
Gandhi's politics: The experiment with nonviolence

This article began as a talk by Menejeah Moradian titled "Gandhi and nonviolent civil disobedience" at the International Socialist Organization's Socialist Summer School 2000 in Chicago. The text, revised and expanded by Moradian and David Whitehouse, appeared in print as "Gandhi and the politics of nonviolence" in the October–November 2000 issue of the International Socialist Review. The version printed here reflects further revisions made by David Whitehouse in September 2001.

THE IDEAS of Mahatma Gandhi have had a lasting impact on the left, from the civil rights movement of the 1960s right through to the movements against corporate greed and racism that are developing today. Many see Gandhi as the embodiment of politically-effective pacifism.

The success of his nonviolent strategy, however, is largely a myth.

The most common version of the Gandhi myth is the simple assertion that a struggle based on pacifism forced the British out of India. Martin Luther King Jr. expressed this view many times when explaining the methods of the Civil Rights movement he led:

This method was made famous in our generation by Gandhi, who used it to free his country from the domination of the British Empire.¹

King believed that

Gandhi was inevitable. If humanity is to progress, Gandhi is inescapable. He lived, thought and acted, inspired by the vision of humanity evolving toward a world of peace and harmony. We may ignore Gandhi at our own risk.²

This view of Gandhi's contributions has lent credibility to the principle of nonviolence in the fights against injustice around the world since then.

But the Indian revolt against British rule was anything but nonviolent. Gandhi's tactical ideas, moreover, had serious limitations as a guide to struggle. Movements that began under Gandhi's sponsorship often ended in premature retreats or escalated into physical confrontations. And the final ouster of the British in 1947 can't be counted as a victory for Gandhi's methods, since India's independence came as the movement was showing Gandhi and his nonviolent philosophy to the political margins.

Gandhi, nevertheless, did make major contributions to the movement. Most crucial was his success in leading masses of people into struggle against British rule—something he did better than any other Indian leader. But while Gandhi's leadership was the spark for some major struggles, it was not their cause. The struggles arose from real, deep grievances against British rule, and the masses, once mobilized, showed repeat-

edly that they were willing to adopt militant tactics when non-violent ones didn't work.

To understand the grievances and the struggles they inspired, we have to look at the background of British colonial rule.

"India must be bled"

To the British conquerors, India was a source of profits and a base for military operations—using Indian troops—from Africa to Indonesia. From the early stages of conquest in the late eighteenth century, the British began setting up taxation to finance their presence and to send money home.³ As early as 1765, when the British East India Company first took over the northeastern region known as Bengal, the company also set up monopolies on common necessities like salt.⁴

These monopolies bred resentment and rebellion in the next two centuries. But the British innovation that brought misery to millions was the imposition of market relations—the cash economy—in agriculture.

The first step in introducing cash relations was to tax all the land. As the British replaced the crumbling Mughal empire, they took over and greatly expanded the Mughal system of land-revenue, which had been based on local tax collectors known as *zamindars*. In Bengal, the British nearly doubled the Mughals' rate of land taxation over the course of three decades.⁵ They pressed on with the increases even as an estimated one-third of the Bengali population died from famine in 1770–71. Lord Charles Cornwallis, Bengal's next governor-general, noted that large areas rich farmland had reverted to jungle because peasants had abandoned it.⁶

Ultimately, Cornwallis crafted a deal with the *zamindars* to stabilize Bengali agriculture and to guarantee steady revenue. The deal, struck in 1793 and known as the "Permanent Settlement," specified that land taxes in Bengal and neighboring Bihar would stop increasing and that *zamindars* would be allowed to help themselves to 10 percent of the revenues.

In most places outside the Permanent Settlement, and especially in the South, the British instituted direct taxation.⁷ Around the southeast coastal city of Madras—a region first officially absorbed by the British in 1801—the initial tax rate was 45 percent of the produce of the soil. In later decades the British reduced the rate to a still-ruinous maximum of 33 percent.⁸

Peasants throughout British-ruled India now needed to sell a major portion of their produce on the market to raise cash to pay the taxes. By 1860, this market began to spread throughout British India, facilitated by a new railway system whose first tracks were laid in 1853 to connect the western port city of Bombay to inland towns.⁹ The railways carried cotton, food grains, and indigo to ships that were ultimately bound for Britain and other markets.¹⁰ The Suez Canal, completed in 1869 and directly controlled by the British after 1875, connected the Red Sea to the Mediterranean and greatly sped up the flow of goods.

The new connections to the world market had a profound effect on the villages. Social power shifted decisively to the moneyed classes, including *zamindars* and moneylenders—often the same people—who, backed by British legal guarantees of their property rights, began to buy up large tracts of land. Ownership allowed them to charge rent to peasant culti-

vators on top of the taxes they extracted.¹¹

Dispossessed peasants became agricultural day laborers, a class that grew from almost nothing in 1852 to 18 percent of the rural population in 1872.¹² By the mid-twentieth century, agricultural proletarians—those who owned no land, or so little land that they had to work for others to survive—made up half of the rural population.¹³

A similar mass confiscation of agricultural wealth had occurred in England in the previous two centuries, a process that Marx had dubbed the “primitive [i.e., initial] accumulation of capital.” But dispossessed Indian peasants could not seek out industrial jobs as English peasants had. England’s head start in industry was allowing it to flood the Indian market with factory goods, and these imports began to crush India’s skilled handicraft industries, including metalworking and—especially—cloth production.¹⁴

The result was to trap the peasants into rural misery and to further expand the rural proletariat with unemployed spinners and weavers.

British rule thus marked a dramatic setback in the material welfare of most Indians. Before conquest, India suffered an average of one major famine every 50 years, but famines or scarcity gripped some part of India for 20 out of the 49 years in the period 1860–1908.¹⁵ The reserves that peasants formerly held to tide themselves over through periods of low rainfall were now routinely being sold to pay rent, debts, and taxes—and shipped out by rail to be consumed overseas. The railroads also ensured widespread uniformity in market prices. As a result, grain shortages in one region caused prices to rise everywhere, thus thrusting the pain of local crop failures onto all of India’s poor.

Since the famines’ immediate cause was the peasants’ financial ruin, these catastrophes only served to speed up the concentration of land in the hands of the rich. What’s more, the British let tens of millions die by refusing to ease up on revenue collections or to return the revenue to the peasants in the form of famine relief. This murderous policy arose partly from a fanatical attachment to *laissez-faire* market economics—and partly from the fear that poor Indians would start to demand relief even when there weren’t famines.¹⁶

Lord Robert Salisbury, British Secretary of State for India and one of the architects of the *laissez-faire* approach to famines, summed up British aims in this period by declaring that “India must be bled.”¹⁷ Karl Marx put some numbers to it:

What the English take from them annually in the form of rent, dividends for railways useless to the Hindoos, pensions for military and civil servicemen, for Afghanistan and other wars, etc. etc.—what they take from them *without any equivalent and quite apart* from what they appropriate to themselves annually *within* India, speaking only of the *value of the commodities* the Indians have *gratuitously* and annually to send over to England, it amounts to *more than the total sum of income of the 60 millions of agricultural and industrial laborers of India! This is a bleeding process, with a vengeance!*¹⁸ [Marx’s emphasis.]

Resistance before Gandhi

Indians did not merely accept this situation. The history of the British *raj* (that is, British rule) is marked by different forms of resistance, including local uprisings of peasants and “tribal” groups.

Up until 1857, however, no movement connected local grievances into an all-India effort to expel the British. Indians were divided from each other by caste, class, religion, language, and region. At the time, the only all-India force that could stand up to the British were the soldiers—known as *sepoys*—in the army. When the *sepoys* rebelled in 1857 against racial and religious abuse, they sparked and linked up to peasant rebellions in north, central, and western India.¹⁹

The revolt was nearly national in scope, but it was not nationalist in consciousness. The revolt’s demands were to expel the British and to return power to local princes—the only legitimate authority the rebels could conceive.²⁰

The rebellion broke down in the face of British repression. As a spontaneous uprising, it lacked planning and coordination. What’s more, the nearer the movement got to the goals of “local control,” the weaker and more divided it was bound to become against British terror.

Thus, although the Sepoy Mutiny was anti-imperial, it was backward-looking. The classes and the consciousness that could carry a truly nationalist movement in the future were only in embryonic stages at the time.

In the wake of the mutiny, the British government took over direct rule of India, replacing the British East India Company’s administration. From then on, viceroys ruled in the name of the British crown, and Queen Victoria promised that Indians would receive—eventually—the same rights as other British subjects.

In the following decades, nationalist politicians arose from the new middle class of Indian lawyers and civil servants that was growing under the British *raj*. To the extent that this class existed in 1857, its members stood aside from the Sepoy Mutiny. They saw their own future connected to modernization, and thus would sooner strive for acceptance as equals in the *raj* than put their fate back into the hands of the princes.

But the nationalist middle class was motivated by more than ambition. In the first place, they saw that the racism that held them back professionally fell even more brutally on other Indians:

For the less fortunate, racism took cruder forms of kicks and blows and shooting “accidents” as the “sahib” disciplined his *punkha* coolie [whose duty was to fan the “sahib” with a palmyra leaf—a *punkha*] or bagged a native by mistake [while hunting]... No less than 81 shooting “accidents” were recorded in the years between 1880 and 1900. White-dominated courts regularly awarded ridiculously light sentences for such incidents, and a glance at contemporary Indian journals or private papers immediately reveals how important such things were for the rise of nationalism.²¹

The middle class could also see the poverty inflicted by British rule—in contrast to the prosperity of England, where many Indian lawyers and civil servants went to school. Many of the students became attracted to ideas of nationalists such as Dadabhai Naoroji (1825–1917), who was living in England and is best known for the “drain of wealth” theory of Indian poverty—the anti-imperialist complement to Salisbury’s “India must be bled.”

In 1885, many of these former students founded the Indian National Congress to press the interests of Indians under the British *raj*.²²

Congress’ methods in its first decades were confined

mostly to petitioning the administration behind closed doors. Even as some nationalists became radicalized enough to demand *swaraj* (home rule), Congress remained an elite affair—a yearly conference dominated by lawyers and professionals. Although Congress became known for increasingly radical speeches, it did not have real roots in other classes—or much concrete achievement to show for itself. In fact, it barely existed between its annual conferences.

One spur to Congress' radicalization was the growth of a tradition of populism within the middle class, which began as urban nationalists responded to outbreaks of peasant resistance to British oppression. These inter-class alliances began to form intermittently even in the years before the foundation of Congress. As early as 1859–60, when Bengali indigo cultivators rose up to resist their virtual enslavement to their landlords (who were primarily British), Calcutta's middle class sprang into action to support the struggle. The Indigo Revolt thus united Hindu and Muslim peasants with Hindu city-dwellers, who took up the peasants' cause in mass meetings, newspaper columns, and law courts.²³

By the late 1890s, populists progressed from supporting roles in peasant movements to positions of direct leadership within them. One such leader in Congress was Bal Gangadhar Tilak (1856–1920), who led peasants in the province of Maharashtra in a successful revenue strike during a famine in 1896.²⁴ In the course of such agitation, Tilak earned the nickname “Lokamanya”—beloved of the people.

The turn to mass agitation reflected a growing impatience with the “mendicant” (begging) methods of the older Congress generation, who became known as “Moderates” after the turn of the twentieth century. Tilak's “Extremist” wing of Congress distinguished itself by its demand for immediate *swaraj*—as opposed to gradual Indianization of the regime—and by its injection of Hindu revivalism into politics. Although the Extremists' main target was the British, some, including Tilak, also supported provocative anti-Islamic campaigns, such as those against the slaughter of cows.²⁵

In their use of religious identification as a mobilizing force in politics—a practice known in India as “communalism”—the Extremists were building on a trend that had caught hold within the middle class in the previous decades. To understand why communalism arose, and to understand why it played a role for a period (roughly 1895–1920) as the most militant expression of resistance to British rule, it is important to recall that Congress' middle-class constituency represented the only section of India's population that was at all Anglicized or secular. Congress spoke English as it pursued its course of making pleas to the British, whose society was evidently superior to India's in scientific knowledge, military prowess, and productive power. And Britain's liberal political principles were attractive, too, even though the British refused, in practice, to apply them in the colonies. The goal of many Congress members was simply to get the British to live up to these principles and thus to extend the benefits of British freedom and prosperity to India. In the process, many became more British than the British in their dress, their speech, their constitutional legalism, and their secular approach to politics.

At the same time, within the same middle class, a realization was growing that the *raj* was not living up to its promises and that, by its nature, it could not. Extremists took the “drain

of wealth” theory, originated by the Moderates, as the key to understanding why the *raj* would never treat Indians as equals. As Tilak said in a 1907 speech:

Pax Britannica has been established in this country in order that a foreign government may exploit the country.... It was an unhappy circumstance that [this] was not realized sooner. We believed in the benevolent intentions of the government, but in politics there is no benevolence. Benevolence is used to sugar-coat the declarations of self-interest.... But soon a change came over us. English education, growing poverty, and better familiarity with our rulers, opened our eyes...especially [those of] the venerable leader [Naoroji, who was] the first to tell us that the drain from the country was ruining it. He went...to England and spent 25 years of his life in trying to convince the English people of the injustice that is being done to us. He worked very hard....

He has come here at the age of 82 to tell us that he is bitterly disappointed.²⁶

Tilak went on to note that the British would be unable to rule without the collaboration of the middle class, including Congress members, who were pacified by their illusions in British intentions. Congress, it seemed, was living up to the words of British historian Thomas Macaulay, who, as an administrator for the British East India Company in the 1830s, had written of the need to cultivate

a class who may be interpreters between us and the millions whom we govern; a class of persons, Indian in blood and color, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect.²⁷

Fired by the realization of Congress' unwitting complicity in propping up British rule, the Extremists pioneered the tactics of “passive resistance” (non-cooperation) that Gandhi would take up later—boycott of British goods and institutions, non-payment of taxes, etc.

But this turn in tactics also required the Extremists to make a decisive shift away from the elite style of politics that focused on appeals to the British—toward the populist style that consistently sought out new allies among ordinary Indians. In this task of making anti-British connections with peasants and workers—or with as-yet unpoliticized sections of the middle class—English words and manners could only get in the way. The Extremists thus used vernacular languages and indigenous symbolism in their agitation, including appeals to local heroes, to regional history and myths—and to religious solidarity. Tilak was a sincere Hindu, but admitted that his real reason for using religion in politics was opportunistic; it was effective in motivating people.²⁸ Others were genuine Hindu fanatics, including a generation of anti-British terrorists who formed a “revolutionary” flank of assassins and bombers outside Congress in the period from 1900–20.

However effective Hindu-based nationalism was in some mobilizations, it alienated ordinary Muslims and left them out of the movement. What's more, it provided an opening for reactionary well-to-do Muslims to pose as defenders of Muslim interests and to forge an alliance with the *raj*. In 1906, Lord Minto, viceroy of India, received a delegation of Muslim nobles and landholders and gave them what they came for: an assurance that the administration would recognize them as the voice of India's Muslims, who made up 20 to 25 percent of the population. The two parties struck the deal, of course, without consulting most Muslims, who, as peasants, were exploited by

both the landholders and the British state. The delegation promptly founded the Muslim League.²⁹

The meaning of the meeting with Minto, said a British official with a bit of optimistic exaggeration, was “nothing less than the pulling back of 62 million of people from joining the ranks of the seditious opposition.”³⁰

The British willingly granted the Muslim League its main demands: reserved positions for Muslims in government jobs and separate Muslim electorates to choose representatives in any elected councils. The demand for affirmative action reflected an underrepresentation of Muslims in government service, but not because Muslims were relatively more “backward” or oppressed than Hindus. In fact, Muslims were scattered through all classes—though unevenly in different regions—and, by 1921, had higher overall literacy rates than Hindus.³¹ The Muslims’ lag in getting government jobs arose from the fact that Muslim population was concentrated in inland areas, while the pattern of British conquest had been to control the coastal areas for decades before they moved inland. Despite their presence in all classes, Muslims were weakest in the industrial bourgeoisie, so the relative political power of landowners was greater among Muslims than among Hindus.³²

Within Congress, Muslims and other minorities (including the Zoroastrians known as Parsis) worked harmoniously with Hindus. In fact, Muhammad Ali Jinnah (1875–1948), who later led the Muslim League’s drive for a separate Pakistan, married a Parsi in his early years—and served as Tilak’s defense counsel in a show trial in 1908.

The trial, which took place in Bombay, also marked a new breakthrough in connecting the official national movement to popular struggle. In the wake of terrorist attacks on British officials in Bengal, Tilak had written an article declaring that, while he did not advocate terrorism, he understood that the ultimate cause of the attacks was British oppression. The British convicted him of treason for publishing the article, and workers in Bombay struck in protest. They mounted a six-day strike, one day for each year of the Lokamanya’s sentence. The strike affected 76 of Bombay’s 85 textile mills and a railway workshop.³³

The strike marked the emergence of the working class as a force in politics. In a contemporary article on political struggles around the world, Russian revolutionary V.I. Lenin noted the strike and wrote:

In India, too, the proletariat has already developed to conscious political mass struggle—and that being the case, the Russian-style British regime in India is doomed!... The class-conscious European worker now has comrades in Asia, and their number will grow by leaps and bounds.³⁴

Only at this time was India’s trend toward de-industrialization beginning to turn around, with the appearance of major Indian-owned enterprises. By 1921, the working class in industry and on big plantations would reach 2.7 million—with a potential to exercise disproportionate influence in a country of 300 million.³⁵

Just as important was the growth of the Indian bourgeoisie, segments of which became solidly nationalist as they chafed under British control of currencies and tariffs.

Practically every class had grievances against British rule: lower and middle peasants, workers, the professional middle

class, and the bourgeoisie. It was a matter of time before enough of these sections of society would unite to throw the British out. The real question was which sections would coalesce into an alliance to lead the rest—and with what ideas about the shape of post-independence India.

Gandhi, more than anyone else, would pull together the leading alliance of forces. His political vision put a stamp on the direction of the movement at crucial turns. Ultimately, though, social forces stronger than Gandhi’s personality were to shape the outcome.

[Go to sidebar 1, on resistance in the military]

Gandhi’s approach to politics

Mohandas K. Gandhi was born in 1869 in the Indian province of Gujarat. His family was in the commercial *bania* caste that produced, along with the Brahmins, much of the middle class. As a young man, he went to England to receive legal training. He would later abandon his profession, however, and adopt the lifestyle and dress of the Hindu peasantry—thus going several steps beyond the Congress Extremists in their stylistic identification with India’s common folk.

The intensity of his religious convictions did not come from orthodox training in childhood but from adult studies that he began as a political activist in South Africa. Upon his return to India from England, he had a rough start as a lawyer and accepted an offer in 1893 to work on a commercial case in South Africa. He ended up staying, with brief returns to India and Britain, for more than 20 years.³⁶

In South Africa, racism was even more intense than in India, and Gandhi became an advocate and leader of the Indian immigrant population. Struggles for Indian rights escalated over his stay in South Africa, and Gandhi’s political development paralleled the course of nationalist debates back in India. He began as a loyalist of the empire, dressed in a three-piece suit, demanding that South Africa’s Indian population be accorded the full rights of British subjects—even though the starting point of many Indians in South Africa was the near-slave status of indentured servants. In the course of struggle, Gandhi ultimately concluded that something was systematically wrong with British society and adopted the cultural trappings of traditional India.³⁷

Gandhi taught himself skills that would make him unique upon his return to India, including how to overcome caste, class, and religious divisions to build a base for dramatic mass actions. Unlike the Congress Extremists, Gandhi was a strenuous advocate of interreligious unity and scrupulously avoided using his Hindu identification to channel people’s anger in the direction of Muslims or other minorities. And, far from being unworldly, Gandhi also learned the fundraising and accounting skills necessary to sustaining mass politics.³⁸

Gandhi’s religious and political development were intertwined. In the writings of Leo Tolstoy, with whom he corresponded, and the writings of social theorist Robert Ruskin, Gandhi found a philosophy that—along with an idiosyncratic reading of Hindu scripture—diagnosed modern oppression as the product of industrialism and proposed nonviolent political action as a cure.³⁹

Gandhi believed, in one historian’s words:

The search for truth was the goal of human life, and as no one could ever be sure of having attained the ultimate truth, use of violence to enforce one's own necessarily partial understanding of it was sinful.⁴⁰

By 1907 he had worked out the basic strategy of nonviolent resistance, which he called *satyagraha* ("the path of truth"). It consisted of training a disciplined core of volunteers (*satyagrahis*) who helped to lead mass marches and mass violations of specific laws that resulted in intentional mass arrests.⁴¹ Three *satyagraha* campaigns in the next seven years, along with a growing body of articles and pamphlets, made him famous in India even before he returned.

Although the aims and methods of *satyagraha* resembled those of passive resistance, Gandhi insisted that the two tactics differed "as the North pole from the South." Advocates of passive resistance such as Tilak adopted nonviolence as a policy—not as a principle—to avoid retribution from the overwhelming force of the British.⁴² But *satyagraha* was far from being a means to avoid suffering. *Satyagrahis* actually aimed to make a show of inflicting suffering on themselves in order to demonstrate their seriousness and patience in resisting injustice.⁴³

While still in South Africa, Gandhi wrote about India in his 1909 pamphlet, "Hind Swaraj" (Indian Self-Rule), and targeted what he thought was the real enemy, industrial civilization:

It would be folly to assume that an Indian Rockefeller would be better than the American Rockefeller... India's salvation consists in unlearning what she has learnt during the past 50 years or so. The railways, telegraphs, hospitals, lawyers, doctors and such like have all to go, and the so-called upper class have to learn to live consciously and religiously and deliberately the simple life of a peasant.⁴⁴

This vision of Indian society going backwards in time was unrealistic, of course, especially given the new growth of an Indian working class and bourgeoisie, and it found little real support among the leading elements of the national movement—Indian intellectuals and industrialists.

It was utopian particularly in upholding the idea that the "so-called upper class" would willingly give up its privileged position to live like peasants. Far from this scenario, the Indian upper class increasingly wanted the British out of the way precisely to become the new "Indian Rockefellers."

Although Gandhi's anti-industrial vision had little appeal for India's rising urban classes, it struck a chord among India's larger masses—especially the poor peasants and unemployed weavers and spinners—who had been crushed by their connection to Britain's industrial system.

Gandhi was to put the anti-modern current of his thought into practice through the village social workers who organized self-help among the rural poor.⁴⁵ Although this "constructive work" made little real headway against poverty, it was later to create mass support for the Congress Party—and mass bases from which to launch future campaigns.⁴⁶

The appeal of Gandhi's strategy was two-fold. It appealed to masses of villagers because it was a collective way to resist, to rise above all the state's violence and show the dignity of their cause. It also appealed to the wealthy merchants, landlords, and small-holding peasants because it offered the hope of getting rid of the British while not threatening to destroy their

property or endanger their economic and social position. To those who had something to lose from unrestrained social revolt, *satyagraha* promised to bring the benefits of mass mobilization—already evident from mass campaigns led by the Extremists—while maintaining the strictest possible control over the movement.⁴⁷

[Go to sidebar 2, Gandhi on caste and class]

India's new mass leader

Gandhi returned to India and joined the Indian National Congress in the midst of the First World War. The war was bringing an economic and political crisis for the British, and space opened up for Indian textile bosses to get a greater share of the home market.⁴⁸ A growing section of them was impatient with British control of the market, and many became fervent supporters of the nationalist movement.⁴⁹

They were particularly drawn to Gandhi's promises of a nonviolent removal of British rule. Through Gandhi's appeal, Congress began to receive funding from some of India's richest industrialists, including the textile magnate Ambalal Sarabhai of Gujarat and the Calcutta-based G.D. Birla, who headed India's second-largest industrial group. They became Gandhi's regular consultants throughout his political career.⁵⁰

For ordinary people in India, the war also awoke new aspirations. Indian soldiers fought for the British in a war they had no stake in and returned home wanting to be treated as equals. As Eqbal Ahmad described the situation,

On the battlefield they were every day recognizing that they were equals, but they were also experiencing patterns of racial discrimination. Therefore they came back from World War I burning with anger. They and their relatives gave the push to the nationalist movement.⁵¹

The Russian Revolution of 1917 had a radicalizing impact on oppressed people throughout the world, and India was no exception. Wrote one historian:

In the post-war years—what is repeatedly evident is a combination of multiplying grievances with new moods of strength or hope: the classic historical formula for a potentially revolutionary situation.⁵²

The aftermath of the Russian Revolution thus saw growing militancy among workers and peasants that erupted into massive struggles. Gandhi tried to play the role of mediator and acted as a restraint on the movement.

In 1918, a dispute broke out at a textile factory in Ahmedabad when the owner, Gandhi's friend Ambalal Sarabhai, tried to end a system of bonuses that he had introduced during an outbreak of plague. Sarabhai's sister Anusya was a Gandhian disciple who had set up night schools for mill workers. Gandhi intervened to convince the workers to drop their demand for a 50 percent wage hike down to 35 percent and forbade militant picketing in favor of his own—successful—hunger strike. The district magistrate's report on the strike claimed that Gandhi undertook his fast after being "stung by...taunts" from workers who "assailed him for being a friend of the mill-owners, riding in their motorcars and eating sumptuously with them, while the weavers were starving."⁵³

He advocated a labor philosophy of peaceful arbitration of disputes and argued that bosses should act as "trustees" for the

workers. This message of class collaboration cloaked in the language of nonviolence would be Gandhi's continued approach as the class struggle intensified. His position on strikes was clear:

In India we want no political strikes.... We must gain control over all the unruly and disturbing elements... We seek not to destroy capital or capitalists, but to regulate the relations between capital and labor. We want to harness capital to our side. It would be folly to encourage sympathetic strikes.⁵⁴

This was an unfortunate position, since the power of the strike, in factories, on plantations, and on the railroads, could economically cripple the British in India—and permit workers to pose a concrete alternative to the exploitation over which the British presided.

The potential exploded in 1919. Mass agitation against repressive British legislation, the Rowlatt Act, which sought to extend wartime “anti-terrorist” restrictions on civil rights, coincided with a strike wave by mill workers.

Gandhi's launched the first all-India *satyagraha* in order to further stir up people's anger against the Rowlatt restrictions and to channel it in a nonviolent direction. But weeks into the campaign—with only fragments of a national activist network in place—fewer than a thousand Indians had signed up nationwide to be official *satyagrahis*. To broaden participation, Gandhi added a call for a nationwide work stoppage, but called it for a Sunday so as to minimize its impact on businesses.⁵⁵

Gandhi and the local leaders who responded to his call made special efforts to unite Hindus and Muslims in the campaign. In early April, they succeeded in putting together massive united demonstrations in most major cities. The British were particularly alarmed to see the breakdown of divisions they had worked so hard to maintain. When Muslims joined a Hindu festival in the Punjab city of Amritsar, for example—and then drank from the same cups with Hindus—the authorities became terribly frightened.⁵⁶

The Punjab, in fact, was the site of the movement's greatest upsurge. Punjab's administrator, Michael O'Dwyer, fanned the flames when he prevented Gandhi from entering the province. Gandhi's arrest enraged Punjabis and deprived O'Dwyer of the mediating services of the one man who might have kept the movement from escalating.

In Amritsar, British police cracked down by arresting the movement's main leaders—one Hindu and one Muslim. When a crowd gathered to protest the arrests, the British open fire, killing twelve. In response to the shootings, the crowd looted buildings associated with the British and killed five Britons, including some civilians. In defiance of a British ban on future assemblies, the remaining leadership planned a mass rally for the following Sunday.

When news of the repression in Amritsar reached the city of Lahore just thirty miles away, peaceful demonstrations escalated into clashes with police. Factory and railway workers struck, and the British withdrew their forces from the city. A mass rally elected a People's Committee that ran the city for four days. The key event of the Lahore upsurge was the entry of tens of thousands of Muslim workers and artisans into the movement, which had been started by the mostly-Hindu middle class. The British enlisted “respectable” Muslim landholders

to persuade the Muslim workers to quit the movement, but the workers were unmoved by their “social superiors.”⁵⁷

Then the big crackdown began in Amritsar. The Sunday, April 13, rally brought thousands to an walled-in park area known as Jallianwala Bagh, where more thousands—unaware of the ban on meetings—had arrived from out of town for a Sikh festival. General Reginald Dyer, on the authority of O'Dwyer, brought his soldiers to break up the crowd of 20,000 by force. Without issuing a warning, Dyer instructed his troops to fire into the thickest parts of the crowd, not to disperse it but, as he testified later, to produce a “moral effect” throughout the whole Punjab.⁵⁸

Back in Lahore, the middle-class leaders of the People's Committee were trying to call off the strikes and rebellion—against vehement objections from workers—when the British attacked under a province-wide martial law decree.⁵⁹

The official casualty count at Jallianwala Bagh was 379 dead and 1,200 wounded, but Indian accounts speak of two or three times that number. In the following weeks of martial law terror, the British massacred many hundreds more Punjabis, tortured and flogged others—and generally reimposed their authority in the most humiliating ways they could dream up.⁶⁰

Forces realign, and Gandhi's star rises

The year's events effectively wiped out the old sources of division between Congress Extremists and Moderates. Extremists such as Tilak (who was to die in 1920) already supported Gandhi's leadership before 1919 and helped him to put together the national agitational network that Congress needed.⁶¹ For their own part, many Moderates took up the demand for immediate *swaraj* as British repression disgusted and radicalized them. Most now backed a populist agitational course for Congress, as long as Gandhi's leadership promised to keep the movement within acceptable bounds.

The British re-thought their approach as well. From late 1919 onward, they would centralize their response to Congress' agitation so that

men like O'Dwyer... would no longer be permitted to stoke the fires of nationalism through brutal repressions of popular will.... British policy was [thereafter] characterized by restraint and coercion in finely balanced proportions. The objectives of this policy were threefold: first, to bring to the surface different strands of opinion which had rallied around Gandhi; secondly, to drive a wedge between moderates and extremists; and thirdly, to strike down the extremists the moment they had lost the goodwill of moderate opinion.⁶²

Gandhi was only too ready to hang the militants (and later, the leftists) out to dry—something he did with numbing frequency for the next 28 years.⁶³ He began in the aftermath of the Rowlatt agitation itself. Five days after the Jallianwala Bagh massacre, Gandhi called off the movement. He declared that he had committed a “Himalayan blunder” in calling for mass civil disobedience without enough organizational and ideological control over the movement,⁶⁴ thus suggesting that British repression was simply a response to the movement's lack of self-discipline. He condemned the violence that had broken out on both sides, though it was far from equal. In the Punjab, for example, every account places Indian deaths well over 1,200 and British deaths under 10.

Gandhi was quite calculating in offering his leadership as

an alternative to radicalism. At the beginning of 1919, he wrote to a Congress Moderate to try to draw him into the Rowlatt agitation:

The growing generation will not be satisfied with petitions...
Satyagraha is the only way, it seems to me, to stop terrorism.⁶⁵

At the end of the Rowlatt agitation, in which mass social revolt replaced terrorism as India's most important radical trend, Gandhi recommended himself to the British authorities as an acceptable bargaining partner—and as an ally against the left. As the British continued to press martial law terror upon the Punjab, Gandhi wrote to the viceroy June 8:

The awful experience of the past two months and a half have shown me that there is nothing save *satyagraha*, of which civil disobedience is an integral part, that can possibly save India from Bolshevism and even a worse fate.⁶⁶

Gandhi could play his unique mediating role only because his leadership served as a lens to focus the explosive discontent of ordinary Indians—which, by the end of the war, had become overripe for expression. By the early 1920s it was clear that Gandhi brought two elements to the anti-imperial struggle that had been missing since the Sepoy Mutiny. His political skills, plans, and charisma drew a mass base into the first all-India struggles since 1857, and the struggles themselves connected popular grievances against *aspects* of British rule to the final goal of *ending* British rule. Gandhi's success made him into the Congress Party's preeminent—and indispensable—leader.

In the course of these struggles, Gandhi remolded Congress from an organization of intermittently-active nationalist clerks and lawyers into a genuine mass party. Although to the mass of peasants he was known as a *Mahatma* (a “great soul” or holy man), Gandhi was also a shrewd political organizer and infighter. In 1920, he insisted on reorganizing Congress into a hierarchy of committees built up from the villages to the district level, reworking provincial committees on a linguistic basis, and creating a 15-member Working Committee as an ongoing executive to oversee the whole party's work.⁶⁷

To make sure that his own voice came through in national politics without relying on the commercial press—as he had been forced to do during the Rowlatt agitation⁶⁸—Gandhi took over the editorship of the Ahmedabad weekly, *Young India*, in October of 1919.⁶⁹

Despite Gandhi's extensive preparations, however, the next mass campaign, the Non-Cooperation Movement of 1921–22, also unleashed forces beyond Gandhi's control. Millions were inspired by Gandhi's call to win “*swaraj* in one year,” and many resorted to methods that he did not approve.

As he toured the countryside in 1921, Gandhi's repeated the slogan that peasants must “turn *zamindars* into friends.”⁷⁰ When peasants in Assam's tea plantations revolted in May, Gandhi and Congress were downright hostile. Some of the strikes hit plantations owned by Congress members, who did everything possible to stop the revolt, which continued into December.⁷¹ He made it clear that he

deprecated all attempts to create discord between landlords and tenants and advised all the tenants to suffer rather than fight, for they had to join forces against the most powerful *zamindar*, namely the Government.⁷²

He went so far as to reassure the landlords that,

I shall be no party to dispossessing propertied classes of their private property without just cause. My objective is to reach your hearts and convert you so that you may hold all your private property in trust for your tenants and use it primarily for their welfare. But supposing that there is an attempt unjustly to deprive you of your property, you will find me fighting on your side.⁷³

Peasants, who were becoming increasingly radical, felt betrayed. In one village, the same people who had showered him with garlands later refused him food.

The largest uprising to occur during the Non-Cooperation Movement was in Malabar on India's southwest coast, an area now included in the state of Kerala. In the revolt, tens of thousands of peasants known as Moplahs rose up against the power of the landlords—and of the British. Following years of tenants' rights agitation, the revolt began in August, 1921, after a police raid on a mosque. The rebels, following “radical leaders preaching an egalitarian millennium,”⁷⁴ attacked official buildings and landlords' houses—and drove the British from some areas for several months.

Repression of the revolt was more severe than at Jallianwala Bagh. Official figures cite 2,337 rebels killed and 45,404 taken prisoner. But no Congress leader defended the rebels at any point. Instead Gandhi condemned this class revolt as an outbreak of communal hatred, since the Moplahs were predominantly Muslim peasants resisting landlords who were mostly Hindu. Religious bigotry did play a role in some aspects of the revolt, but the Moplahs pointedly left thousands of Hindu peasants unmolested—and arrested Muslim nobles when they needed to. Some Hindus were indeed forcibly converted to Islam, but the highest estimate (from a Hindu communal association) claimed only 2,500 forced conversions out of the 400,000 Hindus who resided in rebel-controlled territory.⁷⁵

Finally, in 1922, Gandhi abruptly called off the movement nationwide when a crowd in Chauri Chaura responded to police beatings and gunfire by killing 22 cops. Even when a court sentenced 172 Indians to death for their act of retaliation, the Congress Party—which was full of lawyers experienced in using trials to expose British oppression—did not raise a finger to defend them. The only recorded protests were from an emigré Communist journal and the Executive Committee of the Communist International. Ultimately, 19 of the 172 were hanged, and the rest were deported.⁷⁶

The fact that Gandhi could call not one but two all-India movements in four years—and then call off the second one when it got too militant for his taste—shows how crucial he had become to the national movement. It also exposes the lack of an alternative revolutionary leadership in the potentially revolutionary situation of 1919–22.⁷⁷

[Go to sidebar 3, on Self-reliance—hype and reality]

Further realignments: The modern right, center, and left emerge

The postwar movement transformed Indian nationality from an idea in the minds of Westernized lawyers into a real historical force. The involvement of workers and peasants on a mass scale also meant that the national movement would bring

Indian social relations into question. As a result, politics polarized in the 1920s into the three trends that still dominate Indian politics today—a nationalist center, the religious right, and the secular left—whose positions on the national movement arose from their answers to the emerging “social question.”

The new right organized along communal lines. Hindu communalists now shrank back from being the most militant anti-British force, a role that they had been able to play only as long as Hindu peasants and workers did not stir and begin to pose their own demands—thus upsetting traditional relations of caste subordination. The new right’s leadership, both Muslim and Hindu, was made up social conservatives who were so frightened by the mobilization of workers and peasants that they recoiled from the mainstream of the national movement. To this day, although their professed enemies are those who belong to a different religion, communal organizations actually serve to discipline lower-caste and lower-class Indians to the authority of elite members of their own religion. As one study argues about the Hindu right,

Organized Hindutva [“Hinduness”] emerges right from the beginning as an upper caste reaction to efforts at self-assertion by downtrodden groups within the Hindu fold....

The RSS [Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh—a Hindu fascist group founded in 1925], from its inception down to today, has been overwhelmingly middle class Brahmin or Bania in composition, drawn together on the basis of a fear psychosis directed against other social groups: Muslims, most overtly, but by implication also lower caste Hindus.⁷⁸

This modern form of street-thug communalism—which now targeted a rival religious group rather than the British as the main enemy—brought about a split in the older generation of Hindu nationalists. Some who favored broad popular struggle against the British, such as Tilak, cast their lot with Gandhi when he agitated on the basis of inter-religious unity.

But others who had been yesterday’s “revolutionaries” became the most vociferous communalists. One, Vinayak Damodar Savarkar (1883–1966), began by collaborating with Tilak in a 1905 boycott campaign before he moved on to lead a seemingly more radical group in London (1906–10) that succeeded in assassinating a British official. Finally in the mid-1920s, after years in prison, Savarkar took up the leadership of the Hindu Mahasabha, a reactionary high-caste political party that spawned the RSS.⁷⁹ The thread connecting Savarkar’s days of “revolutionary terrorism” to his days as the prime ideologue of *Hindutva* was his reliance on the actions of an elite—and a corresponding mistrust of mass action from below.⁸⁰

In the 1920s, the Muslim right developed some urban street-thug groups that mirrored the RSS. But the main organization of the Muslim right, the Muslim League, was not built on the RSS’s middle class basis. The League had begun as a trend dominated by big landowners. Following the Non-Cooperation Movement, the League withdrew from an alliance it had formed with Congress in 1916—and began to take a growing fraction of the middle class with it, including Muhammad Ali Jinnah. An anglophile with an aristocratic manner, Jinnah refused to back Congress’ agitational turn in 1919, and he harbored a grudge against Gandhi for eclipsing his own star in the galaxy of Congress leaders. From these tactical and personal differences—not from religious conviction—

Jinnah first withdrew from politics and then later used the Muslim League as a vehicle to promote his leadership.⁸¹

The League’s political focus was on electoral campaigns for British-sponsored (and, initially, powerless) representative councils. But the League lacked a mass base and fared poorly in elections—losing to Congress for 20 years even in races for seats reserved for Muslims.⁸² Like Congress, the Muslim League favored Indianization of the regime, but was willing to tolerate a slower pace than Congress because they foreswore the method that could speed up the process—mass agitation. And until the late 1930s, the League did not call for a separate Pakistan.

The nationalist center was by far the strongest organized political trend in India. This broad grouping formed the mainstream of the Congress Party, ranging from Gandhi on the right to reformist socialists on the left. This force regrouped in the 1920s from its failure to win “*swaraj* in one year” and relaxed its tactical stance of “non-cooperation.” By the second half of the decade, the party gave up its boycott of British-sponsored councils and began to use them as a platform to advocate further concessions.

The party combined its “parliamentary” activity with Gandhian “constructive work” in the countryside (i.e., nationalist base-building). At the same time, it still wielded the threat of further mass action to push the pace of reform. Although this mixed bag of tactics actually reflected debates among different trends in Congress, together the tactics formed a fairly coherent strategy of winning political independence gradually through an “escalating series of compromises.”⁸³

This reformist approach required occasional use of mass action that focused on the national question while keeping the social question as far in the background as possible. For this strategy, Gandhi’s leadership was crucial, for only he stood a chance of directing the mass struggles—from above—toward acceptable targets.

This kind of mass organizing would have to legitimate and strengthen existing indigenous authorities while attempting to bridge the divisions that the British had fostered among Indians. Gandhi’s solution was to approach Indian nationality the way that earlier nationalists (and the British) had seen it—as a “composite” of separate communities in which people’s first loyalty was religious—even though caste, class and regional ties were at least as strong as religious ones.⁸⁴ As a result, Gandhi tended to approach mass organizing as a task of convincing established local figures to lead their co-religionists into struggle.

The more or less conscious aim of this strategy was to undermine the class independence of the urban and rural proletariat, but its unintended effect was to give strength to communalism. Like the institution of separate electorates for different religious groups, Gandhian politics promoted a form of political power that was founded on a religious base. Thus, despite his avowed commitment to Hindu-Muslim unity, Gandhi’s top-down methods helped to strengthen the communal organizations that took the initiative when nationalist action ebbed.⁸⁵ Just when nationalist agitation had raised and then disappointed people’s hopes, communal organizations were thus ready to step in and direct people’s bitterness toward scapegoats.

Congress showed its tolerance for communalism by allowing its members to belong to the RSS, the Hindu Mahasabha

or the Muslim League until a Congress resolution in 1934 finally forbade such dual memberships. By then, however, Gandhi's solicitude toward the Hindu right had even alienated Congress party leaders such as Mohamed Ali (1895–1931). Ali began as a staunch Gandhi ally in 1919–22 and became Congress Party president in 1923. By 1930, however, he denounced Gandhi as the tool of the Hindu Mahasabha—an organization that cared more for cattle than for Muslims.⁸⁶

As the postwar upsurge sparked the emergence of the right and the consolidation of the nationalist center, it also provided the opportunity to build a genuine Indian left for the first time. Embracing the self-activity of workers and peasants, the left could offer an anticolonial strategy that put the social question at the front of the anti-British movement—with the promise of building durable Hindu-Muslim unity on the basis of common class interests.

From its foundation in 1925, the Communist Party of India (CPI) refused to admit anyone who belonged to a communal organization⁸⁷—and the party was an effective antidote to communal divisions in the places where it grew. The CPI had the most success in organizing unions like the Girni Kamgar Union, which was strongest in Bombay. By 1929 the CPI had helped form 42 elected workers' committees in the textile mills following its success in leading a 1928 industry-wide strike for higher wages.⁸⁸ Communists were gaining influence among railway workers and oil workers as well.

By 1930, however, the labor movement and the Communist Party were being beaten back. Fierce repression from the British, along with the disastrous twists and turns of the CP's strategy, combined to weaken the only real alternative to communalism and bourgeois nationalism. In 1928, the CPI adopted Stalin's policy of attacking relatively left Congress leaders. As a result, the CPI removed itself—and, tragically, removed most workers—from the next wave of nationalist struggle, the Civil Disobedience Movement of 1930–31.⁸⁹

At the same time, the British crackdown removed the left's most important leaders from the scene. In 1929, the year that Congress itself declared its goal of complete independence from Britain (*purna swaraj*):

Thirtyone persons including practically all important communist and left-inclined trade-union leaders were arrested in different parts of the country and brought to Meerut to stand trial for entering "into a conspiracy to deprive the King [of England] of the sovereignty of British India."⁹⁰

The trial dragged on until 1933, when long sentences were imposed. Then the CP itself was banned in 1934. Although Congress' new rising star, future prime minister Jawaharlal Nehru (1889–1964) had responded to the mass movement by moving to the left—and personally espoused socialism in his 1930 presidential address to Congress—the party did nothing to take up the defense of the Meerut "conspirators" during the movements of the early 1930s. At a Bombay "labor meeting" in 1931, Communists heckled Gandhi for ignoring the Meerut defendants (and for his compromising stance toward the British), but Congress continued to withhold support from the imprisoned leftists. The CPI was unable to reconstruct a functioning all-India leadership until the late 1930s.⁹¹

The CP's later support of Stalinist Russia in the Second World War, and thus, of the British war effort, would also re-

move them from biggest nationalist upsurge of the following decade, the Quit India Movement of 1942.

Despite the way that the CPI's policy kept shifting in response to Stalin's directives, the party's class-unity position remained a significant counterweight to communal division in the countryside—where "the failure of Congress leaders to espouse agrarian radicalism even in Depression conditions, encouraged Muslim peasant movements to develop increasingly on separatist lines."⁹²

Leading and limiting the struggle

Despite his skills and the powerful influence of his personality, Gandhi kept igniting forces that got beyond his control. The basic pattern could be seen again in the Civil Disobedience Movements of the early 1930s, which began with the famous campaign to violate the British salt monopoly. Gandhi chose this hated monopoly as a symbolic target to unite Indians on a nationalist basis while minimizing the risk that the movement would move on to pose class demands.

But the salt *satyagraha* escalated quickly. Mass marches to the coast to break the British salt monopoly led to mass arrests. News of Gandhi's own arrest sparked a strike by textile workers in Maharashtra who attacked police outposts, law courts and other official buildings.

The struggles repeatedly threw up the question of physical force in cases where the answer meant the difference between advance and retreat—and where retreat often meant dire consequences, including the loss of livelihood. In the Central Provinces, a *satyagraha* to violate restrictions on the use of forests escalated into attacks on the police pickets that had been set up to guard the forests—followed by mass illegal cutting of firewood. And throughout the country, peasants devastated by the Great Depression refused to pay their land taxes—and then put up physical resistance when police came to seize their property.⁹³

Gandhi's refusal to endorse selective use of physical force also virtually ruled out strikes as a method of struggle. As one Bombay mill owner remarked about strikes in 1929, "peaceful picketing does not really exist," since the point of picketing is to prevent scab workers from getting into the mill.⁹⁴ Gandhi recommended that dissatisfied workers quit their jobs and look for other work rather than strike in a situation where they might have to confront scabs.⁹⁵

Despite Gandhi's efforts, however, class divisions could not be smoothed over, and Gandhi's campaigns would continually move beyond the boundaries he tried to impose. This was because, in order to build up a mass base, he would deliberately tap into people's real grievances, which inevitably had a class aspect.

When those he mobilized met with repression, they felt justified in using any means necessary to get what they felt they deserved. What's more, civil disobedience campaigns led their participants to draw natural conclusions about resisting *all* unjust laws, such as those laws that defended the landlords' rights to crushing rents.

Gandhi, who in 1930 had promised a "fight to the finish" for Indian self-rule, wound up the massive Civil Disobedience Movement of 1930–31 after extracting only token concessions—disappointing even close collaborators like Nehru, who remarked in T.S. Eliot's words, "This is the way the world

ends/Not with a bang but a whimper.”⁹⁶

Then, in May 1933, when Gandhi abruptly suspended a second Civil Disobedience Movement that he had begun the year before, his party comrades were furious. Said Nehru:

After so much sacrifice and brave endeavor, was our movement to tail off into something insignificant? I felt angry with him [Gandhi] at his religious and sentimental approach to a political question and his frequent references to God in connection with it.⁹⁷

Subhas Chandra Bose (1897–1945), a Congress militant, was scathing about Gandhi’s retreat:

Today our condition is analogous to that of an army that has suddenly surrendered to the enemy in the midst of a protracted and strenuous campaign. And the surrender has taken place, not because the nation demanded it, not because the national army rose in revolt against its leaders and refused to fight...but either because the commander in chief was exhausted as a result of repeated fasting or because his mind and judgment were clouded owing to subjective causes which it is impossible for an outsider to understand.⁹⁸

Independence, partition and communal bloodbath

A combination of factors pushed the British to finally accept that they could no longer hold India. Some factors operated outside India, including broad pressures to decolonize—both from national movements and from the U.S., which had demanded that Britain open its colonial markets to postwar American penetration in return for its lend-lease military support.⁹⁹

It was clear that the empire was crumbling. Japanese forces had swept through British colonies in Asia with little difficulty, showing Indians that the mighty British could be defeated. For their part, when the British lost their other possessions in Asia, they also lost their main incentive for maintaining an army based in India. And inside India, Gandhi launched the Quit India Movement in 1942, which became the biggest revolt since 1857.¹⁰⁰

After the war, when Britain was negotiating terms of departure with Congress and the Muslim League, the revolt continued without Congress sponsorship. In 1946, nearly 2 million workers, more than half of the working class, went on strike. They earned the condemnation even of Nehru on the Congress left, who saw himself as the main leader of an independent India and did not want to inherit an undisciplined workforce.¹⁰¹

The most spectacular episode of the postwar upsurge was the Royal Indian Navy mutiny of 1946, which, like the mutiny of 1857, was founded on Hindu-Muslim unity. In response to the mutiny, the CP called sympathy strikes that drew out 300,000 in Bombay. Gandhi and Congress condemned the mutiny and the strikes.¹⁰²

In general, mass politics after the war was a patchwork of united class revolt and its opposite—communal bloodletting. Because the CP could not fill the vacuum of leadership left behind when Congress left the field of popular action, upsurges of united struggle were to alternate with gruesome communal violence—spurred on by both the Hindu right and the Muslim League. The one all-India mass action that the League ever called before independence, a “Day of Action” in August 1946 demanding the separation of Pakistan, precipitated murderous

riots in Bengal that spread to other provinces.

In Bengal’s capital, Calcutta, the riots killed 4,000 and injured 10,000 in just four days. Although the police favored the Muslims against the Hindus, the Muslims got the worst of it.¹⁰³

The riots that followed the League’s “Day of Action” pushed Congress Party negotiators to accept Partition.¹⁰⁴ The party was not prepared to support the only real alternative—class struggle on an increasingly leftist basis. In this way, the refusal to polarize the struggle along class lines virtually guaranteed a bloodbath along communal lines. The British themselves became eager for Congress to take over, since they realized that an Indian government could more easily put down the wave of strikes and mutinies than they themselves could.¹⁰⁵

For its part, the Muslim League needed the expiring British *raj* to approve the Partition *before* independence, since the League was unlikely to win the partition of key provinces (including Bengal and the Punjab) through a post-independence referendum.¹⁰⁶ The League’s members had always depended on the state to protect their property rights and their political clout,¹⁰⁷ so it’s no surprise that they would seek help from the departing rulers to create a friendly state of their own. The late-developing Muslim bourgeoisie also looked forward to freeing itself from competition with India’s more-established Hindu-owned businesses.¹⁰⁸

The Muslim League’s political ascendancy remained founded on a weak popular basis. The League finally won some provincial elections in 1946 when votes split along communal lines, but this victory came from an extremely narrow electorate; only the richest 10 percent were allowed to vote.¹⁰⁹ Later, in 1954, the League was to be tossed out of office in East Pakistan’s first election based on universal suffrage, and the League would not provide political stability even where it was strongest, in West Pakistan.¹¹⁰ In contrast, Congress was the top vote-getter in all-India elections for the first 30 years after independence.

Sumit Sarkar describes the immediate consequences of the Partition agreement:

For far too many Muslims in India and Hindus in Pakistan, freedom-with-partition meant or came to mean a cruel choice between the threat of sudden violence and squeezing of employment and economic opportunities, or a forcible tearing out of age-old roots to join the stream of refugees.¹¹¹

In 1947, millions celebrated the independence that they had won through decades of struggle. But the year was also marked by a holocaust of violence and ethnic cleansing that accompanied Partition. Estimates of the numbers killed and displaced vary from less than a half-million to “nearly a million” killed and from 10 to 22 million displaced.¹¹² Thousands of corpses littered the streets of cities like Calcutta and Delhi. There are descriptions of train cars arriving full only of dead people.¹¹³

Gandhi, now in his late seventies, personally journeyed to areas where communal violence had broken out and did his best to persuade people to stop, walking barefoot through the riot-torn slums and threatening “to fast unto death.”¹¹⁴ His moral authority was able to stop the violence sometimes, but when he left, all the social and political forces that led people to see another religious group as their main enemy were still in place.

Gandhi was disgusted with the opportunism he saw in

Congress, and up to his death he displayed a principled anti-communalism. While riots raged in the Punjab, Gandhi told a leader of the Muslim League:

I want to fight it out with my life. I would not allow the Muslims to crawl on the streets in India. They must walk with self-respect.¹¹⁵

Gandhi died for upholding Muslim equality, assassinated in 1948 by a Hindu fascist. The killer, Nathuram Godse, had been trained as an organizer in the RSS in the 1930s.¹¹⁶ It is appalling to note that, as we first wrote these lines in September 2000, president Clinton (whose insistence on sanctions against Iraq killed more than half a million children) dedicated a statue of Gandhi in Washington, D.C.—assisted by India's prime minister, Atal Behari Vajpayee, who belongs to the RSS.

The Muslim population that remains in India is worse off than before Partition. Muslims now make up just 15 percent of the population and are disproportionately represented in poorer classes, are shut out of plum jobs by discrimination, and are targeted for communal terror by the Hindu right.¹¹⁷

Moral force and class forces

Gandhi's principle of nonviolence, whose moral force propelled several mass movements forward in their initial phases, repeatedly held back the struggles at key moments. The outcome of these struggles was that

the privileged groups in town and country had been able to successfully detach attainment of political independence from radical social change. The British had gone, but the bureaucracy and police they had built up continued with little change, and could prove as oppressive and ruthless as before (or even more perhaps at times).¹¹⁸

Gandhi never promoted the class forces that could have helped him in his final struggle to unite Hindus and Muslims. Only class struggle from below could have achieved what Gandhi's purely moral mission attempted.

The movement didn't have to turn out in such a mess. Potentially revolutionary situations existed in the periods 1919–22 and 1946–47, but no mass party with revolutionary goals had been forged to steer the movements to victory.

In the post-Second World War movement, the same social forces that had overthrown the Russian Tsar in 1917 were at the center of the upsurge—the industrial working class, along with peasants and workers in uniform. But in India's case, the country's only mass party saved the British from being overthrown by taking power “peacefully” themselves—at the price of leaving the class rebellion to be consumed in the fires of communalism.

Different alignments of class forces were possible, since most classes opposed British rule. The independence movement would have produced a different outcome if industrial workers and the agricultural proletariat had been able to form a revolutionary socialist party—and drawn the middle class and small-holding peasants behind their leadership. Instead, Gandhi's party reversed these relations, with the bourgeoisie included in the leadership with the middle classes of town and country.

Gandhi's life was history's longest experiment in nonviolent political action. The result of the experiment is fairly clear: An exploitative class structure cannot be broken without violence somewhere along the way. Property rights, defended by

state violence, have never yielded to the peaceful pressure of the exploited class. Put in other terms, no exploiting class has ever left the stage of history without being pushed.

But moral force is, in fact, necessary to help draw together even a socialist movement. In some ways, our methods must indeed foreshadow a society that is more humane than the current one. Carpet-bombing civilian targets, showering thousands of anti-personnel weapons into rice paddies, or inflicting a starvation blockade upon an entire population, to take three examples, have been characteristic tactics of bourgeois war. Indeed, their use is a good reason to overthrow the bourgeois order. Conversely, it's hard to conceive of them as tactical options in a movement that aims at the liberation of ordinary people.

Moral force alone, however, cannot win a struggle against a class whose interests are inherently antagonistic to ours. Violence has to be part of the movement's arsenal. In a society founded on a violent class antagonism, our political aim cannot be like Gandhi's—to win over the whole of society. We must learn, instead, to draw the right battle lines.

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4 Anthony Read and David Fisher, *India's Long Road to Independence* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1997), p. 227.

5 Bipan Chandra, Mridula Mukherjee, Aditya Mukherjee, K.N. Panikkar, and Sucheta Mahajan, *India's Struggle for Independence* (Calcutta: Penguin Books, 1989), p. 42.

6 Romesh C. Dutt, “Paper on the Indian Land Question,” in *Speeches and Papers on Indian Questions, 1901 and 1902* (Calcutta: Elm Press, 1902), pp. 2–4.

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9 R.C. Majumdar and P.N. Chopra, *Main Currents of Indian History* (New Delhi: Sterling Publishers, 1994), p. 224.

10 B.M. Bhatia, *Famines in India* (Delhi: Konark Publishers Pvt. Ltd., 1991), p. 16.

11 Bhatia, pp. 18–20.

12 Bhatia, p. 18.

13 Barrington Moore Jr., *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy: Lord and Peasant in the Making of the Modern World* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1966), p. 368.

14 Sarkar, pp. 28–30.

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17 Quoted in Dadabhai Naoroji, “India Must Be Bled,” in *100 Best Pre-Independence Speeches 1870–1947*, ed. by H.D. Sharma (New Delhi, HarperCollins Publishers India, 1998).

18 Karl Marx, letter to N.F. Danielson, February 19, 1881, in *Karl Marx-Friedrich Engels Collected Works*, Vol. 46 (New York: International Publishers, 1992).

19 Ashman, pp. 83–84.

20 R.C. Majumdar and P.N. Chopra, *Main Currents of Indian History* (New Delhi: Sterling Publishers, 1994), pp. 149–50.

21 Sarkar, p. 22.

22 Sarkar, p. 88.

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- 24 Davis, p. 148.
- 25 Sarkar, p. 60.
- 26 Bal Gangadhar Tilak, "Not by petitions alone," January 2, 1907 address in Calcutta immediately after the Extremists' expulsion from the Indian National Congress, quoted in *Sources of Indian Tradition*, vol. 2, Stephen Hay, ed. (New Delhi: Penguin Books India, 1992), p. 144.
- 27 Quoted in Hay, ed., p. 31.
- 28 Prakash Chandra, *History of the Indian National Movement* (New Delhi: Vikas Publishing House, 1997), p. 218.
- 29 Anthony Read and David Fisher, *The Proudest Day: India's Long Road to Independence* (New York: W.W. Norton), pp. 91–93.
- 30 Read and Fisher, p. 93.
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- 38 Brown, pp. 46–48.
- 39 Brown, pp. 78–81.
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- 41 Sarkar, p. 179.
- 42 Prakash Chandra, p. 218.
- 43 M.K. Gandhi, "The satyagraha movement," written statement to the Hunter Committee, serialized in *Young India* beginning November 5, 1919, reprinted in *Young India 1919–22*, pp. 11–16.
- 44 Quoted in Sarkar, p. 180.
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- 47 Sarkar, p. 180.
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- 49 Ashman, p. 90.
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- 52 Sarkar, p. 169.
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- 62 Ravinder Kumar, "Introduction" to *The Rowlatt Satyagraha*, p. 8.
- 63 Aside from the half-dozen cases noted in the text of this article, we should note one other significant instance where Gandhi allowed British repression to fall on the militant wing of the movement without making a peep—the Cawnpore Conspiracy Case of 1924, which led to long prison terms for four communists. See Irfan Habib, "The Left and the National Movement," in *Indian People in the Struggle for Freedom* (New Delhi: Safdar Hashmi Memorial Trust, 1998), p. 106.
- 64 Sarkar, p. 194.
- 65 Sarkar, p. 188.
- 66 Quoted in Satya M. Rai, "Jallianwala Bagh tragedy—its impact on the political awakening and thinking in India," in *Jallianwala Bagh*, p. 135.
- 67 Sarkar, pp. 197–198.
- 68 Owen, p. 77.
- 69 M.K. Gandhi, "To the subscribers and readers," *Young India*, October 8, 1919, in *Young India 1919–22*, pp. 1–3.
- 70 Sarkar, p. 210. See also M.K. Gandhi, "To the peasants of the United Provinces," *Young India*, March 9, 1921, reprinted in *Young India 1919–1922*, pp. 741–44.
- 71 Sarkar, 217–18.
- 72 Siddharth Dube, *In The Land Of Poverty: Memoirs of an Indian Family 1947-1997*, (New York: Zed Books, 1998), p. 36.
- 73 Dube, p. 55.
- 74 Sarkar, p. 216.
- 75 Details of the Moplah Revolt come from Sarkar, pp. 216–17 and Tariq Ali, pp. 23–26.
- 76 Sarkar, pp. 224–225.
- 77 Sarkar, pp. 225–226.
- 78 Tapan Basu, Pradip Datta, Sumit Sarkar, Tanika Sarkar and Sambuddha Sen, *Khaki Shorts and Saffron Flags* (New Delhi: Orient Longman, 1993), pp. 16–17.
- 79 Hay, pp. 289–90.
- 80 Not every Indian terrorist followed a rightward trajectory. In the 1920s, a new generation of militants arose when the movement of 1919–22 dissipated without winning independence. Some, including the most famous terrorist of this generation, Bhagat Singh, became socialists. By the time of his 1931 execution, Singh had foresworn individual terror and advocated mass militance—a movement of self-emancipation by India's exploited. See *India's Struggle for Independence*, pp. 247–59.
- 81 Tariq Ali, p. 27.
- 82 Sarkar, p. 426.
- 83 Vanaik, p. 74.
- 84 See Ravinder Kumar, "Introduction," pp. 12–15 and *Khaki Shorts*, pp. 6–7.
- 85 *Khaki Shorts*, p. 22.
- 86 Hay, 195–204. For the details and context of Congress' concessions to the Mahasabha, see Sarkar, pp. 262–63.
- 87 Habib, p. 107.
- 88 Sarkar, p. 270–71.
- 89 Sarkar, p. 297.
- 90 Habib, p. 108.
- 91 Habib, pp. 108–110.
- 92 See Sarkar, pp. 302, 323, 354, and 364.
- 93 Sarkar, pp. 286–96.
- 94 Sarkar, p. 280.
- 95 M.K. Gandhi, "Strikes," *Young India*, February 16, 1921, reprinted in *Young India 1919–1922*, pp. 736–41.
- 96 Jawaharlal Nehru, *An Autobiography* (New Delhi: Jawaharlal Nehru Memorial Fund, 1996), p. 259. First published 1936.
- 97 Quoted in Majumdar and Chopra, p. 197.
- 98 Subhas Chandra Bose, "The Fickle Leader," in *100 Greatest Pre-Independence Speeches*.
- 99 Sarkar, p. 386 and Gabriel Kolko, *The Politics of War: The World and United States Foreign Policy* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1968), pp. 249 and 286.
- 100 Sarkar, p. 391.
- 101 Sarkar, p. 429.
- 102 Sarkar, pp. 323–25.
- 103 For accounts of the Calcutta riot and its spread, see Sarkar, pp. 432–37 and Read and Fisher, pp. 394–96.
- 104 Sarkar, p. 436.
- 105 Sarkar, p. 431.
- 106 Tariq Ali, p. 34.
- 107 Tariq Ali, p. 29.
- 108 Sarkar, p. 409.
- 109 Sarkar, p. 426–27.
- 110 Sarkar, p. 428.
- 111 Sarkar, pp. 452–53.

112 The higher estimate of deaths—and the lower estimate of displaced persons—is from Tariq Ali, pp. 155–56. The low figure for deaths and the high figure for displacement come from Ahmad, p. 13.

113 Ashman, p. 97.

114 Sarkar, p. 437.

115 Quoted in Sarkar, p. 437.

116 *Khaki Shorts*, pp. 23–24.

117 Pranav Jani and Ganesh Lal, “Behind Hindu Nationalism,” *International Socialist Review*, Fall 1999, p. 70.

118 Sarkar, p. 453.

SIDEBAR 1

Resisting Divide-and-Rule in the Military

THE BRITISH gained their dominant position in India by armed force—and used Indian soldiers to do it. The method was to seek out a dispute between two local princes with rival claims to power. The British would then approach one of the princes and offer to train “his” peasants to be British soldiers, at the prince’s expense, in order to conquer his rival.¹

The British used this recruitment method to win a victory in 1757 over French-backed forces at the Battle of Plassey, which marks the traditional date for the advent of British rule. This battle, part of the Seven Years War, turned the tide against French imperial power in India and gave the British command over the region of Bengal, in India’s northeast.

In Bengal, the British set up their administrative capital in Calcutta and became tax collectors for the first time—to finance their administration and the army.² In the following decades they used Bengal as a base to subdue the rest of the subcontinent. A widely used Indian history text sums up the process:

By training Indian troops on the European method and taking full advantage of the struggle for supremacy among the Indian States by joining one against the other, the British who came to trade, remained to rule over the whole of India.³

The army policed India and also became an instrument of British power from Africa to East Asia, intervening outside India 19 times between 1838 and 1920.⁴

But the British were taking an enormous risk by putting arms into the hands of so many Indians. By 1857, 100 years after Plassey, the army had grown to 247,000 Indians and included only 34,000 Europeans.⁵ Beginning in May of that centennial year, a soldiers’ mutiny sparked a revolt that shook the centers of British rule. As British socialist Sam Ashman writes:

Soldiers defied and killed their European officers, Delhi was captured by the rebels and rebellion broke out all over north, central and western India. The causes of revolt in the army were many, from feelings that soldiers’ religious beliefs were being abused to racial abuse and discrimination. Once the sepoys’ [soldiers’] revolt began, peasants rose en masse as accumulated grievances, particularly against excessive taxes, found expression in a challenge to British rule. Government buildings were destroyed, treasuries were plundered, barracks and court houses were burnt and prison gates flung open.⁶

Although the British responded with massacres and torture, it took them a year to recapture all of the territories controlled by the rebels—some of whom fought on for another year as guerrillas.⁷

Then the British set about reorganizing the army to head off future revolts. The key to the outbreak of the Sepoy Mutiny had been the unity achieved among different Indian groups—particularly between Muslims and Hindus, members of the two dominant religions.⁸

But Sikh forces in the west and Gurkha forces in the east helped the British put down the revolt.⁹ Afterwards, the British cultivated a myth of these religious and ethnic groups, along with the Marathas of west-central India, as “martial races.” The British used these forces to police other groups much as the Russian Tsars used the Cossacks. As a British official said in 1862:

I wish to have a different and rival spirit in different regiments, so that Sikh might fire into Hindoo, Goorkha into either, without any scruple in case of need.¹⁰

It wasn’t until almost the eve of independence, in February 1946, that Indians were able to mount another major fight within the military. This time it was the navy that revolted. A hunger strike in one training area “against bad food and racist insults”¹¹ spread to two onshore barracks and 22 ships in Bombay harbor. Within days, the mutiny spread to the whole navy and involved 20,000 sailors—including units as far away as Aden, Yemen.

As the strike spread, its demands became broader and more political: equal pay for white and Indian sailors, release of political prisoners, and a withdrawal of Indian troops from Indonesia—where the British were backing Dutch attempts to retain their colonial holdings.

The Communist Party called on Bombay workers to strike in sympathy with the mutineers, and 300,000 responded, shutting almost all of the city’s factories. The British called in two Maratha battalions to put down the movement, but they refused to fire on the strikers, and the British had to use their own troops.¹² Strikers erected barricades in the working-class neighborhoods and held out in two days of street fights—by which time the army had killed, by official figures, 228 civilians and wounded 1,046¹³ (other estimates double the casualties¹⁴). Both the Congress Party and the Muslim League supported the suppression of the mutiny and strikes.

The catalyst for the revolt, just as in the Sepoy Mutiny 90 years before, was the achievement of Muslim-Hindu unity. From the first day they joined the strike, the sailors on each ship in Bombay harbor raised three flags to express this unity: the Congress tricolor, the Muslim crescent, and the Communist hammer and sickle.¹⁵

The revolt helped to convince the British that their days as India’s masters were numbered. But Gandhi condemned this heroic mutiny. He wrote that the sailors had set “a bad and unbecoming example for India” and urged them, if they had grievances, to resign instead of striking. He concluded that his usual advocacy of interreligious unity did not apply in this case, since “a combination between Hindus and Muslims for the purpose of violent action is unholy.”¹⁶

- 1 R.C. Majumdar and P.N. Chopra, *Main Currents of Indian History* (New Delhi: Sterling Publishers, 1994), p. 131.
- 2 Sam Ashman, "India: Imperialism, Partition and Resistance," *International Socialism* 77 (Winter 1977): p. 82.
- 3 Majumdar and Chopra, p. 133.
- 4 Ashman, p. 86.
- 5 Ashman, p. 86.
- 6 Ashman, pp. 83–84.
- 7 Bipan Chandra, Mridula Mukherjee, Aditya Mukherjee, K.N. Panikkar, and Sucheta Mahajan, *India's Struggle for Independence* (Calcutta: Penguin Books, 1989), p. 39.
- 8 Irfan Habib, "The coming of 1857," in *Indian People in the Struggle for Freedom* (New Delhi: Safdar Hashmi Memorial Trust, 1998), p. 15.
- 9 Majumdar and Chopra, p. 147.
- 10 Sumit Sarkar, *Modern India: 1885–1947* (Madras: Macmillan India Limited, 1983), p. 16.
- 11 Sarkar, p. 423.
- 12 Tariq Ali, *Can Pakistan Survive?* (London: Penguin Books, 1983), p. 34.
- 13 Sarkar, pp. 424–5.
- 14 Tariq Ali, p. 34.
- 15 Sarkar, p. 423.
- 16 Sarkar, p. 425.

SIDEBAR 2

Caste, Class, and Gandhi

IN TRADITIONAL Indian villages, Hinduism prescribed the division of labor through a hierarchy of castes. The Brahmins were the priestly caste. They preached that those who carried out the labors and observed the customs of a lower caste could be reincarnated into a higher one. A system of arranged marriage ensured that caste status ran in families.

Peasants feared Brahmin authority but didn't always respect it. A north Indian proverb says that "there are three bloodsuckers in the world, the flea, the bug and the Brahmin."¹ Direct revolts against caste subordination, however, were rare before the twentieth century and were seldom directed against the caste system itself. Repression of revolt was severe, and if it didn't work, the rebellious caste might be accommodated by creating a new caste or by raising the old one's status.²

In cases where land was available, people could escape their caste position by escaping their village entirely.³ And for centuries, a significant minority of low-caste Indians have been turning to Islam, Christianity, or Buddhism. But since the caste system has exerted a pervasive influence on daily life, religious conversion has never guaranteed a full escape from oppression.

People play out their caste roles through a complex of customs that express deference toward higher castes and disgust for lower ones. Brahmins sometimes penalize violators of caste protocol by imposing fines or forced labor, but the most consistent discipline comes from members of one's own caste, sometimes through councils of leading caste members.⁴

Relations within one's own caste are crucial for a number of reasons. First is that the system prescribes a high degree of caste segregation—not just in marriage but in daily activities such as meals. Most segregated of all are the "untouchables," the "sweepers" who are consigned to menial labor, including

cleaning latrines. Untouchables are actually known as an "out-caste" group, traditionally barred from sharing wells, roads, and public transport with caste Hindus—and even barred from entering Hindu temples.

Another reason for the importance of relations within castes is that mobility between castes is impossible. As a result, people focus their efforts on raising their status within their own caste. Ravinder Kumar writes of "how caste built a bridge between classes and acted as an instrument of social mobility"⁵ in the urban context of Lahore in the early twentieth century:

The position occupied by an individual in society was determined not only by his wealth and his occupation but also by his rank in the scale of caste. Successful men in the professions, or in business, did not look upon caste fellows who were merely clerks or school teachers or petty businessmen as belonging to a different social group. Instead, they acknowledged their social obligations towards caste fellows whose wealth and status were inferior to their wealth and status. A caste stretched across more than one class, and because it did so, it gave strength and cohesion to its members, and enabled lowly placed individuals to improve their prospects through the influence and connections of the leading men of their community.⁶

Social mobility was no doubt greatest within the modernizing urban castes, but Kumar points out that all castes were organized around ranks of status so that they "resemble social pyramids, with a few successful individuals perched at the apexes."⁷ High-ranking caste members could use their status to dispense favors and patronage—or to withhold them—somewhat in the manner of Europe's medieval guild-masters. These relations could be a source of caste solidarity, as Kumar suggests, but they also show how high-status individuals could exert discipline to force involuntary "solidarity" upon their caste fellows.

The ultimate social function of caste discipline, of course, is to get people to accept a regime of economic exploitation in which they must perform uncompensated work for others. The exploiters generally belong to a different, higher caste, since exploitation rarely occurs between members of the same occupational group. And this is why maneuvers such as religious conversion provide only a limited respite from caste oppression: the real root of the oppression is the role that it plays in supporting exploitation, and purely religious movements do not target the society's economic structure.

While the boundaries of caste have never corresponded exactly to class divisions, the British conquest brought major changes to Indian class relations and thus further complicated the connections between caste and class. In general, control of the land has conferred economic (and thus, social) dominance upon a caste. For this reason, Brahmins have not dominated in all times and places.⁸

Thus, although caste oppression clearly serves to support class subordination, caste relations are, in concept and in reality, distinct from the economic aspects of class relations.

Gandhi insisted on this distinction, simultaneously decrying caste oppression and supporting society's division into economic classes.

Gandhi developed his position over time, becoming more critical of the existing caste system as his political activism exposed him to the blatantly inhumane treatment of lower castes. From the start of his career in South Africa, he called for the abolition of untouchable status.⁹

His views were not new or particularly radical on the Indian scene. His opposition to untouchability—as well as his advocacy of women’s equality—were shared by precursors such as the modernizer Rammohun Roy (1774–1833) and the Hindu reformer Dayananda Saraswati (1824–1883), who came from Gandhi’s home state of Gujarat. Some attribute the spread of such progressive social views to European influence,¹⁰ but in material terms, the important factor was the rise of the urban middle classes, which grew substantially under British rule. Certain forms of caste and gender oppression, which helped to maintain order in the villages, no longer made sense to urban lawyers, merchants, and functionaries—who proceeded to create new, liberalized versions of Hinduism.

Another factor leading high-caste urban Hindus to support the interests of lower castes was the resistance that the lower castes regularly put up against the British. Alliances between middle-class nationalists and peasant fighters ultimately became important to the national movement, but the urban-rural connection remained intermittent until Gandhi’s leadership consolidated the Indian National Congress as a mass party in the early 1920s.

The self-activity of untouchables—in addition to straightforward class revolts—included organized violations of the taboo on entering Hindu temples. Many became radicalized in these “temple-entry” actions, which began in the late 1890s. Some moved on to atheism, rejecting the whole caste system and adopting leftist politics.¹¹ Gandhi eventually participated in temple entry, but he never rejected the caste system.

Instead, as he witnessed how caste customs made it impossible for Indians to treat each other as equals, he developed a scheme to reform and streamline caste relations. Biographer Judith Brown writes that Gandhi’s new view, formulated in 1924,

owed much to ancient scriptural accounts of caste as a four-fold division of society in which each of the four castes...had a peculiar function for the good of the whole, be it fighting and ruling, trading or exercising priestly functions, or performing essential laboring tasks. Gandhi visualized a harmonious social order of four castes...into which men were born, but which were not inferior or superior to each other.¹²

This flight of fancy reminds us how thoroughly religious Gandhi’s views were. Instead of seeing repressive social customs and attitudes arising to serve the material interests of real exploiters in society, he saw things upside down. Actual, repressive social practice, according to Gandhi, was a corrupt manifestation of a divine, harmonious ideal. Those who, like Gandhi, achieve some insight into the ideal should press for reforms to bend reality to the ideal—by bringing their insight to others in hopes of provoking a change of heart.

One prominent untouchable leader, Bhim Rao Ambedkar, who had broken with Hinduism in the 1930s after his experience in the temple-entry movement, became a furious critic of Gandhi’s attempts to relegitimize the caste system. He wrote in 1945:

Hinduism...is just a set of rules which bear on their face the appearance of a crude and cruel system. Gandhism supplies the philosophy which smoothens its surface and gives it the appearance of decency and respectability...It is a philosophy which says: “All that is in Hinduism is well, all that is in Hinduism is necessary for public good....”

To the Untouchables, Hinduism is a veritable chamber of horrors. The sanctity and infallibility of the Vedas, Smritis and Shastras [i.e., scriptures that provide detailed prescriptions for caste relations], the iron law of caste, the heartless law of karma and the senseless law of status by birth are to the Untouchables veritable instruments of torture...These very instruments which have mutilated, blasted and blighted the life of Untouchables are to be found intact and untarnished in the bosom of Gandhism.¹³

Gandhi had drawn the Congress Party into advocacy of untouchable rights, but his religious views shaped and limited his approach. He sponsored charitable work among the untouchables, and he campaigned to open wells, roads, and temples to their use. But he refused to support the basic economic demands that arose from the class position of so many untouchables as landless agricultural laborers.¹⁴

Thus Gandhi always saw class oppression and class struggle through a religious lens. He saw the existing class relations of exploitation, between peasant and landlord or between worker and capitalist boss, as corrupt expressions of an ideal caste division of labor. The remedy to the corruption was enlightenment, and the method was nonviolent civil disobedience. Enlightened capitalists and landlords would see themselves as “trustees” of their property and manage it for the benefit of their workers and tenants.

Many have rejected Gandhi’s approach, then and now, as dreamy and impractical. But it’s not impractical because it’s based on a rosy view of human motivation. The problem is that it’s based on a false view of exploitation. Exploitation is not a corruption of some benign process. The forcible extraction of a living from other people’s work is crucial to the *normal* functioning of capitalism. For that matter, exploitation was a basic building block of the Indian class societies, idealized by Gandhi, that preceded British rule. The remedy for exploitation is not to enlighten the exploiters through examples of self-sacrifice but to undermine the functioning of their system through class struggle.

- 1 L.S.S. O’Malley, *Popular Hinduism* (Cambridge, 1935), pp. 190-91. Quoted in Barrington Moore, *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1966), p. 335.
- 2 Moore, pp. 339-40.
- 3 With the advent of strict land ownership under British rule, this option was increasingly shut down. See Sumit Sarkar, *Modern India* (Madras: Macmillan India Limited, 1983), p. 55. The British system, Pranav Jani tells us, also helped reshape and further rigidify caste distinctions by enshrining them in law.
- 4 Moore, pp. 336-37.
- 5 Ravinder Kumar, “The Rowlatt satyagraha in Lahore,” in *Essays on Gandhian Politics: The Rowlatt Satyagraha of 1919*, R. Kumar, ed. (London: Oxford University Press, 1971), p. 249.
- 6 Kumar, pp. 250-51.
- 7 Kumar, in the introduction to *Essays on Gandhian Politics*, p. 15. Even though within-caste disparities play a role in the regulation of the caste system, the biggest gulf in wealth, income, and education is between castes. For a detailed look at the state of caste inequality as it still existed in the 1970s, see Anil Bhatt, *Caste, Class and Politics: An Empirical Profile of Social Stratification in Modern India* (Delhi: Manohar Book Service, 1975), pp. 20-76.
- 8 Moore, p. 336.
- 9 Judith M. Brown, *Gandhi: Prisoner of Hope* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), p. 205.
- 10 Including some Indians. See A.L. Basham, “Traditional influences on the thought of Mahatma Gandhi,” in *Essays on Gandhian Politics*, pp. 40-41.
- 11 Sarkar, pp. 55-56.

12 Brown, p. 207.

13 Bhim Rao Ambedkar, "What Gandhi and Congress Have Done to the Untouchables," quoted in *Sources of Indian Tradition*, vol. 2, Stephen Hay, ed. (New Delhi: Penguin Books India, 1992), pp. 330–31.

14 Sarkar, p. 329.

SIDEBAR 3

Self-Reliance: Hype and Reality

GANDHI, WEARING only a loincloth, seated at a spinning wheel. This image of rustic self-reliance symbolizes, for millions around the world, Gandhi's vision of a simple and peaceful life.

Inside India, the spinning wheel was a potent symbol of defiance to British rule because cheap British textile imports had been demolishing the class of skilled spinners and weavers since the 1830s.

But the movement to link Indian production to a boycott of British imports began years before Gandhi put his primitivist stamp on it. *Swadeshi* (which literally means "belonging to one's own country") was the brainchild of nationalists who found allies among the new Indian bourgeoisie in the first years of the century. As one account puts it:

Swadeshi was a movement the Indian middle classes could support wholeheartedly, since it called for passive resistance, with no riots, no violence and no damage to property. None supported it more wholeheartedly than the mill owners and industrialists, who stood to make fortunes from the sudden boom.¹

By the time Gandhi joined the national movement in 1915, the volume of Indian textile production was about to overtake the volume of imports from Britain and Japan. From 1918 on, Indian mills dominated the market, so the main force driving handicraft workers to ruin during Gandhi's career was actually *swadeshi* factory production, not foreign imports.²

Despite his aversion to machines, Gandhi supported Indian factory production "at the present moment" as a supplement to hand-made yarn and cloth—in pursuit of the broader goal of replacing British imports.³ This kind of talk cemented Gandhi's relations with some major industrialists, including textile magnates from his home region of Gujarat, who would act as major financiers for Gandhi's organizing projects in the coming years.⁴ And even though he understood perfectly well that machine production was more efficient than handwork, Gandhi maintained a quixotic wish that handloom cloth would outsell mill cloth on the market.⁵

The higher price of Indian cloth—both machine-made and hand-made—came to trouble one of *swadeshi*'s earliest proponents, Rabindranath Tagore (1861–1941), a Bengali poet who won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1913. Tagore had been a prominent leader of Bengal's *swadeshi* movement of 1905–07, but he soon realized that giving up cheap imported cloth—the strategy promoted by middle-class activists like himself—demanded special sacrifices from the poor. In a novel about the movement in Bengal, one of Tagore's older charac-

ters addresses student activists:

You are well off, you need not mind the cost [of Indian-made cloth]. The poor do not want to stand in your way, but you insist on their submitting to your compulsion. As it is, every moment of theirs is a life-and-death struggle for a bare living; you cannot even imagine the difference a few *pice* [pennies] means to them—so little have you in common.⁶

Despite the cost of adhering to *swadeshi*, many poor Indians joined the boycott of British goods when Gandhi renewed the call in the early 1920s. Their determination, combined with the continued development of Indian factory production, was able to cut imports of all British goods significantly by 1930.⁷ By thus attacking Britain's main interest in India—profit—*swadeshi* helped make continued possession of the colony less attractive to the British.

But Gandhi's much-hyped "homespun" version of *swadeshi* was—beyond its undeniable importance as a symbolic rallying-point—a complete failure as a model for India's economy. Handicraft production was part of a utopian vision of self-reliant, nonindustrial village units that would be held together internally by a sense of mutual obligation instead of cash connections. Gandhi experimented with such commune-type relations at "Tolstoy Farm" in South Africa and attempted to create the same kind of working relations among his close followers in India.⁸

Gandhi never could say how such village units were supposed to hold themselves together economically or socially under the corrosive pressure of the world market—pressure that had already torn up traditional relations and impoverished the residents of India's villages.

In the Non-Cooperation Movement of 1921–22, Gandhi got the Congress Party to distribute hundreds of thousands of spinning wheels, which temporarily drove up the production of homespun yarn and handloom cloth.⁹ But even at the peak of the handicraft revival in 1923, handloom production accounted for only 39 percent of Indian-made cloth sold on the market and for 25 percent of total sales. This market share for handmade cloth represented an increase of only 1.5 percentage points in the two years since the movement had begun. The 1923 figure even represented a *decline* of half a percentage point since 1918.¹⁰

Tagore, by now a critical supporter of Gandhi, confronted him in 1921 about the *swadeshi* movement's burden on the poor—writing that he could support the demand to burn cheap foreign clothing only if the demand had come from the naked to the well-clothed and not the other way around.¹¹

As experienced *swadeshi* campaigners, both Gandhi and Tagore knew that an effective campaign would have to cut off foreign imports at the "supply end"—among importers, distributors, and merchants. Cutting off the supply of cheap cloth, however, would transform a mass, voluntary movement into a compulsory, regressive tax. The movement might thus deliver a blow against British rule, but only by enriching India's textile bosses at the expense of the poor. When Tagore realized that *swadeshi* campaigns would have to inflict such compulsion, he refused to go along anymore.¹²

As it happened, the attempts to cut off supplies of British imports failed. Many Indian importers, including some in Bombay and many in Calcutta, refused to stop the flow of

British goods.¹³ So the campaign had to fall back upon the “demand side,” relying on a mass spirit of self-sacrifice that could not be sustained indefinitely. When the movement inevitably wound down, low-cost mill cloth took back its growing share of the market—although more of this mill cloth was now being produced in Bombay.

When the movement had passed its peak, Gandhi tried to press his primitivist vision within Congress, demanding in 1924 that every party member personally spin 2,000 yards of yarn per year. He won a compromise under which party members were allowed to pay someone else to do the spinning!¹⁴ This solution illustrates two points that characterize Gandhi’s role in the movement: first, his casual acceptance of class inequalities and, second, the way in which people followed his lead selectively whenever they thought his ideas were cranky.

1 Anthony Read and David Fisher, *The Proudest Day: India’s Long Road to Independence* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1997), p. 89.

2 Sumit Sarkar, *Modern India* (Madras: Macmillan India Limited, 1983), p. 172.

3 M.K. Gandhi, “The secret of *swaraj*,” *Young India*, January 19, 1921, reprinted in *Young India 1919–22* (New York: B.W. Huebsch, 1924), pp. 513–18.

4 Sam Ashman, “India: Imperialism, Partition and Resistance,” *International Socialism* 77, Winter 1997, p. 90.

5 Sarkar, p. 230.

6 Rabindranath Tagore, *The Home and the World* (Madras: Macmillan India Limited, 1919), p. 132.

7 Sarkar, p. 293.

8 Judith Brown, *Gandhi: Prisoner of Hope* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), p. 43.

9 Sarkar, pp. 207.

10 Market shares derived from a table in Sarkar, p. 172. Although Sarkar’s figures may be reliable in showing the fluctuations in the relative market shares captured by cloth from various sources, the figures probably understate the real volume of handicraft production. Some handmade cloth must have been produced just to meet the clothing needs of the producers’ families, and some must have been bartered or sold through networks of acquaintances. None of this production, of course, would register in national figures of market sales. But even if a large portion of clothing worn by Indians in this period never circulated in the impersonal national (or world) market, the persistence of such products would show only that market relations require several generations to penetrate into all corners of people’s lives—not that this penetration is permanently reversible through sheer force of will.

It is also remarkable that after 90 years of British attempts to sell factory cloth to Indians, one-quarter of the cloth sold on the Indian market in 1923 was still made by hand. But this merely reminds us that, like the spread of market relations, the worldwide ascendancy of the factory system has been a protracted process.

11 Rabindranath Tagore, “The call of truth,” *Modern Review* 30(4): 429–32, quoted in *Sources of Indian Tradition*, vol. 2, Stephen Hay, ed. (New Delhi: Penguin Books India, 1992), p. 285.

12 See Tagore, *The Home and the World*, pp. 141–42, and “The call of truth,” p. 285.

13 Claude Markovitz, “The Congress Party and Indian big business: some salient features of their relationship, 1920–1947,” in *The Indian National Congress and the Political Economy of India 1885–1985*, Mike Shepperdson and Colin Simmons, eds. (Aldershot, England: Gower Publishing Company Limited, 1988), p. 154.

14 Sarkar, p. 228.