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Hailed by B. R Nanda as the 'Father of the Nation,'¹ Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi rose from political obscurity to challenge and help secure India's independence from the British Empire in 1947. As a character with seemingly so much influence in politics after 1920 up until his death in 1948, Gandhi galvanised and united the movement for independence. Yet, he was ineffective in channelling its potential; his 'all or nothing' approach, whilst admirable, was not the technique required to achieve concessions after so many years of Imperial rule.

Without him, India would still have achieved independence if solely on the basis that Britain was no longer in a position of strength to maintain power. The effects of the Second World War as well as a rise in nationalism are just some of the other causes for British power in India to capitulate. This essay will argue that these other factors played a greater role in dictating the arrival of Indian independence than the role of Gandhi and his actions after 1920.

Gandhi's opposition to the British Empire stemmed from his experiences of colonialism in South Africa, where he was discriminated against, along with the other members of the Indian minority in South Africa. The basis for his actions was shaped by recent writings such as Leo Tolstoy's *The Kingdom of God Is Within You* (1893) and John Ruskin's *Unto this Last*, (1862); this led to him developing a form of non-violence called satyagraha, ² to which he encouraged the society of the times to adhere.

However, he is criticised by Parekh, who claimed that, as "with many things in his life," Gandhi "made up his brand of Hinduism as he went along." ³

Indeed, there was a prominent nationalist movement before the era of Gandhi. However, its lack of success in achieving desirable steps towards independence show it lacked momentum and direction; partly due to poor communications within India and the high illiteracy rate in rural regions, meaning that promulgation of ideas that existed at the time was virtually impossible.

What Gandhi did, as Nanda suggests, was to harness the latent nationalism and make it of more significance. This coincided with an upsurge in patriotism at the turn of the 20th Century from the Extreme Wing in the Congress, outraged at Lord Curzon's decision to divide Bengal, the 'Mother State' of India, essentially on Hindu-Muslim lines. Swaraj, swadharma and dharmatattwa⁵ were words frequently uttered within nationalist circles; figures such as Bal Ganghadar Tilak, who saw "revolution by the collective act of passivity"⁶ ('non-violent non-cooperation') as a way of galvanising the nationalist movement into an effective movement, provided the direction for the movement.

Gandhi, it may be strongly argued, merely provided the inspiration. As historians such as Percival Spear believe, the First World War "formed a watershed in modern Indian development."⁷ Whilst Nanda did not mention the effects of World War I on the Indian population, preferring to concentrate on Gandhi, it can be argued that Spear's argument is stronger than Nanda's because he was analysing the overall situation; it would be tendentious to assume, as Nanda does, that the War did little to change how life was lived.

British Prime Minister Lord Asquith's comment that Indian questions would "have to be approached from a new angle of vision" ⁸ signalled a new era for India; the people felt their loyalty would be rewarded. This assumption, further supported by Wilson's Fourteen Points⁹ also meant that Indians saw light at the end of the tunnel. However, with imperialism still rooted firmly in the minds of the British public, to give India independence would diminish the status of the Empire and would be seen as weak.

This problem of 'losing face' forced the British into a policy of reactionary reform; whilst the Government of India Act was passed in 1919, ¹⁰ The Rowlatt Acts were also passed¹¹ shortly afterward, a highly contradictory reform which meant that progress for Indians remained limited overall (e. g. gaining the vote but at the same time losing civil liberty). Gandhi's intervention, calling for hartals in direct response to the Rowlatt bills, which he believed raised "moral issues of trust and self-respect and should be met with a moral response" had the desired effect; major cities such as Bombay and Calcutta being halted to standstill.

Another meeting, held in Amritsar on April 12, 1919, however, saw an ensuing massacre on a scale not previously witnessed outside of war. The orders of Brigadier General Dyer to fire on the assembly (prohibited under the Defence of India rule) left 379 dead and over 1200 wounded, according to official counts. Spear cites that Dyer had inadvertently "written finis to the old imperial regime" ¹² with this act of brutality.

It is undeniable that this single event changed the course of the British Raj forever; it was tarnished, and, for all the support that Dyer received at home

for his 'defensive tactics,' the foundations were laid on which decolonisation was to be accentuated. The repercussions of Amritsar, it can be argued, had a greater effect on the move towards independence than the event itself. As Nanda explained, Amritsar "became a turning point in Indo-British relations almost as important as the Mutiny.

Amritsar caused British opinion at home, public and ministerial to change and sympathise with the Indian people. The die-hards at Westminster in 1919 (such as Churchill and Lord Lloyd) claimed that Dyer's actions were justified, and that Indian nationalism was due to Montagu's failure to suppress it in the bud, an unreasonable assumption according to T. O. Lloyd, who believed the "Indian nationalist movement had been growing for some time, and the British government could not resist all of its demands.

Many leading statesmen, such as Baldwin and McDonald, were also ready and willing to make concessions, even if limited at best to start with. Gandhi, as Nanda and Parekh argue, made this recognition possible by championing non-violence in the face of adversity; the British 'lost face' to a greater degree than if major concessions had been made at this time. What Amritsar also allowed Gandhi to do was to press home the slogan of "Swaraj." Gandhi, however, alarmingly predicted that self-rule would be achieved by the end of 1921.

However, the way Gandhi set about achieving this could be considered worrying and rash; his theory of 'non-cooperation' with the state, which included resignation from government services and even as far as the burning of foreign cloth led many to believe¹⁴ it had quasi-anarchist

implications, including India's poet laureate Rabindranath Tagore, who questioned whether Gandhi "was not stoking the flames of narrow nationalism and even xenophobia." 15 Such concerns over Gandhi's propositions for self-rule were compounded when, instead of peace prevailing as he had hoped for, there were acts of looting, arson and even murder of Englishmen.

S. C. Bose wrote that "the promise of Swaraj within a year was not only unwise but childish." 16 Whilst Nanda defended Gandhi on the grounds that a "moral transformation of the Indian people could be expected to lead to a transformation of the British government and people," 17 Gandhi's "Himalayan miscalculation" had only serve to cost lives, possible constitutional reform, and, more importantly, it showed a distinct lack of understanding on the part of Gandhi himself.

Rash speculations of independence being achieved after centuries of colonial rule undermined any success he had achieved up until this point in time. By early 1922 Gandhi was forced to call off the civil disobedience campaign on the premise that India would become ungovernable. Hesitation by Gandhi and other Congress leaders to press home any opportunity for change limited whatever success may have been achieved in the campaign, as attentions soon turned to the growing economic downturn caused by World War I.

Gandhi's role can be seen in two ways; on the one hand, ultimately it was he who called off the civil disobedience campaign in India and called for parity and calm because the campaign had deviated from what it was supposed to

achieve. The British government also recognised that public opinion existed and Spears believed that it could not be ignored, 18 the 'colonial' mentality that existed needing to be discarded. However, Parekh heavily criticises Gandhi, citing that "his flawed strategy of national regeneration failed to develop the conventional forms of institutional politics" and that he "perpetuated unrealistic and confused ideas.

Whilst it can be argued that Gandhi's call for peace was significant, it is important to note that British statesmen of the time were more concerned¹⁹ by factors such as the fact that Britain was in economic downturn post-WWI than with Gandhi's attempted show of power. Gandhi's withdrawal from the political spotlight after 1924 had seen him make little impact on politics within India. Instead, as Nanda believes, he had made a significant impact on the people, as support for the Swaraj campaign showed.

He sat for the Indian National Congress on few occasions and his influence within the Indian National Congress also began to waver. It was not until the 1930s that he returned to politics. The political situation in India during the mid-1920s saw little change effected in this period and Gandhi imprisoned for periods at a time. However, 1927 saw Lord Birkenhead, the new Secretary of State for India call for a review of the 1919 Act, which included a provision for parliamentary review after ten years.

The significance of this, however, was that the commission which was entrusted with conducting the review contained no Indian members. The Congress, which, despite having much more political power than it had enjoyed in its history, and Gandhi, who in these circumstances rejoined the

Congress ranks, could do little to stop the commission carrying out its review, except protest. The following year saw the Congress concluded a more aggressive stance, after the Commission concluded in its findings that government for India should be kept at provincial level.

Its 1928 meeting declared that the party would push for complete independence. Lord Irwin, the new Viceroy persuaded Baldwin that a declaration of dominion status " was the goal of British policy" and called for Round Table Conferences to consider the next steps. Therefore, as Spears states, it puzzled many when such a great advance on the British side was met by direct action by the Congress. However, he concurred that accepting the compromise may split the Congress altogether, forcing Gandhi himself to take measures of his own against the British.

The Salt Tax levied by the British on the Indians in 1930 saw Gandhi respond by walking 240 from Ahmedabad to the coastal town of Dandi, where he was arrested for gathering salt. Congress gave support to Gandhi by calling upon all of its followers to break the salt laws. Soon, processions, arrests, hartals, and occasional riots were widespread across India. In the course of that year some hundred thousand went to prison. Lord Irwin was forced to release Gandhi in 1931, enabling him to attend the second of the Round Table Conferences.

However, he failed to impress the delegates at the conference, and, there were more pressing financial issues at home; Nanda highlighted that the " financial crisis was for it (the British public) a more urgent issue than the niceties of an Indian Constitution. " 20 Gandhi, shunned by imperialists at

the Conference and dismissed by Churchill as nothing more than a “ seditious Middle Temple lawyer” 21 returned to India having achieved little.

However, whilst in this climate it can be argued that Gandhi had little chance of gaining any resolution to his wishes, his timing could not have been any worse; it was naive to assume, as Nanda did, that concessions could be made at such a time when the British government had more pressing concerns with domestic policy than abroad. When the civil disobedience was recommenced, it was met with severe repression. Formally called off in 1934, Gandhi woke up to the realisation that the people as a whole were tired of conflict, and the masses which had supported him were more concerned with the realities of increasing cost of rents and interest rates in the wake of the worldwide Depression rather than home rule.

The 1935 Government of India Act, 22 seen by Spears as a “ blueprint for independence” was criticised in India for not going far enough; Gandhi commented, “ India is still a prison, but the superintendent allows the prisoners to elect the officers who run the jail. ” The increased number of Indians into the civil service meant little when the Viceroy continued to have the final say on matters. The impact of the Second World War, as many historians have concluded, had a massive impact on India.

Gandhi, a pacifist by nature, opposed the war effort but also used it to try and, in one final push, gain independence. Congress leaders backed Gandhi by refusing to support the war effort unless India could participate as an independent state. A mass resignation from all offices of provincial government for members of Congress sent out a message to Britain that

India had 'had enough.' By 1942, Sir Stafford Cripps' radical offer to the Indians on 11th March, essentially an 'after-the-war' proposal that would draw up a dominion constitution for India was rejected.

Gandhi's foolhardy rejection of the proposal on the premise that complete independence could be achieved if India waited for a total Japanese invasion meant that Congress lost a chance to entrench itself, as Spears saw, "in the seats of power.... before it was too late." 23 Whilst stressing in his 1942 "Quit India" 24 campaign, "We shall either free India or die in the attempt; we shall not live to see the perpetuation of our slavery," 25 the campaign backfired. Repeated successes against the Japanese saw British confidence increase under Lord Wavell.

The only major factor in Gandhi's favour was that British elections after WWII in 1945 made it clear that the British public was no longer prepared to make sacrifices to maintain British supremacy in India, and thus moves towards independence were made. Nanda even made the assertion that, by 1945, the civil service in India "could see in 1945 that the old order, which they had known and shaped and loved, had been largely, even if imperceptibly, eroded." For Gandhi, the British had inadvertently let him 'save face' by granting independence.

Moreover, if the British were to retain any advantages of Empire, they had to leave sooner rather than later. Whereas in the aftermath of the First World War Britain had no desire to leave, the aftermath of the Second World War saw them with little choice, Gandhi or otherwise, but to leave. The factors discussed in this essay all played a contributing role in India gained

independence in 1947. India pushed forward for Swaraj²⁶ because the nationalist movement believed that it had a right to govern its own people.

Whilst individuals such as Gokhale and Tilak gave nationalism to the classes, as Spears concurred, Gandhi gave a nation to the country. What he embodied was a figure that united people. If it were not for his leadership skills, preaching and actions in resisting the British, then Indian self-rule may well not have been achieved. He showed what could be achieved by application of commitment and determination. More importantly, he never lost sight of his aims and methods to seek his objectives; he provided a never-ending source of inspiration for the masses.

Nevertheless, the assertion that Gandhi alone achieved independence is flawed. He put ideology above meaningful action, as Parekh believed, his "intensely moralistic vision also blinded him of others." ²⁷ Parekh adds that Gandhi overlooked the specific context the suffering he perceived was in; for example of how Nazi brutality had little effect on a German population - in other words Gandhi's views rested on an optimistic view of humanity.

Parekh's assertion that these limitations in Gandhi's thinking in turn limited the success of the policies can be supported because, superficially, whilst Gandhi masqueraded as a figure who tried to involve himself in almost every attempt to push for self-rule, he achieved little because his concern with ideology rather than politics meant that he lost sight of the objective of Indian leaders.

By consistently pushing for complete independence at every possible opportunity, rather than looking for gradual concessions from the British

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government that would lead to independence, it could be said that Gandhi undermined his effectiveness as a political figure. He was essentially too obdurate and inflexible in his aims to be a successful leader, political or spiritual. Whilst historians such as Francis Robinson have described Gandhi as "politically skilful," who "came to symbolise the Indian nationalist movement," 28 Spears claimed that Gandhi moved against the British government as though it were a 'satanic institution.

Although Nanda rebuts Gandhi by claiming that focus lay on 'stray acts of violence rather than the remarkably peaceful nature of Gandhi's campaigns,' his failure to reconcile his differences with Jinnah so that there was a united front against Britain and his introduction of religious language into politics, as Parekh believes, "alienated the Muslims and rendered the partition of the country unavoidable. 30 Only when Britain seemed to be losing strength in their rule did he lash out against their imperial hosts and make a bold statement of intent, for example the flawed declaration of independence shortly after the Amritsar Massacre.

If we consider an India without Gandhi, would India have still conceivably achieved independence? Whilst historians akin to Nanda has taken a biographical view of Gandhi's life and stressed his importance, it can be strongly argued that the nature of biography means he gives a bias and contorted view of Gandhi, leading to a difference in interpretation to historians (i. . Hobsbawm) concerned with general history who have given little mention to his importance, and those looking at history within India, such as Spear and Parekh, who give a balanced perspective of history within India. Consequently, it can be argued that Gandhi's role in securing <https://assignbuster.com/how-far-were-gandhis-actions-after-1920-responsible-for-indiagaining-her-independence-in-1947-essay-sample/>

independence has been overplayed, and that other factors precipitated independence to a far greater extent than the actions of Gandhi alone.