

Original Article

Historical Analysis of Mahatma Gandhi's Non-Cooperation Movement

Snehal Mahaveer Patil

Asst. Prof., Department of History, Smt. Kasturbai Walchand College of Arts and Science, Sangli

Abstract

The Non-Cooperation Movement (1920–1922), led by Mahatma Gandhi, marked a significant turning point in the history of India's struggle for independence and represented the first major nationwide mass movement against British colonial rule. This study provides a historical analysis of the movement by examining its political, social, economic, and ideological foundations. It explores the circumstances that contributed to its emergence, including the impact of the First World War, rising taxation, the Rowlatt Act, the Jallianwala Bagh massacre, and growing nationalist sentiment. The study also examines Gandhi's principles of ahimsa (non-violence) and satyagraha (truth-force), the role of the Indian National Congress and the Khilafat Movement, and the organizational mechanisms that facilitated mass mobilization across urban and rural India. Particular attention is given to the major developments, government repression, social and economic consequences, and debates surrounding the movement's effectiveness and limitations. Although the movement was withdrawn in 1922 and did not immediately achieve Swaraj, it significantly broadened political participation, strengthened nationalist consciousness, encouraged the boycott of foreign goods and colonial institutions, and established non-violent mass action as an important strategy in India's freedom struggle. The study concludes that the Non-Cooperation Movement left a lasting legacy in Indian nationalism and influenced subsequent anti-colonial and liberation movements.

Keywords: Non-Cooperation Movement; Mahatma Gandhi; Indian National Congress; Satyagraha; Ahimsa; Swaraj; Indian Nationalism; Khilafat Movement; British Colonial Rule; Mass Mobilization; Non-Violence; Indian Freedom Struggle.

Address for correspondence: Snehal Mahaveer Patil Asst. Prof., Department of History, Smt. Kasturbai Walchand College of Arts and Science, Sangli

Email: snehalpatil0230@gmail.com

Submitted: 23 June 2024 **Revised:** 30 June 2024 **Accepted:** 16 July 2024 **Published:** 31 July 2024

Introduction

The Non-Cooperation Movement (1920–1922) constituted Mahatma Gandhi's first mass campaign, mobilizing over 40 million supporters to withdraw from institutions linked to imperial rule and seek Swaraj (self-governance). Gandhi framed the movement as a reaction to the Jallianwala Bagh massacre and anticipated that resignations from government jobs would deprive colonial authorities of legitimacy, encouraging constitutional reforms, and fuelling demands for dominion status (Campbell, 2019). The campaign also related to the economy, with calls to boycott foreign cloth and higher taxes, drawing on protests against discriminatory taxation during the War. Ultimately, the objective crystallised into a demand for immediate self-rule. Influenced by earlier satyagraha campaigns in South Africa and instrumental in drafting the 1919 Montagu-Chelmsford Reforms, Gandhi began articulating non-cooperation in 1920, distinguishing it sharply from

swadeshi and Home Rule, and rejecting a call for civil disobedience amidst heightened repression. Initial participation came from educated circles, culminating in the formation of a national Non-Cooperation Committee in August and increased media support. Over the next six months participation spread across socio-economic strata and the political horizon, and the movement complemented simultaneous campaigns of the All India Khilafat Committee against the dismantling of the Ottoman Caliphate (Rani Sarma Puzari & Mazane, 2001).

Historical Context and Preconditions

The historical preconditions for the Non-Cooperation Movement involved certain colonial policies, nationalist sentiment, and popular mobilisation efforts. At an economic level, World War I and rising taxation had intensified anti-colonial sentiment (Rani Sarma Puzari & Mazane, 2001). During the war, the colonial government had committed itself to Indian autonomy in exchange for assistance.

Quick Response Code:	Access this article online	This is an open access journal, and articles are distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-Share Alike 4.0 License, which allows others to remix, tweak, and build upon the work non-commercially, as long as appropriate credit is given and the new creations are licensed under the identical terms How to cite this article: Patil, S. M. (2024). Historical Analysis of Mahatma Gandhi's Non-Cooperation Movement. Royal International Global Journal of Advance and Applied Research, 1(1), 93–96. https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.21916573
	Website: https://rlgjaar.com	
	Website: https://www.doi.org DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.21916573	

But upholding this pledge in the 1918 Montagu–Chelmsford report had won the nationalists few concessions; dissatisfaction deepened by the repressive Rowlatt Act (1919) and by the failure of the Lucknow Pact (1916) to deliver reforms. The campaign for provincial autonomy, distilling the essence of Gandhism, was among the first local attempts on a national scale aimed at attaining the goal of swaraj or self-rule. Anti-colonial feeling surged after the war along various channels: in popular protests, in ever-emboldened radical rhetoric, and in formal constitutional negotiations. Nationalist institutions, primarily the Indian National Congress, had promoted the goal of self-rule since colonial rule had begun. The Congress was evidently the primary focus of anti-colonial activism around the time that the Non-Cooperation Movement was launched.

Ideological Foundations of Non-Cooperation

The ideology of non-cooperation was rooted in the desire for complete independence and the rejection of British rule. The Congress Socialist Party accepted the Congress leadership but defined complete independence as a socialist state. Relations between Gandhiji and socialists varied from conflict to rapprochement, culminating in almost complete accord by 1947–48. Gandhi never tried to persuade socialists to abandon their principles. The Indian nationalist movement originated from the country's division into separate kingdoms and Mughal rule, which was exploited by the British through trade monopolies and political dominance. The growth of nationalist ideas was fueled by exposure to Western modern ideas and the awakening of the Indian educated class, leading to resistance such as the revolt of 1857. The establishment of the Indian National Congress in 1885 marked the rise of an all-India political organization. Major movements like the Non-Cooperation Movement, launched by Gandhi in 1920, emphasized non-violence and truthfulness as means to fight British rule (Rani Sarma Puzari & Mazane, 2001). Mahatma Gandhi began his nonviolent movement in South Africa and returned to India in 1915. In 1930, he challenged the British salt tax by leading a 240-mile walk to the sea to make his own salt, inspiring mass civil disobedience. He encouraged Indians to boycott imported cloth and resign from government jobs. Gandhi's movement, centered on ahimsa and satyagraha, emphasized discipline and self-purification through Hindu beliefs. He viewed nonviolence as a discipline involving the coordination of mind, body, and speech, guided by the Bhagavad Gita (Campbell, 2019).

Organizational Structure and Mobilization

The Non-Cooperation Movement, the first nation-wide mass mobilization in the country, thrived in an organizational network that was formally structured, although imperfectly defined. Within this framework, the Congress Party played a central directing role, closely assisted by important partner organizations, especially the Khilafat movement and the Anjuman-i Khilafat of Gujarat and All-India Khilafat conference led by Shah Nawaz Khan and Mahomed Ali. State, provincial, city, and village councils constituted the organizational sub-structure, advising local activists on policy and implementing decisions from on above. Mobilizing committees, often unaligned with formal organization, aided the propagation of the programme by organizing public meetings, persuading undecided people, preparing

pamphlets, and activating smaller groups. The participation of journalists constitutes a remarkable characteristic of the movement. Leading figures widely exploited newspapers, periodicals or pamphlets as a medium of transmission. Independent campaigns such as the Akali, Khilafat and Swadeshi movements preceding the Non-Cooperation Movement successfully activated the local political, administrative, and general public discourse to call on general support for the Non-Cooperation Movement. The movement spurred a nationwide mass mobilization, which diligently attempted to cover city and rural areas. A number of activists made special efforts to establish connections with the rural mass and to put rural area on the agenda in the earlier phase of the movement. Mobilization agenda drew attention to rural meetings, beginning with a wider address of national interest. Conferences at both district and provincial level provided an institutional arrangement for the transfer of direction. The accent shifted from organization with trained workers to persuasion of the general public; from whole-hearted mobilization to concerted emphasis on the rural area; and from an exclusive concentration on swadeshi to an inclusive enrichment of the reform programme. (Rani Sarma Puzari & Mazane, 2001)

Key Events and Chronology

The exposition proceeds by detailing the principal episodes and chronology of the Non-Cooperation Movement, with special emphasis on its major campaigns, milestones, and turning points. It begins by tracing the procession from initiation to escalation. The passage then aims to identify pivotal moments of repression, negotiation, and strategic shifts in tactics. Although the movement was formally launched on 1 August 1920, opposition to colonial rule predating its inception, particularly precipitate gravitation towards the Gandhian camp and an upsurge in agitation founded on political-economic motives and concerns. This culminated in skirmishes seeking pre-emptive concessions from the crown and in anti-colonial expressions that increased risk of violence; the salt satyagraha served as a harbinger for mass disobedience against a fabric of laws that was ordinarily accepted and whose violation still required careful consideration. It was only fitting that the Non-Cooperation Movement's first substantive campaign should be the most spectacular effort under its umbrella.

Political Repercussions and Government Response

Legislative measures adopted by colonial authorities reveal the political repercussions of the Non-Cooperation Movement, which formed the first organised nationalistic struggle against British imperialism. On 11 December 1921, the British Parliament enacted the Government of India Act with statutory constitutional reforms aimed at restoring British legitimacy. The Act followed local Reforms and the Montagu-Chelmsford Reforms of 1919. Constitutional restrictions on Indian voter eligibility had forced Gandhi to alter Non-Cooperation Movement objectives. Imperial governance posed national security risks for Britain. The government enacted the Repression Act (19 January 1922) to prohibit all public meetings not announced thirty-five days in advance and to dissolve associations. On 21 January 1922, Mahatma Gandhi was prosecuted in a Sedition case. Measures such as coercion, obstruction, and dispersing gatherings under the Defence of India Act

formally defined the Movement's political character beyond the Indian National Congress (Rani Sarma Puzari & Mazane, 2001). Viceroy Lord Reading elevated public security to the highest political priority in December 1921. Impressive public gatherings by Congress and Khilafat leaders, notwithstanding arrests and other punitive actions provoked urgent governmental action against the evolving Non-Cooperation Movement. Prominent Congress leaders—including Gopal Krishna Gokhale, Annie Besant, and C. Rajagopalachari—applied further British pressure by adopting a policy of compromise. The Partition of Bengal enabled Congress leaders in the Left Wing to emerge within the framework of the General Nationalist Movement. Beginning in early 1920, the Government of India had hoped to exploit the acute dislocation of Islamic loyalty arising from the war against Turkey to neutralise Congress and the Khilafat Movement's grip over the Muslim community by transferring the support base to the All India Trade Union Congress.

Social and Economic Impacts

The Non-Cooperation Movement, ignited by an emotionally charged speech delivered by Gandhi on 1 August 1920 at Calcutta, spread throughout the length and breadth of the country like wildfire. The very call for non-cooperation with the British Imperialism stirred the nation and infused fresh blood into the struggle for freedom. It gave shape and direction to the national movement after the First World War. The Non-Cooperation Movement cut the representative masks of the British rulers. It encouraged people to throw away the foreign goods and burn their foreign clothes, and made every citizen to rise for the formation of a non-Violent, non-cooperation governed self-rule. The goal was to arouse the consciousness of masses and strengthen the tempo of the freedom struggle, and the same was achieved through the movement as innumerable people were awakened and joined the struggle. The Non-Cooperation Movement, which from the very beginning had social, religious and economic dimensions, also created difference of opinions among the leaders and affected the other stream of the Indian Renaissance. The Non-Cooperation Movement placed the economic development and social upliftment of Indian villages on the desk of many leaders and the all-round upliftment of the masses became their main agenda. The thought of 'Back to the Village' gained immense popularity and many leaders differentiated themselves from the many strands of the Indian National Congress. The Ahamdar Movement and the Khilafat Movement played a very important role in the political, social and religious regeneration of the Muslim community (Rani Sarma Puzari & Mazane, 2001).

Critiques, Controversies, and Limitations

Debate surrounds the Non-Cooperation Movement's efficacy and moral bearings, with both supporters and critics within Congress. Some consider the movement ineffective, arguing it failed to compel a withdrawal of colonial policy beyond pre-war provisioning and heightened repression. Even so, a surge of anger towards colonial rule marked Indian politics, and subsequent campaigns drew inspiration from Gandhian tactics. Others contend that nonviolent action is inherently impractical. Such positions face challenge, however. In the wake of rabid communal hatred, Gandhism had little efficacy. The inherent moral ambiguity of Gandhism as a

military strategy faced opposition even from left-independence circles such as the revolutionary nationalists and B.R. Ambedkar. Internal pressures also bore upon the Non-Cooperation Movement. Moderates objected because it dissipated economic pressures and rekindled British resolve. Others, particularly within the Swarajists, claimed it did not go far enough, and that all forms of administrative cooperation should be withdrawn immediately. The imperial government professed goodwill towards India, and warning against provoking a withdrawal of that goodwill; the demand for swaraj appeared to outstrip the essential need of the moment, which was acceptance of swadeshi, and a sound, disciplined and concentrated campaign against the Blue Book policy. Even in Congress an occasional note of caution was heard.

Legacy and Influences on Liberation Movements

The Non-Cooperation Movement left an indelible mark on subsequent nationalist campaigns and post-colonial reforms (Campbell, 2019). Its appeal to collaboration through shadow state institutions inspired many Indian activists, from rural satyagrahi to Congress leaders. Gandhi's activities during the movement also reverberated beyond Indian borders, influencing the leaders of an emerging global movement toward decolonization for the following half-century. Gandhi's stipulations and satyagraha methods were of particular interest. It was during the Non-Cooperation Movement that he first deployed the famous iconic salt collection. Campaigns from Egypt to Indonesia were specifically modeled on the march, while the parallel colonial imposition of salt taxes and salt laws provided ample further reason for imitation. The final years of the British Raj in diverse colonial settings—such as the Gold Coast and Malaya—witnessed as much effort directed to the satyagraha of symbols such as salt, light, and flowers as to the broader agitation for national self-determination. Even movements toward post-colonial socio-political reconstruction at the dawn of independence often drew on Gandhi's account of pre- and post-Nationalist India, and concurrently sometimes returned to questions of colonial legitimacy similarly engaged during the Non-Cooperation Movement. Assessments of Gandhi's grasp of the contingencies and consequences of the movement's subsequent trajectory were as various as the intended objectives and outcomes of the movement itself. Gandhi emphasised pure means, and especially their wider appeal—or lack thereof—at each stage. Questions of strategic efficacy continued to receive interest across the spectrum of participation throughout the confrontation. The Non-Cooperation Movement remains a reference point for studying mass action; subsequently, the simultaneous operation of several campaigns of non-violent action, and debate over the merits or otherwise of concurrent participant-initiated policies, turned attention back to the early years of Indian independence. The Non-Cooperation Movement represents the entry point into Indian politics for a sociologically literate approach to Gandhi's complex application of, in truth multiple answers to, the question of what constitutes an adequate instructional account of mass mobilization. Which thematic lines drawn in earlier accounts of the movement align with Gandhi's evolving grasp of mobilisation during subsequent confrontations. Which limits to the instruction

offered were initially recognized. And the extent to which those limits combine to shape the instruction itself.

Several methodological lessons are worth bearing in mind for the study of other mass campaigns and of non-violent action more generally. The intense articulation of the contemporary political situation and deliberation on means and ends permit scrutiny of how ordinary participants and even external observers comprehend each. The March 1920 call made available a finite and systematised response in the form of the text, yet, as already noted, it was by no means the starting-point of those participants involved prior to the first declaration of a campaign for independence. Working within a very specific milieu, Gandhi propounded a distinctive series of intermediate objectives, both political and administrative, immediately prior to the movement concerning the first constitutional discussions subsequent to the war. With the Non-Cooperation Movement he situated the consideration squarely within the nationalist project—still formally in the context of Dominion status—as an articulation had not previously sought, and departed from the delineation of interior aspects of earlier stages of that politics with a clarifying set of further guidelines on what constituted a ‘nationalist’ option beyond the ‘unqualified’ prospect offered standardly. The degree of convergence or divergence between approaches to the articulation of mass initiatives and the processes followed in the contexts preceding decisive shifts into action merits separation only for analytical exposition; the relationships, stages and extensions in the chronology multiple and non-linear rather than enclosing, and movements of wider interest occupy centrally the same critical junctures.

Methodological Considerations and Sources

The study employs a variety of sources to assess the Non-Cooperation Movement, relying predominantly on documents produced during the time of the movement from both Indian nationalists and British officials. Following a general survey of the historiography, an overview of the archival materials informing the analysis is provided. The specific records are highlighted to illustrate the nature of the sources drawn upon and their respective advantages as evidence. Finally, an outline of the methodology used to cross-validate and correlate these records is presented. The analysis of the contemporary sources informs the overall interpretation by clarifying the alternatives perceived by those involved. Consideration of the colonial-era documentation requires an understanding of the complex, asymmetric and contested nature of the colonial archive, as well as the challenges in attempting to ‘read’ the archived material. While such an approach enables the examination of official perceptions, it nevertheless presupposes the discursive frame of colonial domination and may disregard the distinct experience and reconstruction of the event by its participants. A further challenge lies in the persistence of a nationalist or sub-nationalist orthodoxy concerning historical events, which periodically tends to saturate the understanding of the past and leaves little sufficient distance from the colonial vision of the movement. Within the framework of the present analysis, key archival material is traced from the central National Archives and supplemented with Government records from a provincial and presidial capital that occupied a

notable position within the historiography of the Non-Cooperation Movement. (Campbell, 2019)

Conclusion

Mahatma Gandhi initially envisioned the Non-Cooperation Movement as a means to revive his earlier successes, engage nationalist groups after the War, and rally widespread public support for constitutional reform. Responding to popular thirst for self-rule, the movement, which took on a distinctly mass character, also directly confronted the British Imperial Establishment. The historical origins of the Non-Cooperation Movement paralleled the Congress demand for dominion status and were rooted in the dislocations and grievances associated with wartime and postwar policies. Political dialogue with the British had failed entirely, nevertheless, and the impact of repression and coercion was deepened by the emergence of an enormous program of civil-disobedience campaigns that aimed to provoke arrest on a large scale. The project of social reconstruction proposed by the Indian National Congress immediately after independence was ultimately more substantive and more visionary than non-cooperation; it focused originally only on the deteriorating situation arising from the Partition of the country and was never generalized to apply across the entire subcontinent (Campbell, 2019) ; (Rani Sarma Puzari & Mazane, 2001)

Acknowledgement

The author expresses sincere gratitude to all those who contributed directly or indirectly to the completion of this research study on the Historical Analysis of Mahatma Gandhi’s Non-Cooperation Movement. The author is especially thankful to the Department of History, Smt. Kasturbai Walchand College of Arts and Science, Sangli, for providing the necessary academic environment and support.

Financial support and sponsorship

Nil.

Conflicts of interest

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

References:

1. Campbell, M. (2019). *Religious Nonviolence: An Analysis of Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King Jr., and Thich Nhat Hanh*.
2. Rani Sarma Puzari, R. & Mazane, K. (2001). *Growth of Indian Nationalism and Germination of Left Wings within the National Congress of India*.
3. Chandra, B. (1989). *India’s struggle for independence*. Penguin Books.
4. Fischer, L. (1950). *The life of Mahatma Gandhi*. Harper & Brothers.
5. Hardiman, D. (2003). *Gandhi in his time and ours: The global legacy of his ideas*. Columbia University Press.
6. Metcalf, B. D., & Metcalf, T. R. (2012). *A concise history of modern India* (3rd ed.). Cambridge University Press.
7. Parel, A. J. (Ed.). (2009). *Gandhi: Hind Swaraj and other writings*. Cambridge University Press.