

The First World War, Khilafat and Non-Cooperation

In India, the growth of modern nationalism is connected to the anti-colonial movement. Due to colonialism, many different groups shared bonds together, which were forged by the Congress under Mahatma Gandhi.

The war created a new economic and political situation in the years after 1919. Income tax introduced and the prices of custom duties were doubled between 1913 and 1918, which led to a very difficult life for common people. In 1918-19 crops failed in India, resulting in shortage of food accompanied by an influenza epidemic. At this stage, a new leader appeared and suggested a new mode of struggle.

The Idea of Satyagraha

In January 1915, Mahatma Gandhi returned to India from South Africa and started the movement Satyagraha. Satyagraha emphasised the power of truth and the need to search for truth. According to Mahatma Gandhi, people can win a battle with non-violence which will unite all Indians. In 1917, he travelled to Champaran in Bihar to inspire the peasants to struggle against the oppressive plantation system. In the same year, he organised satyagraha to support the peasants of the Kheda district of Gujarat. In 1918, Mahatma Gandhi went to Ahmedabad to organise a satyagraha movement amongst cotton mill workers.

The Rowlatt Act

In 1919, Mahatma Gandhi launched a nationwide satyagraha against the proposed Rowlatt Act. The Act gives the government enormous powers to repress political activities and allowed detention of political prisoners without trial for two years. The British government decided to clamp down on nationalists by witnessing the outrage of the people. On April 10th, police in Amritsar fired on a peaceful procession, which provoked widespread attacks on banks, post offices and railway stations. Martial law was imposed and General Dyer took command.

On 13th April, the Jallianwala Bagh incident took place. A large crowd gathered in the Jallianwala Bagh where a few people came to protest against the government's new repressive measures, while some came to attend the annual Baisakhi fair. General Dyer blocked all the exit points and opened fire on the crowd killing hundreds. After the Jallianwala Bagh massacre, people became furious and went on strikes, clashes with police and attacks on government buildings. Mahatma Gandhi had to call off the movement as it was turning into a violent war.

Mahatma Gandhi then took up the Khilafat issue by bringing Hindus and Muslims together. The First World War ended with the defeat of Ottoman Turkey. In March 1919, a Khilafat Committee was formed in Bombay. In September 1920, Mahatma Gandhi convinced other leaders of the need to start a non-cooperation movement in support of Khilafat as well as for swaraj.

Why Non-cooperation?

According to Mahatma Gandhi, British rule was established in India with the cooperation of Indians. Non-cooperation movement is proposed in stages. It should begin with the surrender of titles that the government awarded and a boycott of civil services, army, police, courts and legislative councils, schools and foreign goods. After many hurdles and campaigning between the supporters and opponents of the movement, finally, in December 1920, the Non-Cooperation Movement was adopted.

Differing Strands within the Movement

In January 1921, the Non-Cooperation-Khilafat Movement began. In this movement, various social groups participated, but the term meant different things to different people.

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