
British Colonialism In India, Gandhi's Satyagraha As The Indian Version Of Nationalism

As a figure, Gandhi is known worldwide for his call for Indian independence and his movement of civil disobedience directed towards ending British colonization. When put in few words, Gandhi's approach might be under-estimated in its worth by reducing it to the element of non-violent struggle. However, by thoroughly investigating Gandhi's version of nationalism, it appears his approach is more sophisticated than simply being regarded as a mere struggle against British colonialism. Rather, Gandhi's nationalism is a complex ideology with underlying philosophical dimensions. Gandhi believed this new Indian nation-state can be achieved not merely by ending colonization, but through the revision of morality in its general terms. At its core, the nation-state of India, as envisioned by Gandhi, is one built on tolerance, self-development, and self-discipline, explained in more details as the concept of Satyagraha. This paper argues in favour of the philosophical dimension of Gandhi's version of nationalism as being the force behind its success. This paper is divided into three sections. The first section gives a brief overview of the history of British colonialism in India. The second section explores the political situation in India under the British rule as well as the nationalist movements prior to Gandhi's movement. The third section analyses Gandhi's non-violent movement, known as Satyagraha.

British Colonialism in India

The British East India company was set up in India, as a means to repeal the Dutch ownership and monopoly over the spice trade, during the 17th century when the British arrived to India. Eventually, the British East India company's control grew over the Indians, however; their administration and policies were disapproved by the nation which ignited a rebellion against the company. As a result, in 1858, the British shifted the administration to be ruled directly by the Queen. During the English reign, new laws and policies were introduced and assigned over the Indian nation and eventually the entire country was under the British rule. Subsequently, the British introduced modern innovations to India such as broadcasts, postal and transportation services, etc... which were methods of implanting a longer period of British rule. Despite the fact that the British East India company was disapproved by the natives, which was a factor in much of the company's decline, the British administration continued to not answer to the needs and requests of the Indians, resulting in more protests against the British (Amina, 2016, P. 2). Regardless of the Indian attempts to rebel, they were no match for the British enforcements and were immediately put to an end. However, this defeat brought about the birth of the nationalist sentiments into the Indians minds and they were inclined to overthrow the British reign. The British domination lasted more than 200 years and the Indians eventually achieved independence in 1947. It is believed that the rise of Indian nationalism was in correspondence with the worldwide wave of nationalism that swept through the colonized nations. Similarly, the French revolution, alongside the American and Russian revolutions, can be said to had been factors inspiring the different nationalist movements in India (Amina, 2016, P. 2).

Nationalism in India

The notion of nationalism, which was initiated in the 19th century, showed an interrelationship and correspondence with the concept of anti-colonialism. The political, social, and economic aspects play a major role in the unifying of a nation through defining and determining a common goal, such as establishing their own national character. In addition to having a common goal as a nation, fighting a common evil was also a factor in the unity of the people; with the countless threats that colonization poses against a nation, it became a mutual impediment that is ought to be brought down. The British maltreatment and injustice dominated and affected every class. Despite the differences in the consequences faced by the different social groups, overturning the colonizer would be beneficial for all. The British enforcement of rules over various domains in India resulted in a political unity focused on repelling these laws. Along with the political oppression, the apparent economic corruption and the exploitation of the country's resources agitated the people and pushed them towards pursuing their independence (Amina, 2016, P. 4).

Reform movements, such as the social and religious movements, strengthened the patriotic sentiments in India in the 19th century. These movements included many characters, such as Swami Vivekananda, Henry Derozio, and Annie Besant, who were responsible for the reestablishment of India. Their purpose was to regain the people's morale towards their religion and the relishing of their culture, creating a sense of belonging to their homeland thus arousing their nationalism (Amina, 2016, P. 4). Other patriotic points of view included intellectuality and spirituality. These ideologies were presented by Bankim Chandra Chatterji, Aurobindo Ghosh, Swami Dayanand Saraswati and others alike. Figures as such played a major role in the expansion of the nationalist movement in India. With all these means rising, by the 20th century, many organisations were now set up to put an end to the British reign. These organisations, such as the Bengal Indian Association, were very engaged in national activities and situations. However, it is argued that if such organisations cooperated with each other, they would have raised their chances in helping the Indian groups assert their revolting backlash against the British rule (Amina, 2016, P. 5).

Among the numerous reasons for the rise of the Indian nationalist movement, including economic, social, and political injustice and oppression, were the grievances of the educated Indian youths, whose future seemed unpromising as the British occupied all the high posts in what appeared as a monopoly. For these educated youths, the only jobs available were those of lower level like clerical positions of low pay. From within these aggravated youths rose the nationalist sentiments (Saund, 1930, P. 202).

In 1885, the nationalist movement had properly began to voice an organized opinion against the British colonization, and the Indian National Congress held their first conference in Bombay. The Congress consisted of revolutionary nationalist members from all around the country. Initially, their meetings were insignificant and had minor effect on the events occurring in India. However, they became relatively more important as they became recognized by delegates nationwide, and were soon viewed as the responsible board to represent India's political concerns. Over the years, the English reign proved to be oppressive and their intended plans were disadvantageous for all Indians alike. The nationalists soon stopped withholding their opposing ideas, and became more daring in the ways of voicing their concerns and showing their disapproval and opposition. The English domination was not moved and continued to resort to oppression. Their constant disregard to Indian needs, as well as their unlawful claim of the country's resources, motivated the Indian nationalists to bestir the more literate groups, the previously mentioned educated youths. This way, the educated would also engross themselves into the political situation and understand their standings and act upon it (Saund, 1930, P. 206).

It is notable to mention the reformation efforts in 1909 by Lord Minto and John Morley, then head figures for the state in India. A few nationalist leaders approved of the reforms, describing it as “considerate”. However, the general public viewed them as incompetent and lacking true change in general. As a result, however, several governmental roles became vacant and, for the first time, accessible for Indians (Saund, 1930, P. 207).

Gandhi’s Satyagraha as the Indian version of Nationalism

Since Gandhi opposed the invasion of the European civilisation of India, he believed the movement had to be carried out by those who were the least affected by westernization. Indian villages, over the centuries, had already established and adopted their version of an authentic civilization. Gandhi believed that the European civilization called for following one’s individualistic aspirations and self-interests as opposed to the Indian villagers’ culture, which tend to subscribe to a traditional pattern which involves a more communal goal dictated by the common good. Gandhi’s approach that included the Indian villagers would require him to use peaceful means. The reasoning for his choice of the Indian peasantry stemmed from his belief that the peasants were not conditioned to use violence and were naturally not aggressive. Gandhi believed the peasants were not conditioned to the use of force and that this form of aggression was of foreign nature, in specific western. In other words, Gandhi believed that violence was generally a feature of the European civilization and was far away from the Indian cultural norms, manifested the most in the Indian villages by the Indian peasants (Mukherjee, 2009, P. 35).

The Salt March highlighted how well-articulated Gandhi’s plan was. He wrote letters to villages that would be marched through, requesting statistical information in regards to the demographics in each village, their overall population, the religious backgrounds as well as genders. Furthermore, in defense of Gandhi’s unique strategy, he even included research into the statistics of the livestock and economical rates as well as prices of land (Gandhi, 2007, P. 4). During the Salt March, the methods used were in the form of passive strikes, governmental insubordination and boycotting as well as many other peaceful measures, which were all embraced by the followers of Satyagraha. What further distinguishes Gandhi the nationalist from many other Indian nationalists of the time is the fact Gandhi was a philosopher who gave deeper meanings to the traditional nationalist wave, hence giving it impetus to be rooted in the minds of its followers. Along the philosophical dimension, other dimensions were introduced by Gandhi, such as the struggle against not colonialism alone but against racism as well as exploitation, sexism, and religious discrimination. In the core of Satyagraha lies the truth, as Gandhi believed, and the path to which is the Ahimsa, non-violence (Akella, 2009, P. 504).

For Gandhi, Ahimsa is not simply about non-violence, but indeed it was the only means to reach the truth, and that truth was as superior as God (Bhaneja, 2007, P. 215). He demonstrates the building blocks of the political non-violent movement, Satyagraha, in his autobiography as being the instrument of truth (Bhaneja, 2007, P. 216). For Ahimsa to manifest, morality and purity of soul are needed elements. Ahimsa also entailed that it is integral to not confuse those who act aggressively and their actions. The element contested is the action itself and not its actor. This highlights the main path of Ahimsa as being directed at unjust actions rather than the individuals behind them, so that the movement is not driven by passion or hatred of individuals but rather by the cause for which it originated (Bhaneja, 2007, P. 217).