



Inclusion as Strategy: A Study of Mahatma Gandhi's Contribution to Cross-Class Solidarity in the Indian Freedom Movement.

Rousanara Khatun,

Ex-Student, WBUTTEPA & Md. Bakul Biswas, Ex-Student, Calcutta University

Abstract:

The Indian freedom struggle witnessed the participation of diverse social groups—peasants, workers, women, industrialists, students, and intellectuals. Yet this broad participation was not spontaneous; it was the result of deliberate political strategies that fostered unity across class divisions. This paper examines inclusion as a conscious political method in Gandhi's leadership and explores how he mobilized multiple social strata into a shared anti-colonial struggle. By analysing campaigns such as Champaran, Kheda, Non-Cooperation, Civil Disobedience, and Constructive Programme initiatives, the study argues that Gandhi's emphasis on moral legitimacy, participatory politics, symbolic practices, and decentralized mobilization helped bridge class divides. The research concludes that cross-class solidarity under Gandhi was not merely ideological but was institutionally nurtured through inclusive political culture, enabling the nationalist movement to transform into a mass movement.

Key-words: - Indian freedom, social groups, political strategies, anti-colonial struggle

1. Introduction: -

The success of the Indian national movement lay not only in its political goals but in its capacity to unify socially fragmented populations under a common cause. Colonial India was marked by deep cleavages—economic inequality, caste hierarchy, linguistic diversity, religious difference, and regional fragmentation. Building solidarity across such divisions required a leadership that could transcend elite nationalism and engage the masses.

Gandhi's entry into Indian politics in 1915 marked a decisive shift in nationalist strategy. Earlier phases of the movement were dominated by educated elites and constitutional methods. Gandhi transformed this approach by introducing inclusive mass politics, emphasizing participation by peasants, workers, women, and marginalized

communities. His politics drew legitimacy from moral authority and collective suffering rather than solely from constitutional claims.

This study investigates Gandhi's contribution to cross-class solidarity by analysing his political methods, campaigns, and ideological framework. It seeks to answer three central questions:

1. How did Gandhi conceptualize inclusion in political mobilization?
2. What mechanisms did he use to foster unity across classes?
3. To what extent did inclusive politics strengthen the freedom movement?

2. Conceptual Framework: Inclusion as Political Strategy: -

Inclusion, in the context of nationalist politics, refers to the deliberate incorporation of diverse social groups into collective political action. Rather than assuming natural unity, inclusion recognizes structural inequalities and attempts to bridge them through shared goals, symbols, and participatory mechanisms.

Gandhi's strategy of inclusion rested on four interconnected principles:

2.1 Moral Universalism: -

Gandhi framed the freedom struggle not merely as a political conflict but as a moral struggle between justice and injustice. By grounding politics in ethical values such as truth, non-violence, and self-sacrifice, he created a universal moral vocabulary accessible to different social groups.

2.2 Participatory Nationalism: -

Gandhi rejected elite-driven politics and emphasized grassroots participation. He believed that Swaraj (self-rule) could only be meaningful if it emerged from collective engagement.

2.3 Symbolic Integration: -

Symbols such as khadi, spinning, fasting, and marches functioned as tools of social integration. They provided shared practices that transcended class barriers.

2.4 Constructive Work as Social Bridge: -

Gandhi's constructive programme—village uplift, promotion of indigenous industries, removal of untouchability—sought to create social cohesion beyond political agitation.

Together, these principles transformed nationalism from an elite discourse into a participatory social movement.

3. Early Experiments in Inclusive Mobilization: -

3.1 Champaran Satyagraha (1917): -

Gandhi's first major intervention in India involved indigo peasants suffering under exploitative plantation arrangements. The Champaran campaign established several features of his inclusive politics:

- It foregrounded peasant grievances within the national movement.
- It mobilized local elites, lawyers, and peasants together.
- It emphasized investigation, dialogue, and non-violent protest.

Champaran demonstrated that nationalism could align with agrarian struggles, thereby expanding its social base.

3.2 Kheda Satyagraha (1918): -

The Kheda movement in Gujarat further illustrated Gandhi's capacity to connect local economic distress with national politics. By organizing tax resistance among peasants while involving urban leaders and volunteers, Gandhi fostered cooperation between rural and urban classes.

3.3 Ahmedabad Mill Strike (1918): -

Gandhi's mediation in the Ahmedabad textile workers' strike revealed his attempt to balance labour rights with industrial interests. His intervention promoted negotiation and non-violent protest, demonstrating his effort to harmonize class relations rather than intensify conflict.

These early experiments shaped Gandhi's understanding that national unity required addressing local grievances and integrating economic struggles into nationalist politics.

4. Mass Movements and Cross-Class Mobilization: -

4.1 Non-Cooperation Movement (1920–22): -

The Non-Cooperation Movement marked the first nationwide attempt to mobilize diverse groups. Gandhi encouraged:

- Boycott of foreign goods (urban middle classes and traders)
- Withdrawal from government institutions (students and professionals)
- Promotion of khadi (peasants and artisans)

The movement's strength lay in its inclusiveness. Participation did not require ideological uniformity; it required willingness to resist colonial authority through non-violent means.

By linking economic practices (boycott, swadeshi) with political protest, Gandhi created a framework where different classes could contribute according to their capacity.

4.2 Civil Disobedience Movement and Salt March (1930): -

The Salt March represented one of Gandhi's most powerful inclusive strategies. Salt, a universal commodity, symbolized colonial exploitation affecting all classes. By choosing salt tax resistance, Gandhi:

- Highlighted economic injustice affecting both rich and poor
- Encouraged participation by women and rural communities
- Generated global sympathy

The movement's symbolism transcended class divisions, demonstrating Gandhi's skill in selecting issues that unified rather than fragmented society.

4.3 Quit India Movement (1942): -

Although launched under more radical circumstances, the Quit India Movement also reflected Gandhi's emphasis on collective participation. The call for immediate independence resonated widely because decades of inclusive mobilization had already fostered national consciousness.

5. Constructive Programme and Social Integration: -

Gandhi believed political agitation alone could not create unity; social reform was essential.

5.1 Khadi and Economic Self-Reliance: -

The promotion of spinning and khadi was not merely economic policy. It served multiple inclusive functions:

- Provided employment to rural poor
- Symbolized resistance to industrial colonial imports
- Created shared national identity through clothing

Khadi thus bridged rural-urban divides and fostered emotional unity.

5.2 Removal of Untouchability: -

Gandhi's campaign against untouchability sought to integrate marginalized communities into the nationalist movement. His use of the term "Harijan" and efforts to open temples and public spaces reflected his belief that political freedom required social inclusion.

5.3 Village Reconstruction: -

Gandhi envisioned villages as the foundation of national life. His emphasis on sanitation, education, cottage industries, and cooperative living aimed to reduce structural inequalities and foster collective identity.

These initiatives reveal that Gandhi's inclusive strategy extended beyond political mobilization to social transformation.

6. Gandhi's Leadership Style and Inclusive Politics: -

6.1 Dialogical Leadership: -

Gandhi's politics relied on dialogue rather than command. He encouraged debate, consultation, and local initiative, making participation accessible to diverse groups.

6.2 Ethical Authority: -

His personal austerity, simplicity, and willingness to suffer enhanced his credibility among both elites and masses. Ethical leadership allowed him to transcend class suspicion.

6.3 Decentralized Organization: -

Gandhi promoted local committees, volunteer corps, and village-level participation. This decentralized structure enabled the movement to penetrate rural society and include previously excluded populations.

7. Limitations of Cross-Class Solidarity: -

Despite its achievements, Gandhi's inclusive politics faced limitations.

7.1 Persistent Class Tensions: -

Industrial workers, peasants, and landlords often had conflicting interests. Gandhi's emphasis on harmony sometimes obscured structural inequalities.

7.2 Critiques from Radical Nationalists: -

Socialists and revolutionaries argued that Gandhi's approach restrained class struggle and protected elite interests.

7.3 Communal Divisions: -

While Gandhi advocated inter-religious harmony, communal tensions eventually undermined national unity, culminating in Partition.

These limitations indicate that inclusive politics can mitigate but not entirely eliminate structural divisions.

8. Impact on the Freedom Movement: -

Gandhi's strategy of inclusion produced several enduring outcomes:

1. It transformed nationalism into a mass movement.
2. It legitimized political participation by marginalized groups.
3. It created shared symbols of national identity.
4. It enhanced international sympathy for India's cause.

By integrating social reform with political resistance, Gandhi broadened the meaning of freedom from mere transfer of power to moral and social transformation.

9. Discussion: Inclusion as a Model of Political Mobilization: -

Gandhi's approach suggests that successful movements require:

- Moral legitimacy that transcends class interest
- Symbolic practices enabling shared participation
- Decentralized organization fostering local engagement
- Integration of social reform with political action

These elements remain relevant for contemporary democratic movements seeking broad-based participation.

10. Conclusion: -

Gandhi's contribution to the Indian freedom movement lies not only in his leadership but in his transformation of nationalist politics into an inclusive mass movement. By consciously bridging class divisions through shared moral language, participatory methods, and social reform initiatives, he fostered cross-class solidarity that sustained decades of anti-colonial struggle.

While limitations persisted, Gandhi's inclusive strategy reshaped Indian nationalism and provided a model for mobilizing diverse societies. The freedom movement's success demonstrates that political unity in deeply stratified societies depends not on suppressing differences but on cultivating shared ethical commitments and participatory structures.

References: -

1. Gandhi, M. K. (2001). *The story of my experiments with truth* (M. Desai, Trans.). Dover Publications. (Original work published 1940)
2. Chandra, B., Mukherjee, M., Mukherjee, A., Panikkar, K. N., & Mahajan, S. (1988). *India's struggle for independence: 1857–1947*. Penguin Books.
3. Majumdar, R. C. (1962). *History of the freedom movement in India* (Vols. 1–3). Firma KLM.
4. Sarkar, S. (1983). *Modern India: 1885–1947*. Macmillan.
5. Fischer, L. (1982). *The life of Mahatma Gandhi*. Harper Perennial.
6. Gandhi, M. K. (1909). *Hind Swaraj or Indian Home Rule*.
7. Gandhi, M. K. (1959). *An Autobiography: The Story of My Experiments with Truth* (Translated by Mahadev Desai).
8. Parekh, Bhikhu. (1997). *Gandhi: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford University Press. Parel, Anthony J. (Ed.). (1997).
9. Nanda, B. R. (1991). *Mahatma Gandhi: A Biography*. Oxford University Press
10. Ambedkar, B. R. (1936). *Annihilation of Caste*. Teltumbde, Anand. (2010). *Gandhi and Ambedkar: Reflections on Their Contradictions*. Economic and Political Weekly.

