

UNIT 14 – UPSC - Salt Satyagraha & First Round Table Conference

India's History : Modern India : Civil Disobedience movement continues; Salt Satyagraha: Gandhiji's Dandi March; First Round Table Conference : 1930

The 1930 Salt March



Gandhi began a new campaign in 1930, the Salt Satyagraha. Gandhi and his followers set off on a 200-mile journey from Ashram Ahmedabad to the Arabian Ocean where Gandhi wanted to pick up a few grains of salt. This action formed the symbolic focal point of a campaign of civil disobedience in which the state monopoly on salt was the first target. Prior to the beginning of the action, Gandhi sent a letter to the Lord Lieutenant "Dear Friend. Whilst, therefore, I hold the British rule to be a curse, I do not intend harm to a single Englishman or to any legitimate interest he may have in India. My ambition is nothing less than to bring round the English people through non-violence to recognize the injustice they have done to India. I do not intend to be offensive to your people. Indeed, I would like to serve your people as I would my own."

Yet the Lord Lieutenant didn't even reply personally to his letter. Gandhi held his last prayer meeting on the evening of the 11th of March 1930. "There can be no turning back for us hereafter. We will keep on our fight till swaraj is established in India. Those of them that are married should take leave of their wives. We are as good as parting from the Ashram and from our homes. --- Let nobody assume that after I am arrested there will be no one left to guide them. It is not I but Pandit Jawaharlal who is your guide. He has the capacity to lead."

It was hoped that this action would spread across India. Wherever possible, civil disobedience was to be used to counter the salt laws. It was illegal to manufacture salt, regardless of the location. The possession and trading of smuggled salt (natural salt or salt earth) was also illegal. Anyone caught selling smuggled salt was liable to prosecution. To collect salt from the natural deposits at the coast was also illegal.

Gandhi had a large group of well-trained Satyagrahi available to him; as well trained in observation as they were in spreading propaganda among the masses. They were bound by a joint pledge and by the principles of the "Ashram in Exodus", which encompassed three points: prayer, spinning and keeping a diary. They wore uniform clothing (a sort of Khaki uniform) and wore the headwear of prisoners.



After a 24-hour long march to the Indian Ocean, Gandhi picked up a few pieces of salt - a signal to the rest of the sub-continent to do the same. This raw material was carried inland before being processed on the roofs of houses in pans and then sold. Over 50,000 Indians were imprisoned for breaking the salt laws. The entire protest was carried out almost without violence. Indeed, it was this that annoyed the police.

A report from the English journalist, Webb Miller, who witnessed one of the clashes, has become a classic description of the way in which Satyagraha was carried out at the forefront of the battle lines. 2,500 volunteers advanced on the salt works of Dhrasana:

"Gandhi's men advanced in complete silence before stopping about one-hundred meters before the cordon. A selected team broke away from the main group, waded through the ditch and neared the barbed-wire fence. Receiving the signal, a large group of local police officers suddenly moved towards the advancing protestors and subjected them to a hail of blows to the head delivered from steel-covered Lathis (truncheons). None of the protestors raised so much as an arm to protect themselves against the barrage of blows. They fell to the ground like pins in a bowling alley. From where I was standing I could hear the nauseating sound of truncheons impacting against unprotected skulls. The waiting main group moaned and drew breath sharply at each blow. Those being subjected to the onslaught fell to the ground quickly writhing unconsciously or with broken shoulders. The main group, which had been spared until now, began to march in a quiet and determined way forwards and were met with the same fate. They advanced in

a uniform manner with heads raised - without encouragement through music or battle cries and without being given the opportunity to avoid serious injury or even death. The police attacked repeatedly and the second group was also beaten to the ground. There was no fight, no violence; the marchers simply advanced until they themselves were knocked down."

Following their action, the men in uniform, who obviously felt unprotected with all their superior equipment of violence, could think of nothing better to do than that which seems to overcome uniformed men in similar situations as a sort of "natural" impulse: If they were unable to break the skulls of all the protesters, they now set about kicking and aiming their blows at the genitals of the helpless on the ground. "For hour upon hour endless numbers of motionless, bloody bodies were carried away on stretchers", according to Webb Miller.

What did the Satyagrahi achieve? Neither was the salt works taken, nor was the Salt Act in its entirety formally lifted. But the world began to realize that this was not the point. The Salt Satyagraha had demonstrated to the world the almost flawless use of a new instrument of peaceful militancy.

First Round Table Conference



The Indian political community received the Simon Commission Report issued in June 1930 with great resentment. Different political parties gave vent to their feelings in different ways.

The Congress started a Civil Disobedience Movement under Gandhi's command. The Muslims reserved their opinion on the Simon Report declaring that the report was not final and the matters should be decided after consultations with the leaders representing all communities in India.

The Indian political situation seemed deadlocked. The British government refused to contemplate any form of self-government for the people of India. This caused frustration amongst the masses, who often expressed their anger in violent clashes.

The Labor Government returned to power in Britain in 1931, and a glimmer of hope ran through Indian hearts. Labor leaders had always been sympathetic to the Indian cause. The government decided to hold a Round Table Conference in London to consider new

constitutional reforms. All Indian politicians; Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs and Christians were summoned to London for the conference.

Gandhi immediately insisted at the conference that he alone spoke for all Indians, and that the Congress was the party of the people of India. He argued that the other parties only represented sectarian viewpoints, with little or no significant following.

The first session of the conference opened in London on November 12, 1930. All parties were present except for the Congress, whose leaders were in jail due to the Civil Disobedience Movement. Congress leaders stated that they would have nothing to do with further constitutional discussion unless the Nehru Report was enforced in its entirety as the constitution of India.

Almost 89 members attended the conference, out of which 58 were chosen from various communities and interests in British India, and the rest from princely states and other political parties. The prominent among the Muslim delegates invited by the British government were Sir Aga Khan, Quaid-i-Azam, Maulana Muhammad Ali Jouhar, Sir Muhammad Shafi and Maulvi Fazl-i-Haq. Sir Taj Bahadur Sapru, Mr. Jaikar and Dr. Moonje were outstanding amongst the Hindu leaders.

The Muslim-Hindu differences overcasted the conference as the Hindus were pushing for a powerful central government while the Muslims stood for a loose federation of completely autonomous provinces. The Muslims demanded maintenance of weightage and separate electorates, the Hindus their abolition. The Muslims claimed statutory majority in Punjab and Bengal, while Hindus resisted their imposition. In Punjab, the situation was complicated by inflated Sikh claims.

Eight subcommittees were set up to deal with the details. These committees dealt with the federal structure, provincial constitution, franchise, Sindh, the North West Frontier Province, defense services and minorities.

The conference broke up on January 19, 1931, and what emerged from it was a general agreement to write safeguards for minorities into the constitution and a vague desire to devise a federal system for the country.