

HISTORY OF INDIA (1858 – 1947)

PAPER 6.7

Unit – V (Topic – Non Co-operation Movement)

Background of the Non-violent Non Co-operation Movement: The Indian national leaders supported the cause of Britain in the First World War with the hope that the British government would come forward to fulfill their minimum demand – a status of autonomy within the framework of the British Empire. The Indian aspirations also found expression in the League-Congress joint demand for swaraj within the British Empire. Meanwhile the Home Rule Movement also popularized the Indian demand for swaraj or self-government. The peasants and the workers of India also had been voicing their protests and, in fact, they had organized movements in different parts of the country. Economic depression during the post war period also distressed the traders, industrialists, etc. Moreover, it was proved beyond doubt that the Congress organization had taken deep root in the soil of the country and that it had the capability to lead a mass movement. The Muslim League also had taken an anti-British stance. Particularly, the attitude of Britain towards the Sultan of Turkey, who was at the same time the religious head of the Muslims, antagonized the Muslims of India. Under a situation like this, when the British government sought to dupe the Indians in the name of introducing reforms, the smouldering fire within the Indians burst out into a conflagration. When the British government in India armed with new repressive laws inaugurated a sort of a reign of terror. It was in this background that Mahatma Gandhi launched his famous Rowlatt Satyagraha which was followed by the Non-violent Non-co-operation Movement in 1920.

The Montague-Chelmsford Reforms of 1919 has been discussed at length earlier. Suffice it to say that the reforms introduced under the said Act of 1919 felt far short of the demands of the Indians. Rather it came as a disappointment to the India people. Both the Indian National Congress and the Muslim League expressed their disappointment calling it (the Act of 1919) 'hopeless' and 'unnecessary'. The British government apprehending a major outbreak of hostilities following the disappointment of the Indians sought to restrict their civil rights by the famous Rowlatt Act (1919).

Rowlatt Act: The 'Anarchical and Revolutionary Act of 1919' was popularly known as the Rowlatt Act. As the said Act was framed on the basis of a Report submitted by a committee headed by Justice Rowlatt the Act came to be called the 'Rowlatt Act'. However, the real motive of the British in enacting the said Act was to deprive the Indians of their right to personal liberty as also the right to participate in political movements on the pretext of suppressing a handful of revolutionaries. The main provisions of the Rowlatt Act were (a) Arrest and deportation of any

person on mere suspicion. (b) Trial of all political cases by tribunals to be set up for the purpose, (c) Possession of seditious pamphlets was declared to be a punishable offence.

Tumult of protest was raised all over the country immediately after the promulgation of the 'Black Act', as the Rowlatt Act came to be known. Opposition to the Rowlatt act took the form of strikes and protest meetings all over the country. It was the wake of the anti-Rowlatt agitation that Gandhiji, who had so long been sitting on the periphery of politics, took an active part in it. Thereafter it was he who dominated the political stage of India for two decades and more. Immediately after the Act had been passed, Gandhiji called upon the people of India to observe an all India hartal (on 6 April, 1919) in protest against the repressive law.

Gandhiji had successfully applied the weapon of Satyagraha among the Indians in the Champaran district, in Bihar as also in the city of Ahmedabad and in the district of Kaira in Gujarat. In the struggle against the Rowlatt Act the same weapons of non-violence and Satyagraha were applied in organizing the ensuing political movement Gandhiji constituted a Satyagraha Sabha in Bombay of which he himself was the President. Meetings were held all over the country in protest and people were invited to sign a Satyagraha pledge. In the Pledge, people had to take a vow that they would not deviate from the path of non-violence under any circumstances. People all over the country responded magnificently to Gandhiji's call and the hartal of 6 April (1919) was widely observed. It must, however, be remembered that in the face of Police oppression the volunteers or the Satyagrahis did not or rather not remain non-violent everywhere. Anyway, the famous Jallianwala Bagh incident opened a new horizon in the national movement of the Indian people.

The Jallianwala Bagh Massacre: As it has been mentioned earlier that the excitement caused by the agitation against Rowlatt Act did not remain its character of non-violence at least some places. Particularly Gandhiji's arrest by the Police was highly provocative. When the resentment of the people rose to its extreme heights ruthlessness of the Police towards the demonstrators further worsened the situation. In places like Lahore, Gujranwala, Amritsar etc. in Punjab the British administrators even did not hesitate to attack the peaceful demonstrators with lathis and to open fire upon them. But what happened in other places pales into insignificance compared to the horrors at Jallianwala Bagh in Amritsar.

In connection with the anti-Rowlatt agitation the British Police authorities in Punjab put under arrest two most popular Congressite leaders, namely, Dr. Satyapal and Dr. Kitchlew. In protest against the arrest peaceful demonstrations were held all over the country and, obviously, the intensity of demonstration in Punjab was much higher than anywhere else. On 13 April, 1919 about 10,000 peaceful crowds assembled at the Jallianwala Bagh (garden) in Amritsar to attend a protest meeting defying the prohibitive order issued by Michael O'Dwyer, the Lieutenant Governor of Punjab. Incidentally, the Jallianwala Bagh was a disused garden with

its three sides obstructed by massive buildings. Only on one side there was no building and four or five narrow lanes led into the Bagh. However, when the assembled crowd was listening to the speeches Brigadier Dyer* deployed troops and suddenly opened fire to the crowd without any prior warning. According to various estimates, about 1000 people were killed and a few hundreds injured.

More important than the number of persons killed or injured was the barbarous attack on the people by the British which had no parallel in the annals of history. The Jallianwala Bagh incident far from lessening the antipathy of the Indians towards the British further increased it. Thousands of hitherto uncommitted people were drawn into the freedom struggle. It must be mentioned here that Rabindranath Tagore renounced his Knighthood in protest against the incident calling it “a monstrous progeny of a monstrous war”.

As it has been pointed out earlier that the Rowlat Satyagraha organized by Gandhiji did not remain non-violent in various places in the face of governmental repressive. Under the circumstances the movement had a tragic end when he suspended it on April 18 (1919) confessing that he had committed a ‘Himalayan miscalculation’. He miscalculated in assuming the ‘the masses were sufficiently educated in the principles of ahimsa’.

Khilafat Movement (1919): The growing discontent of the Indians against the British rule led to a series of mass movements at the end of the First World War. The Khilafat Movement was started by the Muslims of India in 1919 under the leadership of the Ali Brothers – Maulana Muhammad Ali, Shaukat Ali and others. The object of the movement was to bring pressure upon the British government to change its policy towards Turkey and the Caliphate. Turkey had joined the First World War against Great Britain and the Allied Powers. After its defeat in the War, Turkey was dispossessed of her territories and the Sultan of Turkey, who was also the Caliph or religious head of the Muslim world was humiliated, contrary to the promise made earlier by the British government. This aroused the indignation of the Muslims of India. Thus the Khilafat Movement aimed at : (a) the preservation of the integrity of the Turkish Empire and (b) the vindication of the power and prestige of the Caliph.

In the beginning agitation was organized throughout the country by the Khilafat Committee set up the Ali Brothers. Later on, in November 1919 the All India Khilafat Conference was held in Delhi. According to the decisions arrived at in the Conference, the Muslims were not to co-operate with the British government till there was a change in the British policy towards Turkey and the Caliph. Bal Gangadhar Tilak and Mahatma Gandhi were sympathetic towards the Muslim demand for Khilafat, as both of them considered the demand to be a right and just one. Gandhiji issued a manifesto to the effect that if the Muslim demand was not met, he would call upon the people not to co-operate with the British government. In November, 1919, the All India Khilafat Conference was held in Delhi, Gandhiji being elected as

its President. It was decided that the Khilafat Movement would be organized under the guidance of Mahatma Gandhi. Indian National Congress and the Muslim League both gave full support to the Muslim demand. The Khilafat Committee launched Non co-operation Movement on August 31, 1920 and Gandhiji was the first to join it. Indian National Congress in a resolution supported Gandhiji's plan of Non co-operation with the British government till the Punjab atrocities were remedied, demand for Khilafat was met and the Swaraj or self-government was established. It has been pointed out by some that the demand for Khilafat had little to do with the non-Muslim communities of India and that it was wrong to make it a political issue. But Gandhiji saw in it a golden opportunity for cementing the Hindu-Muslim unity. He himself said that the Khilafat Movement had given "an opportunity of uniting the Hindus and the Muslims as would not arise in a hundred years". Gandhiji thought that by raising the Muslim demand for Khilafat to the height of national demand and thereby bringing the Muslim masses into the national movement, the British policy of divide and rule, that is to say, creating division between the Hindus and Muslims, would receive a serious set back and, as a result, it would be earlier for the Indians to get the demand for Swaraj from the British fulfilled.

In 1920 began the Non Co-operation cum Khilafat Movement under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhiji. Imprisonment of Gandhiji during the course of the movement brought the Non Co-operation virtually to an end. Of course, the Khilafat Movement was still apace. Nevertheless, movement of the Khilafatists was not destined to continue for long due to the national and international events which had taken place in the meantime. The Khilafat Movement took a different turn with the rebellion of the Moplahs (1921) in the Malabar coast. Besides, the Khilafat Movement lost all its momentum when Kemal Pasha, the progressive ruler of Turkey, defying all the Islamic traditions, abolished the post of the Caliphate. This was how the Khilafat Movement of the Indian Muslims had come to an end.

Non-Violent Non Co-operation Movement: Gandhiji first announced his plan of Non Co-operation with the British at a meeting of the Khilafatists held in Delhi (in November, 1919). On the advice of Gandhiji, the Khilafat leaders lent their full support to the proposed Non Co-operation movement. Meanwhile the Indian National Congress in its Nagpur session also adopted resolution supporting the proposed Non Co-operation movement. In fact, the four underlying causes of the Non Co-operation were : (a) People's resentment against the Rowlatt Act, (b) People's reaction to the ghastly massacre at the Jallianwala Bagh, (c) The demand for Swaraj jointly raised by the Moderates and the Extremists and (d) The possibility of a Hindu-Muslim joint movement on the Khilafat question. The Non Co-operation Movement launched on the basis of the above had three clear objectives in view, namely (a) Remedy of the Punjab wrongs done by the British (b) Vindication of the prestige of the Caliphate and (c) Fulfillment of the demand for Swaraj.

Gandhiji's programme of Non Co-operation had two distinct aspects. One was Non Co-operation with the British in a Non-violent way and this included enunciation of the titles conferred by the British Government, boycott of British courts, legislatures, etc., withdrawal of children from the schools and colleges run by the government, boycott of British manufactures etc. If this programme represented the negative aspect of the movement, Gandhiji also had a constructive side to champion. The constructive or positive aspect of the Non Co-operation included establishment of national schools, promotion of Swadeshi and hand-spinning, to do away with untouchability, promotion of communal harmony etc. Gandhiji formally, launched the Non-violent Non Co-operation movement by renouncing the honorific title 'Kaiser-i-Hind' conferred upon him by the British government.

At the call of Gandhiji lacs of people all over the country joined the Non Co-operation movement. Thousands of students left government aided schools and colleges, lawyers left their profession and many others resigned government jobs to participate in the movement. Alongside with boycott of foreign goods people started using indigenous products. Khadi and Charka (spinning wheel) became the symbol of national sentiment. The womenfolk was also not lagging behind. Basanti Devi, wife of the celebrated leader Chittaranjan Das, Sarojini Naidu and others actively participated in the movement.

During the movement the Indian peasantry also started voicing protests against their various grievances. The first peasants' movement had begun at Rae Berili and Faizabad (in present Uttar Pradesh) where the tenant farmers burst into revolt and stopped paying illegal taxes. The peasants' movement assumed a significant character in Oudh (in modern Uttar Pradesh) where an armed hand of peasants called "Ika" became very active. In Bengal, Orissa and South Indian also the peasants voiced their protests in various ways. The peasants of Midnapore in West Bengal started a no-tax campaign.

Intensity of the Non Co-operation movement alarmed the British government so much that they took resort to repressive measures to suppress the peaceful volunteers. Despite Gandhiji's appeal to the Satyagrahis to remain peaceful there had been clashes between the police and the people in some places following police action beyond endurance. However, a violent incident that took place at Chauri Chaura ultimately led to the suspension of the Non Co-operation Movement by Gandhiji. The incident was that in the village Chauri Chaura, near Gorakhpur in U.P. an infuriated mob set the Police Station on fire and as a result a number of constables were burnt to death. This incident took place on February 4, 1922.

Gandhiji's was a non-violent movement. There was no scope of violence in it. Realizing that his movement was drifting towards violence, Gandhiji immediately declared its withdrawal (1922). Though Gandhiji's decision was later on duly ratified by the Indian National Congress, yet at least to some of the members suspension of the movement appeared as a bolt from the

blue. In fact, Jawaharlal Nehru made no secret of his reaction to the sudden withdrawal of the Non Co-operation movement by Gandhiji when he wrote: “We were angry when we learned of the stoppage of our struggle.....”. Yet, owing to their love and respect to Gandhiji the discontented leaders refrained from openly opposing him. Gandhiji’s argument in suspending the movement was that people should first learn and practice the creed of Non-violence before achieving success through the path of Satyagraha and Non Co-operation. This was how the first phase of the Non-violent Non Co-operation Movement came to an end.

The Non Co-operation Movement of 1920 failed to achieve its immediate goal of establishing Swaraj in India. But this apparent failure must not blind us about the immense impact the movement had on India and her people. First, the Non Co-operation was the first mass-movement of its kind that touched the people even of the remotest village. Secondly, the movement augmented the organizational strength of the Indian National Congress. Indian people could realize that it was through this organization that the goal for Swaraj could be achieved. Thirdly, the movement increased the self-confidence of the people. People were now inspired with the morale to challenge the imperialist rule of the British. Fourthly, the social impact of the movement was no less important. From this time onwards people became conscious of the social evils like untouchability, communalism, caste barriers, etc. and efforts were made to generate a public opinion against them. Considering what has been said above it may be asserted that the immediate failure of the Non Co-operation Movement far outweighed its far reaching consequences.

Any discussion regarding the causes of the failure of the Non Co-operation Movement must begin with the consideration of the opinion expressed by the Judith M. Brown. Judith Brown, a critic of Mahatma Gandhi, sought to explain the failure of the movement by the personal limitations of Gandhiji. Yet it is possible to find out the causes which ultimately led to the failure of the movement. First, the British tackled the situation arising out of the movement in a very subtle way. The governmental repression was not uniformly applied to the provincial level and all India level. The British refrained from taking any provocative step against the all India leaders. Even Gandhiji was not arrested before March, 1922. Secondly, the government revenue never dried up. Financial crisis was never a factor to pressurize the British government to come to terms with the Non Co-operation. These are the two most important factors that account for the failure of the Non Co-operation Movement.
