



Civil Disobedience Movement in Colonial Punjab

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Abstract

The purpose of the study is to investigate the role of Punjabis in the Civil Disobedience Movement. The research examines the breaking of the salt law under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi. The research paper analyses the establishment of the Sabhas, Societies, Leagues in the support of the movement. It examines the activities of *satyagrahis* of picketing and boycott the foreign cloth, non-payment of the taxes and more focuses to popularize *Swadeshi*. The research evaluates the participation of political parties, religious groups and prominent personalities of Punjab in the movement. It will critically analyzed the British repression and suppression policies against the freedom fighters. It will scrutinized at what extent the Civil Disobedience Movement successful.

Keywords: *Dandi March, Ryotwari, Khudai Khidmatgar, Satyagraha, Daska Morcha*

The whole country was agog with excitement over the Civil Disobedience Movement. All eyes were turned towards the Sabarmati Ashrams, for Gandhi alone would determine the hour, place and the precise issue on which the Civil Disobedience Campaign for manufacturing salt would start. Dandi, a village on the sea-coast in Gujarat about 200 miles from Sabarmati to break the salt-law was decided. He wrote a long letter to the Viceroy, Lord Irwin, on 2nd March 1930, communicating this decision. After enumerating evils done by the British Government more or less on the lines indicated by his 'Eleven Points', he announced that if his letter made no appeal to the Viceroy's heart to the extent of removing the evils of British rule enumerated by him, he would proceed with his followers to disregard the salt laws on the eleventh day of March. He also asked for an interview, but Lord Irwin refused to see Mahatma Gandhi and regretted that he should have 'contemplating a course of action which was clearly bound to involve violation of the law and danger to the public peace'. The die was cast and there was no retreat.¹

On the eve of epic march, Mahatma Gandhi gave detailed instructions to people about what they should do when he is arrested, an event that he clearly foresaw. The gist of his instructions was that people should never resort to violence but keep the fight going with full faith in the efficacy of truth and non-violence. He exhorted that everyone should become a votary of *satyagraha*. He added that a votary of *satyagraha* should find himself in one of the states, in prison or in an analogue state, engaged in civil disobedience and under orders at the spinning wheel or at some constructive work advancing *Swaraj*. So, he contemplated that the

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movement he was launching with the march to Dandi for breaking the salt law was the great beginning of a great movement for a fight to the finish.ⁱⁱ

Mahatma Gandhi chose salt for *satyagraha* because it symbolized exploitation of India. In 1836, the Government had appointed a Salt Commissioner. It recommended that Indian salt should be taxed and through this made costlier in order to enable salt from England to be sold in India. The duty symbolized exploitation of India, for the benefit of the ruling power. Gandhiji pointed out to the Viceroy that the salt tax was the most iniquities of all from the standpoint of vast majority of Indians who were poor. So, the salt campaign was symbolic of the revolt of the then 31 *crores* of Indians against a law which was detrimental to their interests and which was imposed by an alien power.ⁱⁱⁱ

Mahatma Gandhi's Dandi March (12th March-6th April) from Sabarmati to the sea through the heartland of Gujarat with asrama members drawn from all parts of India attracted enormous publicity and attention from the entire country and even world-wide. Wholesale illegal manufacture and auctioning of salt should begin, Gandhiji declared on 11th March, after he had himself violated the law at Dandi. It could be accompanied by boycott of foreign cloth and liquor and indeed 'everyone would have a free hand; subject to the pledges of non-violence and truth after his own arrest though local should be obeyed. The existence, right from the beginning, of pressures from below was vividly revealed as village officials began to resign their posts all along Gandhi's route and on 19th March Patidars of Ras (in Borsal taluk of Kheda district) demanded permission for starting immediate non-payment of revenue a plea which Mahatma Gandhi accepted with considerable reluctance. In mid-May, after Mahatma Gandhi's arrest, the working committee sanctioned non-payment of revenue in provinces where the *ryotwari* system prevailed, a no *chaukidari* tax campaign in Zamindari provinces and violation of forest laws in the Central Provinces.^{iv}

The leaders of the Congress in the Punjab also took steps to start Civil disobedience. Dr. Satyapal, the General Secretary of Provincial Congress made an appeal to the people to enrol themselves as member of the Congress. The provincial unit of the All India Hindustan Seva Dal was inaugurated to enrol members and train them for national service. The Congress decided to hold a *satyagraha* conference at Gujranwala. Batches of volunteers from all sides of the province were required to march to Gujranwala and were expected to reach their destination on April 6th when Gandhiji was scheduled to break the salt law at Dandi. The programme evoked good response. About six thousand delegates attended the conference. The Punjab government, nevertheless, contended that the Congress received a setback at Gujranwala Conference. The conference decided to start Civil Disobedience Movement in the province on April 13th by breaking the Salt law. A war council was also setup to organize the work of civil disobedience in the province. The salt law was broken first at Lahore on April 11th. A procession headed by Dr. Muhammad Alam and Dr. Satyapal went through the city and across the Ravi bridge where some process of making salt out of saline earth was gone through. It was manufactured at the Jallianwala Bagh under the leadership of Dr. Kitchlew and Chaudhari Afzal Haq. Similar attempts were made at several places in the province.^v

Some of the politicians like Sir Tej Bahadur Sapru and Mohammad Ali warned of the danger of the situation. E. Villiers, president of Calcutta's European Association, saw Lord Irwin on 21st April and told him that the Government's decision of arresting Mahatma Gandhi was generating a dangerous atmosphere in Calcutta. Other news from Bengal was even more disquieting. On the night of 18th April, the Chittagong group of the *Jugantar* terrorist party successfully raided the police and auxiliary force armours was clearly a well-planned and well financed operation. Other provinces reported serious clashes between police and public as a result of arrests of salt *satyagraha* leaders. One of the worst occurred in Karachi on 16th April when a crowd of 7-8 thousand broke into the compound of the city Magistrate's court where six Sind leaders were being tried the police fired, killing two people.^{vi}

The remnants of Hindustan Socialist Republican Association once again became active in the Punjab. About 26 incidents were reported in 1930. Even more alarming perhaps from the British point of view was the popular upsurge in Peshawar, capital of the traditionally sensitive border area of North-West Frontier Province. Abdul Gaffar Khan, son of a prosperous village chief of Utmanzai near Peshawar had started educational and social reform work among his Pathan countrymen from 1912, deriving inspiration successively from the Deoband Muslim nationalist group, the Khilafat Movement and the modernistic reforms of Amir Amanallah (the Afghan King whose progressive and pro-soviet policies led to his overthrow in 1928). Badshah Khan as he was coming to be known by the mid-1920s started the first Pushto political monthly *Pakhtun* in May 1928 and organized in the next year a volunteer brigade *Khudai Khidmatgar* which wore red shirts because they got less soiled on village tours. By 1929, Ghaffar Khan had become a disciple of Mahatma Gandhi. The creed of non-violence helped to mitigate the traditional blood-feuds among Pathans and as elsewhere served as a check on internal social tensions (for the *Khudai Khidmatgar* included small and middling land-lords, tenant farmers, as well as poor peasants and agricultural labourers). After the Lahore Congress which Gaffar Khan attended with a large contingent of Pathans, membership of the *Khudai Khidmatgar* shot up from 500 to 50,000 in six months and a government communiqué on 5th May 1930 also alleged a certain amount of communistic activity in the villages around Peshawar by a local branch of the Naujawan Bharat Sabha. The arrest of Badshah Khan and a number of other leaders on 23rd April led to a massive upsurge in Peshawar with crowds confronting around cars and defying intensive firing for three hours at Kissakhani Bazar.^{vii}

The Punjab Congress now decided to send regular batches of volunteers to Peshawar from different parts of the Punjab. In pursuance of the resolution passed by the Punjab War Council, Master Tara Singh also led an Akali Jatha from Amritsar on May 10th, 1930. It was followed by more shahidi jathas. But most of the volunteers were arrested before they could reach the boundaries of the North-West Frontier Province. There were hartals, processions and meetings in various towns of the province to protest against it.^{viii}

The Sikhs also participated in large numbers in Civil Disobedience Movement. According to Master Tara Singh, out of 7000 *satyagrahis* who were convicted in Punjab, there were 3000 Sikhs. Duni Chand, a Congress leader from Punjab also admits that the Sikh community has perhaps sent proportionally the largest number to jail and has made glorious sacrifices. The news of the firing at the Sisganj Gurdwara at Delhi by the police gave a new turn to the Civil Disobedience Movement among the Sikhs wrote De Montgomery, Governor of Punjab. He further wrote 'The repercussion of this fixing at the Sisganj Gurdawara at Delhi on the Sikhs had been very unfortunate. I am afraid it has brought in lot of extremist Sikhs agitating for the independence cause. We shall now have to deal with the whole extreme wing.' According to K. L. Tuteja, however, the Sikh participation in the Civil Disobedience Movement was limited as well as cautious. The loyalist Sikhs formed new bodies like Amn Sabha and Sikh Sudhar Committees to hamper the spread of Civil Disobedience Movement in the Sikh community. Another straw came over the question of flag which was used by Baba Kharak Singh and his allies to prevent the Sikhs from joining the Gandhian Movement. Even the Sisganj firing which once blazed the sky, failed to generate the fire of opposition in the Sikh community against the government and gradually lost force. Another answer to why Sikhs did not join in large numbers in the Civil Disobedience Movement can be sought in their continued obsession with the question of communal representation. The minority psychosis of Sikhs impelled them to think more in terms of adequate representation than the bigger issues like Civil Disobedience Movement.^{ix}

After Mahatma Gandhi's arrest, the scope of civil disobedience was extended. The provincial Congress Committees were instructed to start no tax campaign by non-payment of special taxes.^x The beginning according to this, could be made by non-payment of land tax in provinces where the *Ryotwari* system prevailed. The Punjab with a large number of peasant proprietors paid the land tax direct to the Government. Some sporadic efforts were made to start a no-tax campaign in eighty villages in Sheikhpura. But when their leaders were arrested, the movement collapsed. Similarly, at Jandiala Guru, lorry drivers and *ekkawalas* refused to pay municipal tax. But, as conceded by the Punjab Congress leadership no serious effort

was made in the province to start no tax-campaign. The Punjab Provincial Congress Committee also took steps to implement the Congress resolution on the boycott of Councils. Consequently, in pursuance of the resolution, a meeting of the Provincial Congress Committee was held in Lahore on August 25th, 1930. It decided to send deputation of the Congress workers to each candidate to persuade his to withdraw his candidature. If any candidate did not accept the request of the deputation then the request would be repeated in a public meeting. But in case he was adamant, peaceful demonstrations were to be held against his candidature. The response of the Punjabi legislators to the resolution of the Congress Working Committee appealing them to boycott the legislatures was very poor. Only two members of the Punjab Council, Bodh Raj and Chaudhari Afzal Haq resigned. It may be added that among the Provincial Councils, Bengal led with 34 resignations followed by Bihar and Orissa with 31 each. Picketing of the polling booths was also decided upon by the Punjab Provincial Congress Committee. A joint meeting of the Central Sikh League and the Shiromani Akali Dal was held at Lahore. It resolved to boycott the forthcoming elections in obedience to the Congress mandate.^{xi}

The Provincial Government initially observed caution in dealing with Civil Disobedience Movement. Not many arrests were made for the violation of the salt law or for picketing mostly under the impression that the movement would die its natural death. But by the end of May, the *satyagrahis* in the Punjab were arrested. This resulted in the intensification of the struggle. Consequently, the number of arrests rose and continued to rise. Till the suspension of the movement about seven thousand persons had been arrested.^{xii} The response was massive. In the first four months, over 80,000 *satyagrahis* most of them urban and rural poor were jailed while lakhs took to the picketing of shops selling liquor and foreign cloth. Illegal gatherings, non-violent demonstration, celebrations of various national days and other forms of defiance of the ordinances were the rule of the day.^{xiii}

In Amritsar, arrests of first batch of volunteers as well as internal Congress factions and personal rivalries combined to delay the Congress activities. Picketing, however was ultimately started on 28th January, 1932 in the Krishna Cloth Market, Gokal Cloth Market and Katra Ahluwalia. Like Lahore, in Amritsar too ladies and students took part in picketing and boycott activities. As mentioned earlier, as a result of the decision of the Shrimani Akali Dal on 24th February 1932, and the settlement of the Daska dispute between the Hindus and the Sikhs gave an impetus to the movement and it made local authorities uneasy as it diverted Akali volunteers from the 'Daska' morcha to the Civil Disobedience Movement. Picketing in Sheikhpura resulted in cloth merchants unanimously deciding to stop all trade in foreign cloth. At Gujranwala, the cloth merchants agreed to stop the sale of foreign cloth from 7th February, 1932. Side by side with the boycott of foreign cloth, efforts were made to popularize *Swadeshi* also. At Lahore, Punjab Swadeshi League was formed with Lala Kanshi Ram Vaid as president and Lala Gobind Ram Khanna as General Secretary. Lala Gobind Rama Khanna toured the various districts and branches of the League were established at Amristar, Ferozpur, Ambala, Okara and Motgomery. Swadeshi Parcharani Sabhas were formed at Lahore and Amritsar with the object of doing *swadeshi* propaganda work. A Buy India League was formed at Okara to propagate the cult of *swadeshi* with Mr. Vidya Sagar as President and Lala Bhagmal Sehgal as Secretary. At Ferozpur in January 1932, batches of volunteers used to parade through the city bazars and lanes every evening urging the people to use *khaddar* and *swadeshi* articles. The National Volunteers Corps and organized processions at Amritsar to preach the use of *khaddar* and other Indian made articles. At Lahore, students union decided to celebrate the *swadeshi* week from 12th May to 18th May 1932.^{xiv}

The concerns of the congressmen after the Gandhi-Irwin Pact and the abortive Second Round Table Conference were now riveted primarily to the Communal Award of 1932 followed by the Government of India Act of 1935. The Congress for fear of displeasing Muslims had officially adopted a policy of indifference to the Communal Award. The dissatisfaction with the congress stand over the award resulted in the formation of a nationalist party headed by Pt. Madan Mohan Malviya.^{xv}

The Punjab also could not remain unaffected by the political discontentment generated in the country by the Communal Award. The Hindus and the Sikhs had denounced it in a body in the Punjab. The award was a bitter blow of the Sikhs. In the Round Table Conference, Mahatma Gandhi had strenuously opposed the idea of separate electorate for the Depressed Classes and said that he would resist it with his life. On 11th March, 1932, he had written to Sir Samuel Hoare that if the Depressed Classes were granted separate electorate he would fast unto death. True to this resolve Gandhi wrote to the Prime Minister on 18th August 1932 that he would commence the fast on 20th September and it would cease if only the Scheme were revised and a common electorate restored.^{xvi}

In the meantime, Congress decided to hold its annual session in Delhi on 24th April, 1932. The Government however decided not to allow the Congress to hold its annual session. Pandit Madan Malviya, President designate, was arrested on 23rd April 1932. Commenting on the holding of the Session, the *Tribune* stated that the session was a battle of wits between the police and the Congressmen, the former bent on preventing the Congress session from being held and the latter determined to hold it. The Congressmen, however, despite extraordinary precautions taken by the police, staged the open session of the Congress at Clock Tower, Delhi. The session lasted only for ten to fifteen minutes when the police surrounded all the delegates and arrested them.^{xvii}

Deputy Commissioners, Superintendents of Police and all Police Officers all over the Province were authorized to take action under Section 3 of the Emergency Powers Ordinance for arresting persons intending to participate in the Congress Session. The arrests were made at Amritsar, Rawalpindi, Lyallpur and Ferozepur. About one hundred Akalis were arrested at Delhi. At Amritsar, under the Emergency Powers Ordinance, restraint orders were issued to Smt. Kartar Kaur, Smt. Lakshami and Smt. Atma Devi. They were directed not to participate in any political activities. About sixty persons were arrested on 4th June, 1932, the day of the Conference of the Indian National Congress. A large number of delegates to the Conference were sentenced to various terms of Imprisonments. The Congress after Mahatma Gandhi's return from London found itself in a not too happy situation. The Civil Disobedience was still being continued but it had lost its earlier fire, appeal and enthusiasm. Thus gradually in spite of occasional sparks and flashes the Movement slowly petered out before it was officially called off by Mahatma Gandhi in May 1933. The disappointment caused in many quarters was understandable and among those who became critical of Gandhi's policy and leadership was Subhash Chandra Bose, a prominent leader of the Congress left wing. The flames of the Civil Disobedience Movement died down in 1934 but the burning embers of the Punjab sentiments remained for a long time hot and unquenchable as their will to freedom.^{xviii}

The Congress revitalized the party during Civil Disobedience Movement. It was however no match for the Unionist leaders Fazl-i-Hussian in particular who effectively organized Muslim opinion against Civil Disobedience. On the whole, most Unionist leaders both as a policy and individually opposed the Congress by using all tactics against the movement. In the South-East Punjab for instance, Chhotu Ram carried anti-Congress propaganda in the countryside warning that non-payment of land revenue would provide opportunity to the Government to confiscate their lands.^{xix}

In Punjab, the Congress efforts at that time to expand its social base by enrolling new members failed to produce favourable results. It carried the mass struggle as decided by the AICC, after constituting a War Council which included representatives from different sections of society. The movement was strong in Lahore, Amritsar and some other towns of Central Punjab but it was weak in Multan and Rawalpindi of the North-West Region. The civil disobedience programme also did not attract the attention of the Punjabi legislature to the same extent. Only two members from the Punjab Council, Bodh Raj and Chaudhri Afzal had resigned in comparison to Bengal where there were 34 resignations.^{xx} On the whole, we can still say that despite the Unionist Party's support to the British, a sizeable section of all the three communities- Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs were pitted against the British during the period in the movement of Civil Disobedience.^{xxi}

Conclusion

The Civil Disobedience Movement of Mahatma Gandhi affected Punjab also where people believed in action and thought was second consideration for them. The people of Punjab followed Mahatma Gandhi doctrine of Civil Disobedience but in practice when they went on disobedience the government used repression, repressive laws and every means to crush the movement. The people lost their temper and their basic character as it automatically turned them to violence. The fact is that the civil disobedience who participated in the movement many times indulged in acts of violence. Their martial characteristics often come out in the open. There occurred cases of violence, arson and sabotage. On the whole it can be summed up that Civil Disobedience Movement was not as successful in the Punjab as was Non-Cooperation Movement. A large number of groups did not join the movement. It remained confined to Congress. The large number of Sikhs under the guidance of Master Tara Singh joined the movement. There were however many Sikh groups especially of Baba Kharak Singh boycotted the movement. The Akali participation remained limited. Muslims also did not join the movement on the whole Civil Disobedience Movement could not attract many Punajbis.



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