strategy to confront the mighty British raj in a changed scenario with President Woodrow Wilson's assurance of self determination for the colonies. The Indian National Movement which had evolved under the moderate and extremist leadership was in need of a reorientation with a new strategy. Gandhi with a novel method and a new philosophy filled in the void. Gandhi had arrived in India in 1915 and had started traveling all over the country to get a sense of Indian people for a few years after and leading three movements in Champaran, Kheda and Ahmedabad during 1917-18. It was with the Non Cooperation Movement of 1920-22 that Gandhi emerged as the leader of the Indian National Movement with Tilak, a doyen of freedom struggle, passing away on 31st July 1920.

Though, attempts were made to organize Indians against the Britishers since long, but it was only in 1885 with the formation of the Indian National Congress, an organized form of freedom movement had started. Initially the objective of Indian National Movement was limited to arousing a feeling of nationalism among Indians who were divided along various prescriptive identities and educating the masses in the political questions of the time. By late, 1890's, extremist leaders like Tilak and Lala Lajpat Rai had started organizing common people, but, the freedom movement at best remained an armed chair one, dominated by the intellectual elites. There was almost

no participation of the masses. Under such situation, the inherent weakness of the Home Rule Movement leading to its decline, the eclipse of moderates, the dilemma of the Extremists and the death of Tilak had left the field open for the rise of a new leadership. Gandhi's emergence as undisputed leader of freedom struggle and the Congress acceptance of his technique of struggle and non cooperation policy was not easy. J.H. Broomfield attributes Gandhi's ultimate success over his opponents to the fact that Gandhi had won over a large section of the *bhadralok* community. Initially the same community had a fear that mass agitation would lead to violence. But Gandhi's charisma and persuasiveness changed them to repose their faith in him who was seen as a man with a new approach and principles. Judith Brown has attributed Gandhi's success to his ability to work with Muslims, low caste Hindus and commercial men who had not found till then any place in Congress dominated by the educated few. Gandhi challenged the vested interests of his educated contemporaries by criticizing the western education and castigating doctors and lawyers. Gandhi believed in the strength of the masses, hence, very intelligently and gradually he transformed the Indian National Movement into a mass movement. Satyagraha, his core strategy to fight the British Raj was to be built on the strength of the masses. As Judith Brown writes, his technique of Satyagraha was ideally suited for thousands of his countrymen who were unaccustomed to institutional politics. Hence, his first three Satyagraha movements were launched in areas considered very backward in national politics, i.e., Bihar, Gujarat, UP and Punjab.

Gandhi knew that common people needed to be mobilized against the British colonialism. For this, people should come out of their fear, fatalism and helplessness against the British raj. Gandhi gave the message of fearlessness by his own practice of defiance as we see in the manifestation of satyagraha, first at Champaran, subsequently at different places. Fearlessness against the Britishers would come with the philosophy of Satyagraha. Satyagraha was based on 'soulforce' which could be evoked by practicing the maxims of non violence. Non Violence/ Ahimsa was means to attain the end, i.e., Satya/Truth. Non-violence was a powerful moral weapon that could transform hearts and minds of the opponents. By adopting non violence, Gandhi aimed to awaken the conscience of both the oppressors and the oppressed, ultimately leading to a change in the status quo. Further, ahimsa to Gandhi was a dynamic concept which has both a negative and a positive connotation. Negatively, this meant 'abstaining from violence/himsa' and positively, ahimsa connoted 'love for others'. It was in both the connotations, the principle of non violence would instill fearlessness among the common people who would be joined by the force of 'love for others'. A collective force against the British colonialism would thus be built.

Non Cooperation Movement

The Non Cooperation Movement of 1920-22 was first of the three major Satyagraha movements in India. The challenge was to form an united front against the British government. Britain was too much occupied at the war front fighting Axis powers which was also joined by Turkey, the abode of caliph, the spiritual leader of the muslim world. The dismemberment of Turkey had led to starting of a pan khilafat movement which soon reached India. Gandhi who wanted to have widest possible participation of common people in the national movement grabbed this opportunity to unite Hindus and Muslims, the two major communities of India. He accepted the offer to become the first president of All India Khilafat Committee. It was from the platform of the All India Khilafat Conference that the call for Non cooperation against the British raj was given in 1920 which was later endorsed by the Indian National Congress under Gandhi's persuasion. The tremendous participation of Muslims in the Non Cooperation Movement, and the maintenance of communal harmony despite the Malabar developments, was itself no mean achievement. The fraternization was witnessed between the Hindus and Muslims with Gandhi and other Congress leaders speaking from the mosques. Further, the Non Cooperation Movement also demonstrated that it commanded the support and sympathy of vast sections of society which included peasants, workers, artisans, shopkeepers, traders, professionals, white color employees, students and women. The capacity of the 'poor dumb millions' of India was demonstrated through their courage, fortitude and sacrifice. The Indian National Congress was no longer a 'microscopic minority' as Viceroy Dufferein had called it in 1888. It was Gandhian strategy of Non Violence/ Ahimsa during the non cooperation movement which could instill fearlessness among the common people who had joined the movement and confronted the powerful colonizers. It was vital to keep non cooperation movement a non violent one otherwise, the British government would have found all justifications to crush a violent uprising. The movement was stopped in the wake of violence in Chauri Chaura. Gandhian Satyagraha has assumption that a violent movement can be crushed in the nip, hence a long battle cannot afford to be violent.

Civil Disobedience Movement

The Civil Disobedience Movement incorporated in its strategy the choice of Salt law to be violated, a march to Dandi and adherence to the creed of non violence. Civil Disobedience itself was a key strategy employed by Gandhi. He urged the Indians to defy unjust laws while accepting the legal consequences of their actions. This approach aimed to disrupt the functioning of the colonial administration and create a moral dilemma for the British rulers. Through acts like the Dandi/Salt March and the Non Cooperation Movement, Gandhi demonstrated the effectiveness of civil disobedience in challenging the British authority and rallying the masses behind the cause of independence. By the end of 1930, Gandhi had started speaking about salt; 'There is no article like salt outside water by taxing which the State can reach even the starving millions, the sick, the maimed and the utterly helpless. The tax constitute therefore the most inhuman poll tax the ingenuity of man can devise'. Bipan Chandra in 'India's Struggle for Independence' refers to the formula of breaking Salt law and the brilliantly conceived plan of marching along with a band of 78 members of the Ashram for 240 miles, beginning from the Sabarmati Ashram in Ahmedabad through the villages of Gujarat ending at the coast of Dandi where Gandhi would break the salt laws by collecting salt from the beach. This plan proved to be devastatingly effective. Even before the march began, thousands gathered around the ashram. 'As Gandhi began his march, staff in hand, at the head of his dedicated band, there was something in the image that deeply stirred the imagination of the people. News of his progress, of his speeches, of the teeming crowds that greeted and followed the marchers, of the long road strewn with leaves and festooned with banners and flags, of men and women quietly paying homage by spinning yarn on their charkhas as Gandhi passed.' (Chandra, 1988) Gandhi while explaining the plan to the crowd stated that if ten persons from each of the 700,000 villages in India come forward to manufacture salt and to disobey the Salt Act, the British government could do nothing. The news of the 300 village officials in Gujarat who resigned their posts at Gandhi's appeal, was carried everyday by newspapers to the readers across the country and was broadcast live by thousands of congress workers. By the time Gandhi reached Dandi, he had a whole nation, aroused and the anti colonial sentiments were at its peak. On 6th April, 1930, by picking up a handful of salt, Gandhi inaugurated the Civil Disobedience Movement, a movement that was to remain unsurpassed in the history of the freedom movement for the countrywide mass participation it unleashed.

The creed of nonviolence was also adopted as a strategy for starting the CDM. Gandhi explained how non-violence enabled the widest participation of the people, and put the Government in unenviable quandary. To a crowd at his Ashram on 10th March, 1930, he said; 'Though the battle is to begin in a couple of days, how is that you came here quite fearlessly? I do not think any one of you would be here if you had to face rifle-shots or bombs. But you have no fear of rifle -shots or bombs? Why? Supposing I had announced that I was going to launch a violent campaign (not necessarily with a men armed with rifles, but even with sticks or stones), do you think the Government would have left me free until now? Can you show me an example in history (be it in England, America or Russia) where the State has tolerated violent defiance of authority for a single day? But here you know that the Government is puzzled and perplexed.'

Gandhi began his Dandi March on 11th March 1930 and defied the British authority by breaking Salt law by picking up a handful of salt on 6th April, 1930, thus, inaugurating the Civil Disobedience Movement. Once the way was cleared by Gandhi's ritual beginning at Dandi, the defiance of salt laws started all over the country. Gandhi's salt strategy had put government in a state of puzzlement and perplexity. The Government was placed in a classic 'damned if you do, damned if you don't fix, i.e., if it did not suppress a movement that brazenly defied its lawsuits administrative authority would be seen to be undermined and its control would be weak, and if it did suppress it, it would be seen as a brutal, anti people administration that used violence on non violent agitators. 'If we do too much, Congress will cry 'repression'if we do little, Congress will cry 'victory,'— this is how a Madras civilian expressed the dilemma in early 1930. Either way, it led to the erosion of the hegemony of the British government.

The Civil Disobedience Movement in its first phase marked a critically important stage in the progress of the anti-imperialist struggle. Indian National Movement was transformed into a mass movement under the leadership of Gandhi. The number of people who went to jail were three times more than the figure for the Non Cooperation Movement of 1920-22.. A vast sections and variety of social groups had been politicized into Indian nationalism. If urban elements like merchants and shopkeepers and students were more active in Tamil Nadu and Punjab, and

in cities ,peasants participated in large numbers in Gujarat, U.P., Bengal ,Andhra ,and Bihar. Tribals came to the front in the Central Provinces, Maharashtra, Karnataka and Bengal while workers joined numerous mass demonstrations in Sholapur, Bombay, Calcutta and Madras. Though , the participation of Muslims were not of the level of the Non Cooperation Movement of 1920-22, still , one notices significant participation of middle class muslims along with students in Bengal whereas weaving community in Bihar ,Delhi and Lucknow were effectively mobilized. The support that the movement had garnered from the poor and the illiterate, both in town and in the countryside ,was remarkable.The Inspector-General of Police in Bengal , E. J. Lowman, expressed the general official bewilderment when he noted;’ I had no idea that the Congress organization could enlist the sympathy and support of such ignorant and uncultivated people...’ As far as Indian women are concerned , the Civil Disobedience Movement was a liberating experience for them. Both enriched one another. Under Gandhi’s leadership, Civil Disobedience Movement had transformed the freedom struggle into a mass movement.With Indian people as true Satyagrahis , imbued with the philosophy of Satyagraha , the national movement was now set for the next level. Quit India Movement of 1942, thus , marked that stage of Indian National Movement where Indian people could steer the whole movement even after the arrest of the leadership.

Quit India Movement

The debate around Quit India Movement of 1942 revolved around how the spate of violence from the beginning could square with the overall Gandhian policy of non violent struggle. In jail, Gandhi refused to condemn the violence of the people because he saw it as a reaction to the much bigger violence of the state.Non violence ,for , Gandhi was not merely a creed but also a very important tool in his strategy to confront the British colonialism.Gandhi’s major objection to use of violence was that its use prevented mass participation in the movement, but, in 1942, he could sense that the mass participation would not be restricted on account of violence. ‘The summer of 1942 found Gandhi in a strange and uniquely militant mood. Leave India to anarchy , he repeatedly urged the British’(Sarkar, 1983).The second world war was at its peak and Japan was approaching India from the eastern side.Gandhi in an interview on May1942 said, ’this orderly disciplined anarchy should go, and if as the result there is complete lawlessness would risk it” (Sarkar,1983).Though the need for non violence was always reiterated , the famous ‘Quit India’ resolution passed by the Bombay session of AICC in August ,1942 followed up its call for ‘mass struggle on non violent lines on the widest possible scale’ , inevitably under Gandhi, with the significant rider that if the Congress leadership was removed by arrest., ’every Indian who desires freedom and strives for it must be his own guide....’ ’Let every Indian consider himself to be a free man...mere jailing would not do’, Gandhi declared in his passionate ‘Do or Die’ speech. The Quit India Movement , thus, brings in the dynamic nature of nonviolence which Gandhi had strategically employed to transform the Indian Freedom Struggle from an armed chair struggle of the early nationalists to a truly mass movement .

Socioeconomic and Cultural movements

Gandhi’s strategies extended beyond political protests; he recognized the need for socio economic and cultural transformation. He advocated for the promotion of khadi and the charkha to empower rural communities and reduce dependence on British goods. This emphasis on self reliance was not just an economic strategy but a way to foster a sense of dignity and unity among Indians.Gandhi’s involvement in social issues such as untouchability and the upliftment of the marginalized showcased his commitment to holistic freedom. He understood that true independence could only be achieved when all sections of society were liberated from oppression and discrimination. These efforts helped consolidate support for the freedom movement across diverse segments of Indian society.

Negotiation and Compromise

While Gandhi was known for his unwavering commitment to non violence and civil disobedience, he also understood the significance of negotiation and compromise. He engaged in talks with British officials to find common grounds and reach settlements, all the while remaining steadfast in his principles. His willingness to engage in dialogue showcased his pragmatism and desire for a peaceful resolution of conflicts.

Gandhi’s strategies were not without challenges and criticisms. Some criticized his approach as slow and passive ,advocating for more aggressive methods. Others questioned the viability of non violence against a powerful

colonial force. Yet, Gandhi's steadfastness and his ability to rally millions behind him demonstrated the effectiveness of his methods and strategy.

Conclusion

Gandhi's strategic brilliance left an indelible mark on the Indian Freedom Movement. His strategic genius was characterized by his deep understanding of human psychology, his unwavering commitment to nonviolence and Satyagraha, and his ability to transform complex issues into relatable actions. His strategies of nonviolent resistance, satyagraha, civil disobedience and holistic empowerment played a pivotal role in India's struggle for freedom. Gandhi's legacy extends beyond the borders of India and remains a global symbol of peaceful resistance and a source of inspiration for movements striving for justice and equality. His methods not only brought India closer to independence but also inspired civil rights movements and struggles for justice around the world. Beyond his strategic acumen, Gandhi's emphasis on unity, inclusivity and socioeconomic upliftment continues to resonate and his ability to bridge diverse communities under the banner of freedom laid the foundation for a united and diverse post-independence India. The Indian National Movement owes much of its success to Gandhi's star strategic leadership, a beacon that guided the nation through one of its most transformative periods.

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