

# The indian national movement a mass movement history essay



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The Indian national movement was undoubtedly one of the biggest mass movements modern society has ever seen. It was a movement which galvanized millions of people of all classes and ideologies into political action and brought to its knees a mighty colonial empire. Consequently, along with the British, French, Russian, Chinese, Cuban and Vietnamese revolutions, it is of great relevance to those wishing to alter the existing political and social structure.

Various aspects of the Indian national movement, especially Gandhian political strategy, are particularly relevant to these movements in societies that broadly function within the confines of the rule of law, and are characterized by a democratic and basically civil libertarian polity. But it is also relevant to other societies. We know for a fact that even Lech Walesa consciously tried to incorporate elements of Gandhian strategy in the Solidarity Movement in Poland.

The Indian national movement, in fact, provides the only actual historical example of a semi-democratic or democratic type of political structure being successfully replaced or transformed. It is the only movement where the broadly Gramscian theoretical perspective of a war of position was successfully practiced; where state power was not seized in a single historical moment of revolution, but through prolonged popular struggle on a moral, political and ideological level; where reserves of counter-hegemony were built up over the years through progressive stages; where the phases of struggle alternated with 'passive' phases.

The Indian national movement is also an example of how the constitutional space offered by the existing structure could be used without getting co-opted by it. It did not completely reject this space, as such rejection in democratic societies entails heavy costs in terms of hegemonic influence and often leads to isolation – but entered it and used it effectively in combination with non-constitutional struggle to overthrow the existing structure.

The Indian national movement is perhaps one of the best examples of the creation of an extremely wide movement with a common aim in which diverse political and ideological currents could co-exist and work – and simultaneously continue to contend for overall ideological and political hegemony over it. While intense debate on all basic issues was allowed, the diversity and tension did not weaken the cohesion and striking power of the movement; on the contrary, this diversity and atmosphere of freedom and debate became a major source of its strength.

Today, over sixty years after independence, we are still close enough to the freedom struggle to feel its warmth and yet far enough to be able to analyze it coolly, and with the advantage of hindsight. Analyze it as we must, for our past, present and future are inextricably linked to it. Men and women in every age and society make their own history, but they do not make it in a historical vacuum, de novo. Their efforts, however innovative, at finding solutions to their problems in the present and charting out their future, are guided and circumscribed, moulded and conditioned, by their respective histories, their inherited economic, political and ideological structures. To make myself clearer, the path that India has followed since 1947 has deep roots in the struggle for independence. The political and, ideological

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features, which have had a decisive impact on post-independence development, are largely a legacy of the freedom struggle. It is a legacy that belongs to all the Indian people, regardless of which party or group they belong to now, for the 'party' which led this struggle from 1885 to 1947 was not then a party but a movement – all political trends from the Right to the Left were incorporated in it.

What are the outstanding features of the freedom struggle? A major aspect is the values and mean ideals on which the movement itself was based and the broad socio-economic-and political vision of its leadership (this vision was that of a democratic , civil libertarian and secular India, based on self-reliant, egalitarian social order and an independent foreign policy).

The movement popularized democratic ideas and instructions in India. The nationalists fought for the introduction of a representative government on the basis of popular election and demanded that elections be based on adult franchise. The Indian National Congress was organized on a democratic basis and in the form of a parliament. It not only permitted but encouraged free expression of opinion within the party and the movement. Some of the most important decisions in its history were taken after heated debates and on the basis of open voting.

From the beginning, the nationalists fought against attacks by the State on the freedom of the press, expression and association, and made the struggle for these freedoms an integral part of the national movement. During their brief spell in power, from 1937-39, the Congress ministries greatly extended the scope of civil liberties. The defence of civil liberties was not narrowly

conceived in terms of one political group, but was extended to include the defence of other groups whose views were politically and ideologically different. The Moderates defended Tilak, the Extremist, and non-violent Congressmen passionately defended revolutionary terrorists and communists alike during their trials. In 1928, the Public Safety Bill and Trade Disputes Bill were opposed not only by Motilal Nehru but also by conservatives like Madan Mohan Malaviya and M. R. Jayakar. It was this strong civil libertarian and democratic tradition of the national movement which was reflected in the constitution of independent India.

The freedom struggle was also a struggle for economic development. In time an economic ideology developed which was to dominate the views of independent India. The national movement accepted, with near unanimity, the need to develop India on the basis of industrialization which in turn was to be independent of foreign capital and was to rely on the indigenous capital goods sector. A crucial role was assigned to the public sector and, in the 1930's there was a commitment to economic planning.

From the initial stages, the movement adopted a pro-poor orientation which was strengthened with the advent of Gandhi and the rise of the leftists who struggled to make the movement adopt a social outlook. The movement also increasingly moved towards a programme of radical agrarian reform.

However, socialism did not, at any stage, become the official goal of the Indian National Congress through there was a great deal of debate around it within the National Movement and the Indian National Congress urging in the 1930s and 1940s. For various reasons, despite the existence of powerful

leftist trend within the nationalist mainstream, the dominant vision within the

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Congress did not transcend the parameters of a capitalist conception of society.

The national movement was, from its early days, fully committed to secularism. Its leadership fought hard to inculcate secular values among the people and opposed the growth of communalism. And despite the partition of India and the accompanying communal holocaust, it did succeed in enshrining secularism in the constitution of free India.

It was never inward looking. Since the days of Raja Rammohan Roy, Indian leaders had developed a broad international outlook. Over the years, they evolved a policy of opposition to imperialism on a world-wide scale and solidarity with anti-colonial movements in other parts of the world. They established the principle that Indians should hate British imperialism but not the British people. Consequently, they were supported by a large number of Englishmen, women and political groups. They maintained close links with the progressive, anti-colonial and anti-capitalist forces of the world. A non-racist, anti-imperialist outlook, which continues to characterize Indian foreign policy, was thus part of the legacy of the anti-imperialist struggle.

In my view, India's freedom struggle was basically the result of a fundamental contradiction between the interests of the Indian people and that of British colonialism. From the beginning itself, India's national leaders grasped this contradiction. They were able to see that India was regressing economically and undergoing a process of underdevelopment. In time they were able to evolve a scientific analysis of colonialism. In fact, they were the first in the 19th century to develop an economic critique of colonialism and

lay bare its complex structure. They were also able to see the distinction between colonial policy and the imperatives of the colonial structure. Taking the social experience of the Indian people as colonize subjects and recognizing the common interests of the Indian people vis-à-vis colonials, the national leaders gradually evolved a clear-cut anti-colonial ideology and critique of colonialism were disseminated during the mass phase of the movement.

The national movement also played a pivotal role in the historical process through which the Indian people got formed into a nation or a group of people. National leaders like Dadabhai Naoroji, Surendranath Banerjee, Tilak, Gandhiji and Nehru accepted that India was not yet a fully structured nation but a nation-in-the-making, and that one of the major objectives and functions of the movement was to promote the growing unity of the Indian people through a common struggle against colonialism. In other words, the national movement was seen both as a product of the process of the nation-in-the-making that was never counter-posed to the diverse regional, linguistic and ethnic identities in India. On the contrary, the emergence of a national identity and the flowering of the narrower identities were seen as processes deriving strength from each other.

The pre-nationalist resistance to colonial rule failed to understand the twin phenomena of colonialism and the nation-in-the-making. In fact, these phenomena were not visible, or available to be grasped, on the surface. They had to be grasped through hard analysis. This analysis and political consciousness based on it were then taken to the people by intellectuals who

played a significant role in arousing the inherent, instinctive, nascent, anti-colonial consciousness of the masses.