

Mahatma 's Non Co- operation Movement and the response of Maharaja Jitendra Narayan of Cooch Behar: An unknown event of Colonial Era .

Joydeep Pal

Lecturer in History, Sukanta Mahavidyalaya , Dhupguri , Jalpaiguri.

Mahatma Gandhi played an important role in Indian politics from 1919 – 1947 . He was a many splendoured personality - a person who kept the highest standards of morality in politics , a great political strategist who evolved and practiced politics of the capture of state power through a prolonged mass movement, an orthodox religious believer who stood for the social liberation of women , the ending of caste oppression and discrimination , and , in general , application of reason to all aspects of social life , a person who had the vision of a world where all conflicts would be settled without the use of violence .¹

M. k. Gandhi returned to India in 1915 at the age of forty six after twenty years in South Africa . He did not grow to maturity through experience of public life in his own country, spiritual and political foundations of his leadership in a foreign land .² South Africa taught him the techniques with which he was to combat the might of British Imperialism in India .³ Here it deserve to mention that in 1906 the Transvaal passed a law that Indians must register themselves and carry passes . This was followed in 1913 by the union Government's decision not to rescind the 3 tax imposed by natal on indentured labourers who wished

to remain in South Africa after their contracts of indenture had expired , and in 1913 by a court ruling known as the Searle Judgement , which touched all Indians , even the woman , by threatening to invalidate all non – Christian Indian marriages .⁴ From 1907 when he realized that the Imperial government would not help South African Indians , he played what was always thereafter to be his trump card - Passive Resistance . The ideology behind passive resistance was a blend of the Hindu Vaishnava tradition of Ahimsa , non – violence , and a belief in suffering rather than fighting to overcome an opponent . Satyagraha became Gandhiji's most powerful weapon in the South African struggle , and he restored to it intermittently from 1907 to 1914, when the Union Government agreed to a compromise Settlement .⁵ By 1915 he had become a skilled political mobilize and had evolved a political technique of superb flexibility which was to be his hall – mark when he returned to India . During the next three years , Gandhi acquired the reputation of a man who would take up local wrongs (of Champaran indigo cultivators , Ahmedabad textile workers , and Kheda peasants) and usually manage to do something concrete about them - a political style in sharp contrast to the established Congress (and Home Rule League) pattern of starting with somewhat abstract all-India issue or programmes and proceeding from top downwards .⁶ Judith Brown in his book ' Gandhi's Rise to Power ' argued that the main importance of these early movements lay in the recruitment of 'Sub – contractors' who would serve as his life –long lieutenants - like Rejendra Prasad , Anugraha Narayan Sinha and J.B. Kripalani in Champaran , or Vallabhbai Patel , Mahadev Desai , Indulal Yajnik and Shankarlal Banker in the two Gujarat move- Ments .⁷

In the Rowlatt Satyagraha of 1919 M.k.Gandhi sought to move a campaign that proposed to involve the entire nation.⁸ The movement was aimed against the two bills prepared by a committee under justice S.A.T. Rowlatt, to provide the government with additional coercive power to deal with terrorism. One of the bills was passed in the Imperial Legislative Assembly on March 18th, 1919 over the unanimous protests of the Indian members. On 26th February Gandhi issued an 'open letter' to all the Indians urging them to join the Satyagraha, starting with a general strike or '*hartal*' on 6th April.⁹ The Government had no prior experience of handling such wide spread mass agitation. To avoid trouble they arrested Gandhi, but that precipitated a crisis, provoking unprecedented mob fury in areas like Delhi, Bombay, Ahmedabad, Amritsar etc. On 13th April, at Jallianwallabagh General Dyer opened fire on a peaceful gathering of Satyagrahis, killing 379 people, in a bid to break their morals.¹⁰ The effectiveness of the movement depended on the capability of the local leaders to relate local grievances to the national issue of the Rowlatt Act.¹¹

While meditation was an important factor at the initial stage of mass mobilization, the leaders often failed to control mass emotions. However, the failure of the anti – Rowlatt Act agitation made M.k.Gandhi realize the need for an impersonal political organization such as Congress. His next step was to take over Congress leadership.

After the withdrawal of the Rowlatt Satyagraha, Gandhiji got involved in the Khilafat movement, in which he saw a splendid opportunity to unite the Hindus and the Muslims in a common struggle against the British. Apart from that at the Nagpur Session of the Congress, most of the new delegates were the supporters of Gandhi. On the other hand, Gandhi too needed the Congress leaders, without whom he could not hope to organize a nationwide movement, as his recent experience of Rowlatt Satyagraha had clearly demonstrated. His goal was to forge a grand coalition of various classes and communities and in this sense the Nagpur Congress symbolized the emergence of a centrist leadership within the pluralist structure of political India.¹²

The Non Co – operation Movement began in January 1921, The initial emphasis began on middle class participation. Gradually the movement became more militant, with the boycott and organization of public bonfires of foreign cloth. Economic boycott was more intense and successful, as the value of import of foreign cloth dropped from Rs. 1,020 million in 1920-21 to Rs. 570 million in 1921-22.¹³ The most significant aspect of the Non Co – operation movement were, however its uneven geographical spread and wide regional variations. First of all, it was marked by the involvement of regions and classes that did not participate in the past in any movement initiated by the Congress. There were significant peasant participation in Rajasthan, Sind, Gujarat, Assam, Awadh and Maharashtra. In 22nd February 1922 after the violent incident at Chauri Chaura (burnt the police station and 25 were killed) Gandhiji withdraws the movement. But in Bengal, the large number of people who participated in the Non Co – operation Movement desired consciously or unconsciously to shatter the domination of Colonial Business interests, and inevitably this desire manifested itself in forms that were unmistakably anti-white.¹⁴ The initial target of attack was the interlinked complex of tea, jute, coal, oil, railway, steamer, and engineering interests. The popular hatred of white racial domination provided the bitter edge of this economic assault. In Darjeeling and Jalpaiguri some sort

of stability was provided by the fact that the Napalese labour employed in the tea gardens was local.¹⁵

Apart from that in case Cooch Behar the response was notable as because it was a Princely State where the rulers were out and out modern . The period of 1921 – 22 of the Non Co – operation Movement in Cooch Behar can be summarize as follows :

Non Co –operation Movement had a tremendous foothold in Cooch Behar . Some of the symptoms of the so - called Non- Cooperation Movement was observed in the Princely State of Cooch Behar during the year 1921 – 22 . At a meeting of the Cooch Behar State Council held on the 31st January 1922 , in which Your Highness Maharaja Jitendra Narayan passed the following Resolution enunciating clearly Your Highness Policy and stating the measures to be taken to give effect to it¹⁶ “ His Highness the Maharaja deems it advisable to issue for the guidance of his officers certain instructions regarding the so called Non – Cooperation Movement ”.¹⁷ Hitherto, very few symptoms of that movement have appeared in the State but, in view of the fact that the neighbouring British district of Rangpur and Goalpara are seriously affected , precautionary measures appear to be necessary . Maharaja Jitendra Narayan does not propose to review the arguments for or against Non – Co -operation . Here it deserve to mention that the movement could not any ‘ raison detre’ in Cooch Behar where “Swaraj” has longan established fact .¹⁸ Nevertheless , it is desirable to indicate what attitude is to be adopted by the Maharaja of Cooch Behar and his officers (should any symptoms of the Non – Cooperation Movement be observed). Such an attempt can be summaries as ¹⁹

i) As regard the agitation against use of intoxicating liquors ,drug & etc. , Maharaja directs the observance of a strictly neutral attitude provided no interference is attempted with the liberty of any of his subjects .

The use of simple persuasion without intimation , or ‘picketing ’ of liquor shops , is entirely unobjectionable , but the use of violence to enforce total abstinence from intoxicating liquors or drugs is not to be allowed .Any section or procedure which in the opinion of the local Magistrate may cause a breach of the people is to be stopped .

ii) The weaving of khaddar (influence of Khadi) cloth is entirely unobjectionable but the use of Gandhi caps by Maharaja’sservants is prohibited as lending to indicate the existence in the princely State of Cooch Behar of an authority other than His Highness .

Similarly , as the use of volunteer badges may cause an impression among ignorant people that the weavers there of posses authority . People who are seen with these badges are to be told to remove them , and if they fail to do so , they will be dealt with under the next paragraph .

iii) Should any outsiders visit the State of Cooch Behar and by their actions give cause to think that they were stirring up an undesirable political agitation within the State , they are to be removed from the State .

All instances of this kind are to be reported in the first instance to the local magistrate who will report the matter to the Fauzdari Ahilkar who will take His-Highness

order on the subject. In His (Maharaja Jitendra Narayan) absence the Fauzdari Ahilkar will report to the vice – president of the Cooch Behar State Council who will deal with the matter as the State Council question in accordance with the usual pro-cedure .

- iv) ‘ *Hartal* ’ as tending to diminish the State revenue are not to be allowed and the names of any shop – keepers infringing this order will be reported .
- v) The holding of political meetings will be carefully watched .

In this regard it deserves to mention that Maharaj Jitendra Narayan visited the head quarter of his Zamindari at Debigunj in the Jalpaiguri district in February , 1922 and took advantage of the occasion to give out in clear and unequivocal language Maharaja’s mind and attitude towards the Non – Cooperation Movement “ It has long been my intention to visit the head quarters of my largest and important zamindari , which at one time formed the territories of my ancestors . The movement has caused a general feeling of unrest and this has somehow spread even to the agricultural community . But in this instance, I must and will insist that my own servants shall not enter passively or actively give their countenance to any unlawful activity .”

From the above analysis it is the true fact that although the movement failed to reach its goal but it reached every knock and corner of the Country and even it ran over the ruler of Cooch Behar (tiny Princely State in Eastern India) to take some serious measures in regard of the Non Co – operation Movement .

Notes and References

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