

The Indian Independence Struggle (1930 – 1931)

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Summary of events related to the use or impact of civil resistance
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Conflict Summary:

Mohandas Gandhi's civil disobedience movement of 1930-1931—launched by the Salt March—is a critical case for understanding civil resistance. Although by itself it failed to bring Indian independence, it seriously undermined British authority and united India's population in a movement for independence under the leadership of the Indian National Congress (INC). It further signaled a new stage in the struggle for Indian *swaraj* (self-rule) and facilitated the downfall of the British Empire in India. Gandhi's Salt Satyagraha (a word Gandhi used to connote civil resistance, meaning “holding fast to the truth”) drew upon a traditional South Asian cultural practice – the “Padyatra” (a long spiritual march) that became a model of strategic action for many social movements in the decades to come.

On the anniversary of the 1919 Jallianwala Bagh massacre in Amritsar—in which hundreds of unarmed Indians were killed and many more wounded by British soldiers—Gandhi reached down and scooped up a handful of mud at a beach and declared that he was shaking the foundations of the British Empire. He then boiled the mud in seawater to produce illegal salt, an act repeated by thousands which led to the arrest of an estimated 60,000-100,000 men and women who participated for the first time in mass public demonstrations. Widespread civil disobedience followed with grassroots actions across the nation including not only illegal salt making, but also bonfires burning British cloth, picketing of shops selling foreign cloth, picketing of liquor shops, and rent withholding. Other issues came to the fore in the campaign as well, such as Hindu-Muslim unity and an attack on the caste system and the elimination of “untouchability”—Gandhi encouraged members of the lowest “untouchable” (*harijan* or *dalit*) caste to participate, thereby creating considerable controversy, especially in villages along the route of the march where the local hosts were delighted to welcome the famous Mahatma (which was a name people gave to Gandhi meaning “great soul”) but were loathe to associate with “outcastes.” Some criticize Gandhi for losing focus on the issue of independence and diffusing the struggle by including so many other issues, but that was characteristic of his approach.

Following Gandhi's arrest and imprisonment just after midnight on 5 May 1930, the famous woman poet Sarojini Naidu took over leadership of the nonviolent invasion of the Dharasana Salt Works in Gujarat. Naidu sent wave after wave of *satyagrahis* toward the plant, where they were met by soldiers who clubbed them with steel-tipped poles (*lathis*), an event that was recorded by journalists and that moved many around the world to sympathize with the Indian cause. Gandhi was finally released from prison and the Salt Satyagraha ended on March 4, 1931, with the signing of the Gandhi-Irwin pact and the invitation for Gandhi to attend Round Table talks in London to discuss the possibility of Indian independence.

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The Salt March was not only the most widely-celebrated moment in Gandhi's career as a freedom fighter, but it is paradigmatic of his approach: it is a highly-symbolic and dramatic exercise in civil resistance, contextualized among a variety of other nonviolent actions (boycotts, civil disobedience, picketing) strategically focused on a relatively narrow goal. It mobilized mass participation, included widespread civil disobedience, had a profound cultural resonance, and attracted worldwide attention through the media. The people were united, the British Empire's façade of civility exposed, and pillars of its vast power shaken.

Political History:

British control of the South Asian Subcontinent began as a trading venture in the early seventeenth century with the English East India Company, which later became a managing agent for the British government. Following an uprising in 1857 (the "Mutiny," the British called it), India came under direct administration by the British Empire. The British colonial government relied on the cooperation of Indian elites and soldiers for formal control of government and the population.

Mohandas K. Gandhi launched and directed three major campaigns in the Indian Independence Movement: noncooperation in 1919-1922, the civil disobedience movement and the Salt Satyagraha of 1930-1931, and the Quit India movement from about 1940-1942. Prior to these campaigns, he had studied law in England, was admitted to the bar at the High Court of Chancery, and then spent a formative 20 years in South Africa where he met raw racial insults, rallied Indians to fight for their human rights, and cultivated his classic methods of nonviolent civil resistance or, as he called it, *Satyagraha*.

Gandhi spent almost two years in prison starting in 1922, charged with publishing seditious writings in the journal *Young India*, to which he pleaded guilty, and used the time to read, pray, and spin. He then worked behind the scenes in the Indian National Congress (INC) political party and directed his attention to what he called "constructive work" such as easing tensions between Hindu and Muslim communities, opposing the practice of "untouchability," and spinning cloth as part of his noncooperation with British colonial rule, which was centered to a large extent on the textile industry. Gandhi was provoked into action along with other members of the INC by creation of a British commission that included no Indians to help chart the course of India's future.

The INC passed Gandhi's resolution at its 1929 annual meeting in Lahore asking for full independence and promising civil disobedience if it was not granted. On 26 January 1930 the INC celebrated "Independence Day" and Gandhi was busy forging a plan for the inevitable response to the lack of official independence. He decided to launch the campaign with an act of civil disobedience involving the British salt tax. The salt tax was a political issue that had a

personal impact on all Indians, especially among the poor. Salt was a basic necessity for survival and its taxation was viewed as an example of British arrogance. On 2 March 1930, Gandhi wrote a letter to Viceroy Lord Irwin informing him of his intent to commit civil disobedience in ten days if eleven previously-communicated demands (related to the salt tax, land revenue assessments, military spending levels, currency exchange rates, and a tariff on foreign cloth) were not met. The letter, addressed to the viceroy as a “friend,” was delivered by British Quaker Reginald Reynolds to make the point that it was not simply a matter of Indians against the British. The civil disobedience campaign was designed to appeal to multiple audiences including: the broader Indian civil society (to draw them into the struggle), British officials, young radicals in the freedom movement wanting violent confrontations, and some Indian economic elites who opposed independence altogether.

On 12 March Gandhi set out with 78 members of his ashram on a 241-mile (390-kilometer)¹ march from Sabarmati, Gujarat, to the coastal village of Dandi. Greeted by large crowds along the way, some of whom joined the march, Gandhi communicated his message of Indian independence, the injustice of the salt tax, and the need to spin in order to promote a boycott of British cloth and thus attack the core of the British Empire’s exploitative relationship with India, which was the textile industry.

The campaign failed to bring independence or even major concessions, but it inspired the Indian people and, as Jawaharlal Nehru put it, widened the outlook of “the village masses,” who for the first time “began to think a little in terms of India as a whole.”

The repression the *satyagrahis* suffered at the hands of the regime—beatings, imprisonment, even torture—backfired, creating a serious credibility problem for the Empire at home and abroad. When India was finally achieved independence on 15 August 1947, scholars and many Indian people looked back on the Salt Satyagraha as a turning point in the Indian independence struggle.

Strategic Actions:

The Salt Satyagraha was a multi-faceted campaign of civil disobedience that included a range of strategic actions beyond the march and the act of illegal salt-making itself. It was part of a tactical sequence that allowed the civil resisters to seize the initiative from the British and ran from the earlier Civil Disobedience Campaign of 1919-1922 that focused on a boycott of British cloth, to the demand for complete and immediate independence, setting the stage for the Quit India Movement of 1940-1941 and the eventual recognition of independence in 1947. The Salt March was a response to the British refusal to recognize the INC’s declaration of independence in December of 1929 and was designed to dramatize the injustice of colonial rule in a concrete

way by challenging the salt tax, but also to memorialize the British massacre of nonviolent protestors at Amritsar in 1919.

The carefully choreographed march went from village to village providing opportunities to make public statements of protest and to recruit people into the movement. The making of salt from the Indian Ocean in defiance of British law led to widespread arrests and beatings by British troops. Baffled by the inability of massive arrests to slow the movement, British officials finally arrested Gandhi himself, thinking it would stop its momentum. On the contrary, more participants were mobilized and the movement escalated its tactics as planned by Gandhi prior to his arrest, with a nonviolent invasion of the Dharasana Salt Works. Wave after wave of civil resisters were severely beaten and then replaced in a spectacle that captured the attention of the world's media. The naked violence against unarmed protesters discredited the Empire even among its staunch supporters in England. In order to save face, the Viceroy was forced to negotiate for the first time with Gandhi as a representative of the INC. Gandhi was invited to London for Roundtable talks with government officials about the possibility of Indian independence. While Gandhi negotiated, a backlash against the conciliatory policies that were counter-offered by the British emerged among British officials in India and a wave of repression clamped down on Congress officials back in India, including the arrests of Jawaharlal Nehru and Abdul Gaffar Khan while Gandhi was on his journey home. Rather than suppressing the movement the repression again energized it – more than 60,000 people were arrested for civil disobedience in the first nine months of 1932. Although formal Independence did not come for another sixteen years, delayed in part by the Second World War, the movement had seized the initiative.

The social organization of the Salt March was designed not only for civil resistance directed at the British colonial system, but also to model the new social order that the freedom fighters wished to put in its place. In advance of the campaign, the INC set up lines of leadership succession, so that with each wave of arrests, new leaders were ready to replace those who were taken away and the participation of women and “untouchables” in the March and the movements parallel structures laid the groundwork for a different kind of social structure in independent India.

In brief, some of the strategic actions of the movement during the Salt Satyagraha included:

Nonviolent Protest and Persuasion

- Formal statements: public speeches by Gandhi and other INC leaders, letters of opposition (including Gandhi's correspondence with the viceroy), mass petitions.
- Communications with a wider audience: Slogans and symbols, newspaper and journal articles from Gandhi's own journals, masterful use of the international press, leaflets and pamphlets, lectures by INC activists on trains to a “captive audience.”
- Group Representations: delegations to persuade officials, picketing of liquor stores.

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- Symbolic public acts: displays of flags (independent India), prayer and worship (Gandhi's daily prayer meetings).
- Drama and Music: singing, dancing, and drums at public gatherings and among the crowds greeting the marchers as they arrived in village after village
- Processions: the Salt March itself, which for Gandhi was also explicitly a religious as well as political procession.
- Honoring the Dead: political mourning of the thousands of unarmed demonstrators killed or wounded by British soldiers at Amritsar in 1919—Gandhi deliberately planned for the march to arrive at the seacoast on the anniversary of their death.

Social Noncooperation

- Ostracism of persons: social boycotts of persons not engaging in noncooperation with the British government.

Economic Noncooperation

- Action by consumers: national boycott of British cloth and shops selling it, as well as liquor stores; rent withholding.
- Limited strikes, hartals, and economic shutdowns

Political Noncooperation

- Rejection of authority: withholding of allegiance and refusal of public office by Indians.
- Noncooperation with government: resignations of government employment and positions, withdrawal from government educational institutions
- Alternatives to obedience: popular nonobedience, refusal to disperse, civil disobedience of British laws, especially the salt tax.
- School boycotts

Nonviolent Intervention

- Physical intervention: nonviolent invasions, especially of the Dharasana Salt Works, nonviolent occupation of the seashore to make salt.
- Social intervention: new social patterns, overloading of facilities (especially jails), alternative markets (salt, cloth) and institutions, such as ashrams and communities that cut across caste, class, and religious-communal lines.
- Economic interventions: alternative economic institutions such as salt manufacturing and the khadi (homespun) cloth industries.
- Political intervention: civil disobedience of “neutral” laws, dual sovereignty, making the Indian National Congress a de facto ruling entity in an attempt to sideline the colonial government.

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Ensuing Events:

Although not without its corruption, injustices, and occasional outbursts of inter-communal conflict, India is the world's largest democracy with significant civil liberties and an independent judiciary as well as a formally free press.

Despite remarkable cultural, religious, and linguistic diversity, overwhelming poverty, and many other social problems, the country has a stable democratic government. The spirit of nonviolent confrontation from the Salt Satyagraha persists. Across the nation, nonviolent civic organizations regularly mobilize for social and political change and engage in public demonstrations to air their grievances with the government. Free speech is protected—a member of the government's own planning commission once severely criticized the nation's constitution in a public speech in Delhi—and movements within a robust civil society often resist the state to redress grievances, sometimes using the classic “padyatra.”

Endnotes:

1. Although this is the commonly-assumed distance, Thomas Weber (2009:488) recalculates the distance of the march at 220 miles (350 kilometers).

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