Chapter 11: Mahatma Gandhi and the Nationalist Movement

Exercises — Exercises

Q1 How did Mahatma Gandhi seek to identify with the common people?

Gandhiji consciously set himself apart from other nationalist leaders by living, dressing and speaking like the common folk. While other leaders wore a Western suit or an Indian bandgala, he went among the people in a simple dhoti or loincloth; during his 1921 tour of South India he even shaved his head and adopted the loincloth to identify with the poor. He spent part of each day working on the charkha (spinning wheel) and urged other nationalists to do the same, thereby breaking the caste boundary between mental and manual labour. His ascetic lifestyle symbolised abstinence and self-discipline, set against the consumerist culture of the modern world. He also insisted that the nationalist message be communicated in people's mother tongues rather than in English. By caste a merchant and by profession a lawyer, his simple life and love of working with his hands let him empathise with the labouring poor, and they in turn empathised with him.

Q2 How was Mahatma Gandhi perceived by the peasants?

To the Indian peasant, Gandhiji appeared as a saviour who would rescue them from high taxes and oppressive officials and restore dignity and autonomy to their lives. The historian Shahid Amin's study of eastern Uttar Pradesh shows that when Gandhiji travelled through the region in 1921, adoring crowds of thousands gathered at every station, some crying with emotion and showering him with currency notes and coins. Known variously as 'Gandhi baba', 'Gandhi Maharaj' or simply 'Mahatma', he was credited with miraculous powers. It was rumoured that he had been sent by the King to redress the farmers' grievances and could overrule local officials, that his power was greater than the English monarch's, and that his arrival would drive the colonial rulers away. There were also stories of dire consequences for those who opposed or abused him, such as houses catching fire or crops failing. These rumours reflect how the peasants saw him as a figure of extraordinary, almost divine authority working for their welfare.

Q3 Why did the salt laws become an important issue of struggle?

The salt laws gave the colonial state a monopoly over the manufacture and sale of salt, and Gandhiji's choice to target them showed his tactical wisdom. Salt was indispensable in every Indian household, yet people were forbidden from making it even for domestic use and were compelled to buy it at a high price from shops. The salt tax was oppressive in several ways: it taxed a vital necessity, it prevented the public from manufacturing salt, and the government even destroyed natural salt it could not sell profitably, so valuable national property was destroyed at national expense. Gandhiji called the salt monopoly a 'fourfold curse' that deprived people of an easy village industry, caused wanton destruction of a resource nature produces in abundance, added to national expenditure, and levied a tax of over 1,000 per cent on a starving people. Because salt touched the rich and poor alike and was so widely disliked, making it his target allowed Gandhiji to mobilise a very wide discontent against British rule.

Q4 Why are newspapers an important source for the study of the national movement?

Contemporary newspapers, published in English as well as in the various Indian languages, tracked Mahatma Gandhi's movements, reported on his activities and also represented what ordinary Indians thought of him. They allow the historian to follow the day-to-day progress of movements such as the Salt March and to hear a range of opinions across the political spectrum. Gandhiji's image among the peasants of eastern Uttar Pradesh, for instance, can be reconstructed from the reports and rumours carried in the local Hindi press. However, newspapers must be used carefully and not seen as unprejudiced. They were published by people with their own political opinions and world views, which shaped what was printed and how events were reported; an account in a London newspaper would differ sharply from one in an Indian nationalist paper. So while newspapers are an invaluable source for recovering both events and public perceptions, every statement in them cannot be accepted literally as representing what was happening on the ground.

Q5 Why was the charkha chosen as a symbol of nationalism?

Gandhiji chose the charkha (spinning wheel) because it embodied the values he wished the nation to adopt. He was profoundly critical of the modern age in which machines enslaved humans and displaced labour, and he saw the charkha as the symbol of a human society that would not glorify machines and technology. Spinning could provide the poor with supplementary income and make them self-reliant, which fitted his stress on wearing khadi (home-spun cloth) rather than mill-made cloth imported from overseas. The act of spinning also broke the traditional caste boundary between mental labour and manual labour, since everyone, however educated, could work with their hands. Gandhiji objected not to all machinery but to the craze for labour-saving machinery that threw thousands out of work; he wanted to save labour for all, not a few, and to concentrate wealth in the hands of all rather than a few. Because he himself spent part of each day at the wheel and asked other nationalists to do likewise, the image of Gandhiji with the charkha became the most abiding image of Indian nationalism.

Q6 How was non-cooperation a form of protest?

Non-cooperation was a form of protest in which Indians who wished colonial rule to end withdrew their voluntary cooperation from the British Government rather than confronting it with violence. Emboldened by the success of the Rowlatt satyagraha, which had made him a truly national leader, Gandhiji launched the movement and asked Indians to adhere to a 'renunciation of all voluntary association with the Government'. In practice this meant that people should stop attending government-run schools, colleges and law courts and should not pay taxes. Gandhiji argued that if non-cooperation was carried out effectively, India would win swaraj within a year, and he joined hands with the Khilafat Movement so that Hindus and Muslims could collectively bring an end to colonial rule.

The method rested on the idea that colonial power survived only because Indians cooperated with it; by withdrawing that cooperation, they could paralyse its functioning. As Gandhiji's biographer Louis Fischer wrote, non-cooperation was 'negative enough to be peaceful but positive enough to be effective' — it entailed denial, renunciation and self-discipline, and was training for self-rule. The movement unleashed an unprecedented surge of popular action: students left government schools and colleges, lawyers refused to attend court, and in 1921 there were 396 strikes involving 600,000 workers. The countryside too was seething — hill tribes in northern Andhra violated forest laws, farmers in Awadh refused to pay taxes, and peasants in Kumaun refused to carry loads for officials, often acting in ways that suited their own interests rather than following the leadership from above. For the first time since the Revolt of 1857 the British Raj was shaken to its foundations. However, when peasants torched a police station at Chauri Chaura in February 1922 and several constables died, Gandhiji, insisting that no provocation could justify such violence, called off the entire movement, showing that non-cooperation had to remain strictly non-violent to be legitimate.

Q7 Why were the dialogues at the Round Table Conference inconclusive?

The British convened a series of Round Table Conferences in London once the Salt March had forced them to realise that their Raj would not last forever and that they would have to devolve some power to Indians. The dialogues, however, proved inconclusive for several reasons.

The first conference, held in November 1930, was rendered an exercise in futility because it was held without the pre-eminent political leader in India, Gandhiji, who was then in jail. He was released in January 1931 and, after several long meetings with Viceroy Lord Irwin, signed the Gandhi-Irwin Pact, by which civil disobedience would be called off, prisoners released and salt manufacture allowed along the coast. Yet even this pact was limited and was criticised by radical nationalists, because Gandhiji could not obtain a commitment to political independence, only an assurance of talks towards that end.

The second conference, held in late 1931, was inconclusive largely because Gandhiji's claim that the Congress spoke for all of India was challenged by three parties. The Muslim League claimed to represent the interests of the Muslim minority; the Princes argued that the Congress had no stake in their territories; and B.R. Ambedkar argued that Gandhiji and the Congress did not really represent the lowest castes. On the question of separate electorates for the Depressed Classes, Gandhiji and Ambedkar were sharply opposed — Gandhiji feared separate electorates would permanently segregate the 'lower castes' and perpetuate the stigma of untouchability, while Ambedkar insisted that a handicapped community needed a share of political power to protect itself.

With the Congress unable to establish itself as the sole voice of India and these deep divisions unresolved, the London conference ended without agreement. Gandhiji returned to India and resumed civil disobedience, now facing a new and deeply unsympathetic Viceroy, Lord Willingdon.

Q8 In what way did Mahatma Gandhi transform the nature of the national movement?

When Gandhiji returned from South Africa in 1915, Indian nationalism was largely an elite phenomenon — a creation of lawyers, doctors and landlords concentrated in the major cities and towns. In his BHU speech of February 1916 he charged the Indian elite with neglecting the labouring poor and announced his intent to make nationalism properly representative of the Indian people as a whole. By 1922 he had fulfilled that promise, transforming the movement into a genuine mass struggle.

He did this first through his local campaigns at Champaran, Ahmedabad and Kheda, which marked him as a nationalist with deep sympathy for the poor. He then built countrywide movements — the Rowlatt satyagraha, Non-cooperation, the Salt Satyagraha and Quit India — that drew in hundreds of thousands of peasants, workers and artisans who had earlier stood outside politics. Many venerated him as 'Mahatma' because he dressed, lived and spoke like them.

Gandhiji also broadened the movement through careful organisation. New Congress branches were set up across India, Praja Mandals carried the nationalist creed into the princely states, and provincial committees were reorganised on linguistic lines so that the message could be spread in people's mother tongues rather than in English. He linked the national cause to social reform — the abolition of untouchability, Hindu-Muslim harmony, and self-reliance through khadi — insisting that Indians had to rid themselves of social evils to be worthy of freedom.

His distinctive technique of non-violent satyagraha gave ordinary people a dignified and accessible means of protest, while symbols like the dhoti and charkha gave the movement a popular idiom. He attracted both poor peasants and wealthy industrialists such as G.D. Birla, and a talented group of followers — Nehru, Patel, Azad, Bose, Rajagopalachari and others from different regions and faiths — who carried the Congress to the farthest corners of the country. In these ways Gandhiji turned nationalism from an elite preserve into a broad-based popular movement.

Q9 What do private letters and autobiographies tell us about an individual? How are these sources different from official accounts?

Private letters and autobiographies give us access to the inner life of an individual. In private letters people express their anger and pain, their dismay and anxiety, their hopes and frustrations in ways they may never do in public statements — the exchange of letters between Nehru, Rajendra Prasad and Gandhiji in 1936 reveals Nehru's hurt, the conservatives' resentment and Gandhiji's role as mediator. Yet this private-public distinction often breaks down: many letters, though personal, are also meant to be read by others, and their language may be shaped by the awareness that they might one day be published, just as the fear of print may stop people writing freely. Gandhiji regularly published in Harijan letters others wrote to him, and Nehru published a collection, A Bunch of Old Letters.

Autobiographies, similarly, are rich in human detail but must be read with care. They are retrospective accounts written largely from memory, telling us only what the author could recollect or chose to present, and how the writer wished to be viewed by others. Writing an autobiography is a way of framing a picture of oneself, so the reader must also notice what the author leaves out — the silences and acts of forgetting.

These sources differ from official accounts such as the government's confidential Fortnightly Reports. Official records were kept by colonial rulers keeping tabs on those they regarded as critical of the government, and they expressed what higher officials saw or wanted to believe — often playing down the mass response to movements like the Salt March to reassure themselves that their fears were unwarranted. Thus private letters and autobiographies reveal personal thoughts and feelings from the writer's own standpoint, while official accounts reflect the anxieties and interests of the colonial state.

Q10 Find out about the route of the Dandi March. On a map of Gujarat plot the line of the march and mark the major towns and villages that it passed along the route.

Map-work guidance: On an outline map of Gujarat, draw the line of the Salt March from its starting point at Gandhiji's Sabarmati Ashram (near Ahmedabad) to the coastal village of Dandi on the sea, the two places the chapter names as the march's beginning and destination. Gandhiji began walking on 12 March 1930 and reached Dandi three weeks later, making a fistful of salt on 6 April 1930. Mark Ahmedabad/Sabarmati and Dandi clearly, and show the route heading towards the ocean; the chapter also names Wasna as one village where Gandhiji addressed the people en route, so it may be marked along the way. Only plot the places the chapter mentions — do not invent additional stops.

Q11 Read any two autobiographies of nationalist leaders. Look at the different ways in which the authors represent their own life and times, and interpret the national movement. See how their views differ. Write an account based on your studies.

Project guidance: Choose and read two autobiographies of nationalist leaders (for example, Jawaharlal Nehru's An Autobiography or M.K. Gandhi's The Story of My Experiments with Truth) and compare how each author frames his own life and interprets the national movement. As the chapter cautions, remember that autobiographies are retrospective accounts written from memory, so note not only what each writer recounts but also the silences — what he chooses not to tell — and write an account comparing how their views, emphases and self-portraits differ.

Q12 Choose any event that took place during the national movement. Try and read the letters and speeches of the leaders of the time. Some of these are now published. He could be a local leader from the region where you live. Try and see how the local leaders viewed the activities of the national leadership at the top. Write about the movement based on your reading.

Project guidance: Pick one event from the national movement (such as the Non-cooperation Movement, the Salt Satyagraha or Quit India) and read the published letters and speeches of leaders of that time — national figures as well as, if possible, a local leader from your own region. Using these sources, examine how local leaders viewed and responded to the activities of the national leadership at the top, and write an account of the movement based on your reading, keeping in mind that letters and speeches reveal both public positions and private thoughts.