

## The National Movement and its Legacy

An appreciation of the hundred-year-old freedom struggle is integral to an analysis of developments in post-1947 India. While India inherited its economic and administrative structures from the precolonial and colonial period, the values and ideals—the vision—and the well-defined and comprehensive ideology that were to inspire it in nation-building were derived from the national movement. Representing the Indian people, it incorporated various political trends from the right and the left which were committed to its ideological goals; it excluded only communalists and those loyal to the colonial rulers.

These goals and values were, moreover, not confined to the intellectuals and the middle classes. During the era of mass politics, tens of thousands of the most humble cadres disseminated them among the common people in urban as well as rural areas. Consequently, these ideals were to play a critical role in integrating and keeping together Indian society and polity. They served to link the national liberation movement with the efforts to develop India, in what Jawaharlal Nehru characterized as ‘a continuing revolution’. It is, in fact, these ideals by which people and parties are still evaluated and judged.

### Character of the National Movement

The Indian freedom struggle was perhaps the greatest mass movement in world history. After 1919, it was built around the basic notion that the people had to and could play an active role in politics and in their own liberation, and it succeeded in politicizing, and drawing into political action a large part of the Indian people. Gandhiji, the leader who moved and mobilized millions into politics, all his life propagated the view that the people and not leaders created a mass movement, whether for the overthrow of the colonial regime or for social transformation. He added, though, that the success or failure of a movement depended a great deal on the quality of its leadership.

Satyagraha, as a form of struggle, was based on the active participation of the people and on the sympathy and support of the non-participating millions. In fact, unlike a violent revolution, which could be waged by a minority of committed cadres and fighters, a non-violent revolution needed the political mobilization of millions and the passive support of the vast majority.

It may be pointed out, parenthetically, that it was because of the long experience of this kind of political participation by common people that the founders of the Indian republic, who also led the freedom struggle in its last phase, could repose full faith in their political capacity. The leaders unhesitatingly introduced adult franchise despite widespread poverty and illiteracy.

The Indian national movement was fully committed to a polity based on representative democracy and the full range of civil liberties for the individual. It provided the experience through which these two could become an integral part of Indian political thinking.

From the very beginning the movement popularized democratic ideas and institutions among the people and struggled for the introduction of parliamentary institutions on the basis of popular elections. Starting from the turn of the twentieth century, the nationalists demanded the introduction of adult franchise. Much attention was also paid to the defence of the freedom of the Press and speech against attacks by the colonial authorities besides the promotion of other political and economic policies. Throughout, the movement struggled to expand the semi-democratic political arena and prevent the rulers from limiting the existing space within which legal political activities and peaceful political agitations and mass struggle could be organized.

Congress ministries, formed in 1937, visibly extended civil liberties to the resurgent peasants', workers' and students' movements as also to radical groups and parties such as the Congress Socialist Party and Communist Party.

From its foundation in 1885, the Indian National Congress, the main political organ of the national movement, was organized on democratic lines. It relied upon discussion at all levels as the chief mode for the formation of its policies and arriving at political decisions. Its policies and resolutions were publicly discussed and debated and then voted upon. Some of the most important decisions in its history were taken after rich and heated debates and on the basis of open voting. For example, the decision in 1920 to start the Non-Cooperation Movement was taken with 1,336 voting for and 884 voting against Gandhiji's resolution. Similarly, at the Lahore Congress in 1929, where Gandhiji was asked to take charge of the coming Civil Disobedience movement, a resolution sponsored by him condemning the bomb attack on the Viceroy's train by the revolutionary terrorists was passed by a narrow majority of 942 to 794. During the Second World War, Gandhiji's stand on cooperation with the war effort was rejected by Congress in January 1942.

Congress did not insist on uniformity of viewpoints or policy approach within its ranks. It allowed dissent and not only tolerated but encouraged different and minority opinions to be openly held and freely expressed. In fact, dissent became a part of its style. At independence, Congress, thus, had the experience of democratic functioning and struggle for civil liberties for over sixty years. Furthermore, the democratic style of functioning was not peculiar to Congress. Most other political organizations such as the Congress Socialist Party, trade unions and Kisan Sabhas, students', writers' and women's organizations, and professional associations functioned in the manner of political democracies.

The major leaders of the movement were committed wholeheartedly to civil liberties. It is worth quoting them. For example, Lokamanya Tilak proclaimed that 'liberty of the Press and liberty of speech give birth to a nation and nourish it'.<sup>1</sup> Gandhiji wrote in 1922: 'We must first make good the right of free speech and free association . . . We must defend these elementary rights with our lives.' And again in 1939: 'Civil liberty consistent with the observance of non-violence is the first step towards *Swaraj*. It is the breath of political and social life. It is the foundation of freedom. There is no room there for dilution or compromise. It is the water of life. I have never heard of water being diluted.'<sup>2</sup> It thus becomes clear that Gandhiji was fully committed to liberal, democratic values—only he also saw their deficiencies and believed that

the existing liberal democratic structure, as prevailing in the West, was not adequate in enabling the people to control the wielders of political power. Jawaharlal Nehru wrote in 1936: 'If civil liberties are suppressed a nation loses all vitality and becomes impotent for anything substantial.'<sup>3</sup> Further, the resolution on Fundamental Rights, passed by the Karachi Congress in 1931, guaranteed the rights of free expression of opinion through speech or the Press, and freedom of association.

The consensus on the practice of non-violence during the national movement also contributed to the creation of a temper of democracy in the country. Discussion, debate and persuasion, backed by public opinion, was emphasized for bringing about political and social change as opposed to glorification of violence which lies at the heart of authoritarianism.

The defence of civil liberties was also not narrowly conceived in terms of a single group or viewpoint. Political trends and groups otherwise critical of each other and often at opposite ends of the political or ideological spectrum vigorously defended each other's civil rights. The Moderates—Gopal Krishna Gokhale, Surendranath Banerjea and others—defended the Extremist leader Tilak's right to speak and write what he liked. And Congressmen, votaries of non-violence, defended Bhagat Singh and other revolutionary terrorists being tried in the Lahore and other conspiracy cases as also the Communists being tried in the Meerut Conspiracy Case. In 1928, the Public Safety Bill and the Trade Disputes Bill, aimed at suppressing trade unions, the left wing and the Communists, were opposed in the Central Legislative Assembly not only by Motilal Nehru but also by Conservatives such as Madan Mohan Malaviya and M.R. Jayakar, besides political spokespersons of Indian capitalists such as Ghanshyam Das Birla and Purshottamdas Thakurdas.

The basic notions of popular sovereignty, representative government and civil liberties to be exercised even against the rulers were not part of India's tradition nor were they, as some wrongly hold, 'the lasting contribution of colonialism'. It was the national movement and not the bureaucratic, authoritarian colonial state that indigenized, popularized and rooted them in India. As pointed out earlier, the colonial administration and ideologies not only tampered with civil liberties and resisted the nationalist demand for the introduction of a parliamentary system based on popular elections but, from the middle of the nineteenth century, promoted the view that for geographical, historical and socio-cultural reasons India was unfit for democracy. It was in opposition to this colonial ideology and practice that the national movement, influenced deeply by democratic thought and traditions of the Enlightenment, succeeded in making democracy and civil liberty basic elements of the Indian political ethos. If free India could start and persist with a democratic polity, it was because the national movement had already firmly established the civil libertarian and democratic tradition among the Indian people. It was this tradition which was reflected in the Indian constitution and which proved wrong the Cassandras who had repeatedly predicted that democracy and civil liberties would not survive in a society so divided by language, religion, caste and culture and in the absence of a minimum of prosperity or economic development and literacy as was the case in western Europe and the United States. It is this tradition which explains why multi-party democracy and civil liberties have met different fates in India and Pakistan, though both equally constituted colonial India. The political party that brought about Pakistan was not known for its defence of civil liberties, or its functioning on

democratic lines, or its tolerance towards its political opponents. Democracy was not a significant part of its political culture. Besides, the national movement and its political culture were weak precisely in the areas which came to constitute Pakistan.

To conclude, over the years, the nationalist movement successfully created an alternative to colonial and precolonial political culture based on authoritarianism, bureaucratism, obedience and paternalism. Its ideology and culture of democracy and civil liberties were based on respect for dissent, freedom of expression, the majority principle, and the right of minority opinion to exist and develop.

### **Economic Underpinnings of the National Movement**

The Indian national movement developed a complex and sophisticated critique of the basic features of India's colonial economy, especially of its subordination to the needs of the British economy. On the basis of this critique, the movement evolved a broad economic strategy to overcome India's economic backwardness and underdevelopment. This was to form the basis of India's economic thinking after independence.

The vision of a self-reliant independent economy was developed and popularized. Self-reliance was defined not as autarchy but as avoidance of a subordinate position in the world economy. As Jawaharlal Nehru put it in 1946, self-reliance 'does not exclude international trade, which should be encouraged, but with a view to avoid economic imperialism'.<sup>4</sup> At the same time, the nationalists accepted from the beginning and with near unanimity the objective of economic development towards modern agriculture and industry on the basis of modern science and technology—India, they held, had to industrialize or go under. They also emphasized the close link between industry and agriculture. Industrial development was seen as essential for rural development, for it alone could reduce population pressure on land and rural unemployment. Within industrialization, the emphasis was on the creation of an indigenous heavy capital goods or machine-making sector whose absence was seen as a cause both of economic dependence and underdevelopment. Simultaneously, for essential consumer goods, the nationalists advocated reliance on medium, small-scale and cottage industries. Small-scale and cottage industries were to be encouraged and protected as a part of the development strategy of increasing employment.

Indian nationalists were opposed to the unrestricted entry of foreign capital because it replaced and suppressed Indian capital, especially under conditions of foreign political domination. According to them, real and self-reliant development could occur only through indigenous capital. On the other hand, the nationalists averred that if India was politically independent and free to evolve its own economic policies, it might use foreign capital to supplement indigenous efforts, because of India's vast capital requirements and need to import machinery and advanced technology from other countries.

During the 1930s and 1940s a basic restructuring of agrarian relations also became one of the objectives of the national movement. All intermediary rent receivers such as the zamindars and other landlords were to be abolished and agriculture based on peasant proprietors.

An active and central role was envisaged for the state in economic development by the nationalists. Rapid industrialization, in particular, needed a comprehensive policy of direct and systematic state intervention. Economic planning by the government and the massive development of the public sector were widely accepted in the 1930s. The state was to develop large-scale and key industries apart from infrastructure, such as power, irrigation, roads and water supply, where large resources were needed, and which were beyond the capacity of Indian capital. As early as 1931, the Resolution on Fundamental Rights and Economic Programme, adopted at the Karachi session of the Indian National Congress, declared that in independent India 'the State shall own or control key industries and services, mineral resources, railways, waterways, shipping and other means of public transport'.<sup>5</sup> Interestingly, the session was presided over by Sardar Patel, the Resolution drafted by Jawaharlal Nehru and moved in the open session by Gandhiji. To promote planning as an instrument of integrated and comprehensive development Congress sponsored in 1938 the National Planning Committee while the Indian capitalists formulated the Bombay Plan in 1943.

Gandhiji was the only major nationalist leader who disagreed with the emphasis on modern industry. But, in time, even he met the dominant view halfway. In the 1930s, he repeatedly asserted that he was not opposed to all machine industries but only to those which displaced human labour. He added that he would 'prize every invention of science made for the benefit of all'. But this was subject to one condition: all large-scale industries should be owned and controlled by the state and not by private capitalists. Nevertheless, Gandhiji did not insist that the national movement should accept his economic approach or agenda, as he did in the case of non-violence, Hindu-Muslim unity and opposition to untouchability. He also did not counterpose his views to those of the other nationalists as witnessed by his moving the resolution at the Karachi session of the Congress in 1931 which favoured development of large-scale industry under state ownership or control. It is also significant that in 1942 he made Jawaharlal Nehru his heir despite the latter's total commitment to the development of industry and agriculture on the basis of modern science and technology. At the same time, the nationalist movement accepted the Gandhian perspective on cottage and small-scale industries. This perspective was to find full reflection in the Nehruvian Second Five Year Plan.

The Indian national movement was quite radical by contemporary standards. From the beginning it had a pro-poor orientation. For example, the poverty of the masses and the role of colonialism as its source was the starting point of Dadabhai Naoroji's economic critique of colonialism. With Gandhiji and the rise of a socialist current this orientation was further strengthened. The removal of poverty became the most important objective next to the overthrow of colonialism.

From the late 1920s, Jawaharlal Nehru, Subhas Chandra Bose, the Congress socialists, the Communists, the Revolutionary Terrorists and various other socialist groups strove to give the national movement a socialist orientation and to popularize the vision of a socialist India after independence. Socialist ideas assumed prominence within the movement, attracting the younger nationalist cadre and large sections of the nationalist intelligentsia, but they did not become the dominant current. Jawaharlal Nehru, the major ideologue of socialism in pre-1947 India, readily

conceded that Congress had not in any way accepted socialism as its ideal. Rather the goal it sought was the creation of an egalitarian society in which all citizens would have equal opportunities and 'a civilised standard of life . . . so as to make the attainment of this equal opportunity a reality' <sup>6</sup>

Nevertheless, even while the question of the basic economic structure of free India remained open and undecided, the Socialists did succeed in giving the national movement a leftist tilt. It was committed to carrying out basic changes in society, economy and polity. It went on defining itself in more and more radical terms, based on equity and social justice and greater social and economic equality. It accepted and propagated a programme of reforms that was quite radical by contemporary standards: compulsory and free primary education, lowering of taxes on the poor and lower middle classes, reduction of the salt tax, land revenue and rent, debt relief and provision of cheap credit to agriculturists, protection of tenants' rights and ultimately the abolition of landlordism and 'land to the tiller', workers' right to a living wage and a shorter working day, workers' and peasants' rights to organize themselves, and reform of the machinery of law and order. A dramatic moment in the evolution of this radical orientation of the national movement was the Karachi Resolution of the 1931 Congress session which declared that 'in order to end the exploitation of the masses, political freedom must include real economic freedom of the starving millions' <sup>7</sup>

And to crown this growing radicalism was that of Gandhiji who declared in 1942 that 'the land belongs to those who work on it and to no one else' <sup>8</sup>

An aspect of its commitment to the creation of an egalitarian society was the national movement's opposition to all forms of inequality, discrimination and oppression based on gender and caste. It allied itself with and often subsumed movements and organizations for the social liberation of women and the lower castes. The national movement brought millions of women out of the home into the political arena. Its reform agenda included the improvement of their social position including the right to work and education and to equal political rights. As part of its struggle against caste inequality and caste oppression, abolition of untouchability became one of its major political priorities after 1920. The movement, however, failed to form and propagate a strong anti-caste ideology, though Gandhiji did advocate the total abolition of the caste system itself in the 1940s. It was because of the atmosphere and sentiments generated by the national movement that no voices of protest were raised in the Constituent Assembly when reservations for the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes were mooted. Similarly, the passage of the Hindu Code Bills in the 1950s was facilitated by the national movement's efforts in favour of the social liberation of women.

## **Secularism**

From its early days, the national movement was committed to secularism. Secularism was defined in a comprehensive manner which meant the separation of religion from politics and the state, the treatment of religion as a private matter for the individual, state neutrality towards or

equal respect for all religions, absence of discrimination between followers of different religions, and active opposition to communalism. For example, to counter communalism and give expression to its secular commitment, Congress in its Karachi Resolution of 1931 declared that in free India 'every citizen shall enjoy freedom of conscience and the right freely to profess and practise his religion', that all citizens would be 'equal before the law, irrespective of caste, creed or sex', that no disability would attach to any citizen because of caste, creed or gender 'in regard to public employment, office of power or honour, and in the exercise of any trade or calling', and that 'the State shall observe neutrality in regard to all religions'.<sup>9</sup>

It is true that in his early years, Gandhi, a deeply religious person, emphasized the close connection between religion and politics. This was because he believed that politics had to be based on morality, and to him all religions were the source of morality. Religion was, in fact, he believed, itself morality in the Indian sense of dharma. But he not only moved the Karachi Resolution in 1931, but when he saw that communalists were using religion as a sectarian belief system to divide the people, he overtly began to preach the separation of religion from politics. Thus he said in 1942: 'Religion is a personal matter which should have no place in politics.'<sup>10</sup> And again in 1947: 'Religion is the personal affair of each individual. It must not be mixed up with politics or national affairs.'<sup>11</sup> Jawaharlal Nehru wrote and spoke passionately and with deep understanding on communalism. He was perhaps the first Indian to see communalism as the Indian form of fascism. Interestingly, the leaders of the national movement never appealed to the people on religious grounds or that the British rulers' religion was Christianity. Their critique of British rule was invariably economic, political, social or cultural.

It is true that the national movement was not able to counter forces of communalism adequately or evolve an effective strategy against them. This contributed to the Partition and the communal carnage of 1946–47. But it was because of the strong secular commitment of the national movement that, despite these traumatic events, independent India made secularism a basic pillar of its constitution, as also of its state and society.

## **Nation-in-the-making**

The national movement recognized early on that the process of nation-formation in India was a recent one. In other words, India was a nation-in-the-making. Promoting this process through the common struggle against colonialism became a basic objective. In this respect, the leadership of the movement acknowledged the role of colonialism in unifying India economically and administratively even while it criticized its furthering all kinds of politically divisive tendencies.

From the outset the movement emphasized its all-Indianness. For example, the Indian National Congress was founded in 1885 not as a federation of the existing provincial political organizations but as a new nationwide organization committed to nationwide political mobilization on the basis of all-India demands. Its cadres and its appeal, its audience and above all its leadership were drawn from all over India. And from the beginning it emphasized the unity and integrity of the country. In fact, it was the alliance of the states' peoples' movements, as part of the all-India

national movement, that enabled easy integration of the princely states with the rest of India after independence.

This all-Indianness was not a feature peculiar to the Indian National Congress. Other political parties and popular mass organizations too followed suit.

To the nationalist leaders, the notion of a structured nation did not contradict its unity. They not only acknowledged but also appreciated India's rich cultural, linguistic, religious, ethnic and regional diversity. The emergence of a strong national identity and the flowering of other narrower identities were seen as mutually reinforcing processes. The diversity and multiple identities were not seen as obstacles to be overcome but as positive features that were sources of strength to Indian culture, civilization and the nation, and were integral to the emerging nationhood. These regional-cultural identities, in particular, developed not in opposition to but as part of the national movement and the all-India identity.

Indian society was also divided by class. But while not letting class divisions to segment it, the movement did not stand in the way of class organizations and class struggles.

Over time, the national movement evolved the dual concepts and objectives of unity in diversity and national integration. The former was to be based on cultural diversity and cultural interaction, leading to a federal polity. National integration was to lead to a strong political centre and the weaving of the different cultural strands into an evolving composite Indian culture.

## **Foreign Policy**

Independent India's foreign policy was also rooted in the principles and policies evolved by the nationalists since the 1870s. Over time, Indian leaders had developed a broad international outlook based on opposition to colonialism and sympathy and support for the peoples fighting for their independence. In the 1930s and 1940s, the national movement took a strong anti-fascist stand. This was put forward in a most expressive manner by Gandhi. Condemning Hitler for the genocide of the Jews, and condoning violence, perhaps for the first time, he wrote in 1938: 'If there ever could be a justifiable war in the name of and for humanity, a war against Germany, to prevent the wanton persecution of a whole race, would be completely justified.'<sup>12</sup> The nationalist approach to world problems during the 1930s was clearly enunciated by Jawaharlal Nehru in his presidential address at the Lucknow session of the Congress in 1936:

We see the world divided up into two vast groups today—the imperialist and fascist on one side, the socialist and nationalist on the other . . . Inevitably, we take our stand with the progressive forces of the world which are ranged against fascism and imperialism.<sup>13</sup>

It is of great significance that Indian nationalism was not chauvinist or jingoist. It did not take recourse to reverse racism even when actively opposing racism practised by the British in India. Opposing and hating British imperialism, it trained its cadre to eschew hatred or bitterness towards the British people.



## Political Norms

In a mass-based struggle, ideology and its influence plays a critical role. Yet, a mass movement has also to incorporate and accommodate diverse political and ideological currents in order to mobilize millions. Besides, it has to be disciplined and organizationally strong and united; yet it cannot afford to be monolithic or authoritarian.

Recognizing this duality, Congress, under whose leadership and hegemony the anti-imperialist struggle was waged, was highly ideological and disciplined while also being ideologically and organizationally open-ended and accommodative. Representing the Indian people and not any one class or stratum, Congress could not be and was not ideologically homogeneous. Widely differing ideological and political streams coexisted within it. It is significant that at no stage did Gandhiji claim to have an ideological monopoly over it. Congress, therefore, succeeded in uniting persons of different ideological bents, different levels of commitment and of vastly different capacities to struggle together for some broad common objectives and principles.

Congress was able to achieve this task by functioning democratically. There was a constant public debate and contention between individuals and groups who subscribed to divergent political-ideological tendencies or paradigms, even though they shared many elements of a common vision and were united in struggle. The majority view regarding the strategic and tactical framework of the movement prevailed but the minority was not decimated. It remained part of the movement, hoping one day to have its approach accepted. Even groups and movements which were outside the Congress stream evolved a complex and friendly relationship with it. The communal, casteist and loyalist parties and groups were the only ones to adopt an adversarial approach towards the Congress.

The national movement thus bequeathed to independent India the political tradition of compromise, accommodation and reconciliation of different interests and points of view. Nehru worked within this tradition in evolving national policies after independence. This approach is, however, now running rather thin. It was, of course, never easy to transfer this tradition of a mass movement to a party of governance or to parties of opposition for that matter. But it was an invaluable experience and legacy for all those who wanted to build a strong and prosperous India and a just and egalitarian society.

The highest norms of politics and political behaviour were set by the movement. Its major leaders, for example, Dadabhai Naoroji, Gopal Krishna Gokhale, Lokamanya Tilak, Gandhiji, Bhagat Singh, Jawaharlal Nehru, Subhas Bose, Sardar Patel, Rajendra Prasad, C. Rajagopalachari, Acharya Narendra Dev, Jayaprakash Narayan, possessed moral integrity of the highest order. It was because of this moral authority and high moral standards of the leadership that the movement could mobilize millions. This was also true of the cadres, most of whom gave up their careers, their studies and their jobs, abandoned family life and devoted their entire lives to the movement. Also, judged in its totality, the movement was able to maintain harmony between means and ends. The movement was able to develop the capacity to evolve, renovate and change with the times. Its programme and policies underwent continuous change

and moved in a radical direction in response to the urges of the masses as they were awakened to political activity and to the changing policies of the colonial rulers. The movement was, therefore, in many ways highly original and innovative, keeping abreast with contemporary world thought, processes and movements.

The legacy of the national movement could be summarized as: a commitment to political and economic independence, modern economic development, the ending of inequality, oppression and domination in all forms, representative democracy and civil liberties, internationalism and independent foreign policy, promotion of the process of nation-in-the-making on the basis of the joyous acceptance of the diversity, and achievement of all these objectives through accommodative politics and with the support of a large majority of the people.

Independent India has as a whole remained loyal to the basics of the legacy of the national movement, a large part of which is enshrined in the constitution and incorporated in the programmes and manifestos of most of the political parties. The Indian people have tended to use this legacy as the yardstick to judge the performance of governments, political parties and institutions.

A legacy, especially of a prolonged movement, tends to endure for a long time. But no legacy, however strong and sound, can last forever. It tends to erode and become irrelevant unless it is constantly reinforced and developed and sometimes transcended in a creative manner to suit the changing circumstances.