

6

The crisis of the colonial order, 1919–1939

The year 1919 was a watershed in the modern history of India. Nothing was the same afterwards. By its end the Montagu–Chelmsford reforms, in prospect since the previous year, were enacted. While the reforms withheld *swaraj*, the ‘self-rule’ increasingly demanded by nationalists, they foreshadowed a period when Indians would determine their own fate. The year, however, also brought the repressive Rowlatt bills and the catastrophe of the Amritsar massacre. For many, if not most, Indians the reforms had become a poisoned chalice. They chose instead a novel course of political action, that of ‘non-violent non-cooperation’, and a new leader, Mohandas K. Gandhi, only recently returned from twenty years in South Africa. Gandhi would endure as a lasting symbol of moral leadership for the entire world community.

REFORM AND REPRESSION

In August 1917 Edwin Montagu announced that the objective of British rule in India would be the ‘gradual development of self-governing institutions with a view to the progressive realization of responsible government in India as an integral part of the British Empire’. This declaration decisively repudiated the old ‘darbar’ model of Indian politics. India would instead follow the path already chalked out by the white-settler dominions of Canada, Australia, and New Zealand. Inevitably, too, it meant that, rather than disdaining the educated as an unrepresentative minority, the British

would repose in them the confidence due future leaders of India. These men were, Montagu averred, in a telling comment on the declaration, 'intellectually our children', who had 'imbibed ideas which we ourselves have set before them'. Britain, however, retained the right to set the pace of reform, which was to be slow and measured, a boon, as the British saw it, to be conferred upon the Indians as they qualified for its benefits.

For the first step in this progress towards self-government, the British devised an ingenious constitutional device called dyarchy, which split the functions of government into two. Although the central government, situated in the spacious garden city of New Delhi, now under construction, remained wholly under British control, in the provinces some areas, among them agriculture and education, along with responsibility for raising the necessary taxes, were transferred to Indian ministers responsible to local legislatures. The electorate for these new provincial legislative bodies was expanded so that it now comprised about one-tenth of the adult male population. British governors retained crucial 'reserved' subjects, such as law and order, under their own control.

The reforms might well have been accepted, even by the Congress, had their enactment not been accompanied by a panic-stricken recourse to coercion on the part of the British in India. The spectre of a revival of revolutionary terrorism, together with the uncertainties of postwar economic dislocation, impelled the government in early 1919 to continue many of the powers of detention and trial without jury that had been in force during the wartime emergency. Known from the name of their author as the Rowlatt Acts, these measures aroused an intense hostility among Indians, to whom they appeared as a bitter reward for their wartime sacrifices. In response, Indians adopted new measures of protest, most notably that of a nationwide *hartal*, or work stoppage, linked to marches in major cities. So effective were these protests, which sometimes spilled over into violence, that the government in some areas introduced martial law. In the Punjab city of Amritsar, the general commanding the local garrison, Reginald Dyer, took it upon himself on 13 April 1919 to disperse by force an illegal, though peaceable, crowd gathered in the enclosed Jallianwalla Bagh. Drawing up his Gurkha troops at the entrance, he fired until some 370 trapped protestors lay dead and over 1,000 wounded.

This terrible massacre, the worst in the history of the British Raj, was an isolated incident, yet it became a symbol of colonial injustice, remembered in speech, song, and drama. Plate 6.1 shows the title page of a Hindi play written shortly after the event. It depicts ‘Martial Law’ as a policeman above the female figure of ‘Punjab’ praying for help, the law book of colonial promise set aside, while ‘Satyagraha’, representing Gandhi, looks on in despair. For many among the British, the massacre confirmed widely held assumptions about how Indians ought to be governed. Dyer, for one, was not repentant. The firing was justified, he later said, for its ‘moral effect’ in the Punjab. Indians, like children, when naughty needed to be severely punished. They were not capable of governing themselves. Opposition to the established order could lead only to anarchy. Although the Government of India forced Dyer to resign his commission, and Montagu staunchly opposed this recourse to violence, Dyer’s reception on his return to England, where he was received like a conquering hero and awarded a purse of £30,000, undercut the effects of the censure. Throughout the years leading up to independence English opposition to constitutional reform remained always a powerful force that the government could not ignore. At its centre stood the popular figure of the Conservative leader Winston Churchill, who resigned from the government rather than support the subsequent 1935 reform measure.

THE ADVENT OF GANDHI

The massacre, together with the government’s failure wholly to repudiate it – Gandhi described the investigative report as ‘thinly disguised whitewash’ – precipitated a wrenching loss of faith in Britain’s good intentions. As Gandhi wrote in 1920, ‘I can no longer retain affection for a Government so evilly manned as it is nowadays.’ Until 1919 a minor figure on the Indian stage, Gandhi took upon himself the task of devising a way out of this impasse. In so doing he emerged not only as a principal architect of India’s independence, but as one of the most original and influential thinkers of the twentieth century. Born in 1869 into a trading family in princely Saurashtra, on the remote western coast of Gujarat, Gandhi grew up awkward, shy, and yet ambitious. Leaving a young wife behind, and defying attempts to outcaste him, Gandhi at the age of eighteen sailed to England

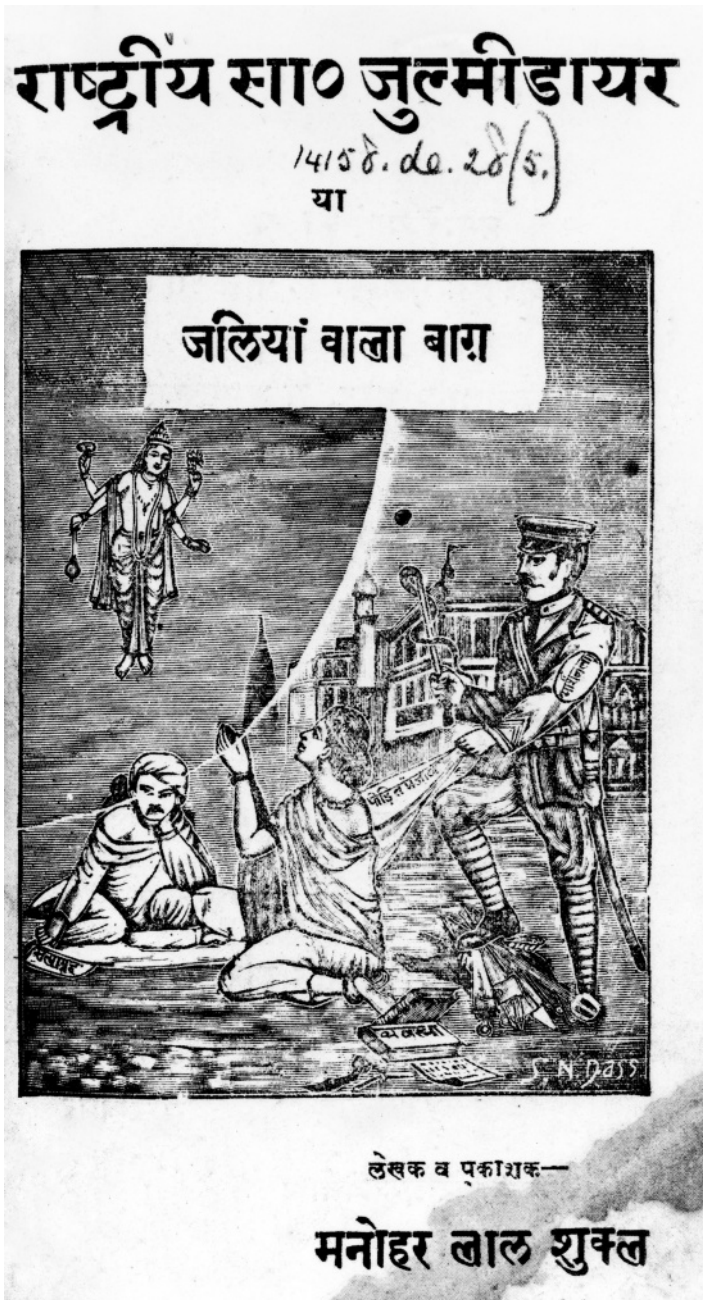


Plate 6.I Title page of *Rashtriya Sangit Julmi Daayar – Jallianwala Bagh*, in Hindi, by Manohar Lal Shukla, Kanpur, 1922.

to study for the bar. Upon his return, he found himself unable to compete as a barrister in the crowded legal world of Bombay, and so he set forth once again, this time to South Africa, in 1893. There, as the only Indian lawyer, he soon grew wealthy defending the local Indian business community; but, moved by his experience of racial prejudice in this white-settler dominated colony, he went on to organize Indian opinion against the colonial, and then after 1910 the Afrikaner, rulers of South Africa. Gandhi's South African experience proved crucial to his subsequent leadership of India's freedom struggle. Above all, in South Africa, a colonial society where a small Indian community was ranged against whites and blacks, an identity as 'Indian' inevitably took precedence over those of region, religion, and caste that mattered so much at home. Often, from Gandhi's time up to the present, whether for political figures or for writers like V. S. Naipaul and Salman Rushdie, the experience of living abroad has provided insights into the complexity and coherence of their homeland.

Gandhi's distinctive social and political outlook was the product too of his upbringing in Gujarat, in an environment so different from that which shaped the cosmopolitan elite of the great presidency capitals. In the small isolated towns of its princely states, English education was a rarity, while Gandhi's family had close ties with Jainism, a religion with many followers in Gujarat. Together with his *bania*, or trader, caste affiliation, these ties encouraged the practice of a non-violent form of Hinduism, for both Jainism and the life of commerce recoiled from violence and the taking of life. As a youth, Gandhi struggled to shake off this heritage and reconstruct himself in keeping with British ideals of masculinity. The British ruled India, so common opinion had it, because they were tough, manly, meat-eating. Therefore the way to oust them was to surpass them at their own game. In pursuit of this objective, Gandhi undertook secretive experiments in meat-eating.

Even though none of this was wholly satisfying, and Gandhi swore off meat to appease his mother's anxieties, he continued to pursue this strategy during his early days in England. He dressed in the style of the late Victorian dandy, took up dancing and the violin only to abandon them, and finally found solace, and a public platform, in vegetarianism. His association with English vegetarians

introduced Gandhi to a strand of Western thought that, while usually submerged in the dominant discourse of Victorian masculinity, had nevertheless a powerful appeal for him. Above all, from reading Tolstoy and Ruskin, with their commitment to pacifism and an ethical life, Gandhi began to formulate his own critique of the materialist West. At the same time he found a way of coming to terms with his own heritage. Repudiating the association of 'feminine' qualities with weakness, he began to construct a 'new courage' in which non-violence, and passive resistance, were transformed into strength. He would be strong, he proclaimed, as a woman was strong.

During his twenty years in South Africa, from 1893 until 1914, Gandhi put together his new vision of society. At its heart was a fierce criticism of what he saw as a Western obsession with material goods, and the culture of competition necessary to secure them. Not only the purchase of English goods but industrial development itself had to be avoided. Machinery, as he wrote, 'is the chief symbol of modern civilization; it represents a great sin'. In its place, he put forth the ideal of a simple life based in a society, like that of his imagined traditional Indian village, in which each member unselfishly looked after the others. True independence, as he envisioned it in *Hind Swaraj* (1909), was not a simple matter of Indians replacing Britons in the seat of government. It involved a wholesale transformation of society from the bottom up, as all individuals came to realize their true spiritual worth. The ideal form of the state, for Gandhi, would be a loosely linked grouping of nearly self-sufficient village republics. Harkening back to the ancient past, Gandhi described his ideal society by evoking the mythic kingdom of Lord Ram:

In my opinion swaraj and Ramarajya are one and the same thing... We call a state Ramarajya when both the ruler and his subjects are straightforward, when both are pure in heart, when both are inclined towards self-sacrifice, when both exercise restraint and self-control while enjoying worldly pleasures, and, when the relationship between the two is as good as that between a father and son.

As Gandhi sought a moral, not simply a political, transformation of human society, he could not accept the view, common in many nationalist movements, that the end – of freedom – justified

whatever means might be necessary to bring it about. Not only must the leader himself eschew violence, but his followers must also be disciplined to accept without retaliation whatever blows might fall upon them. Similarly, the transformative love that Gandhi held out as the basis of a new India must encompass not only all Indians, from the wealthy zamindar to the despised untouchable, but the British as well. No one, whether Muslim, Hindu, or Christian, was inherently unworthy.

Gandhi in time abandoned ‘passive resistance’ as a description of his strategy in favour of the more active *satyagraha*, or truth-force. For Gandhi, the pursuit of *satyagraha* involved a range of behaviours that together would create an India, both of individuals and as a nation, capable of self-rule. Above all it involved settling disputes by seeking truths shared with an opponent whom one must always respect, even love. Gandhi’s search for truth by its very nature involved a disciplining of the passions and an avoidance of violence. A vegetarian diet, as he saw it, avoided violence to animals as well as the consumption of food, such as meat, that inflamed the passions. Gandhi further advocated *brahmacharya*, or sexual abstinence, even within marriage and himself, after many years of married life, abandoned sexual relations with his wife. The disciplining of the acquisitive passions was to be accomplished by simplicity of dress and the promotion of hand-spun fabrics (*khadi*). Every nationalist was expected to spend a certain number of hours each day at the spinning wheel.

The appealing figure of the loin-cloth-clad ‘mahatma’ (see plate 6.2) must not be allowed to obscure aspects of his philosophy that opened Gandhi up to charges of self-righteousness and condescension. He was prepared to love his opponents, but only on his terms, and his attitude towards large segments of society – Muslims, women, and untouchables among them – was defined by an inability or unwillingness to accept the legitimacy of grievances which did not accord with his conception of a proper moral order. Above all, Gandhi never advocated a wholesale repudiation of the Hindu caste system, nor of the patriarchal family structure. Much as he sought to ease caste rigidities and improve the status of untouchables, for instance, he spoke always with the patronizing assurance of the upper-caste Hindu. Gandhi’s fasts too, in his view a form



Plate 6.2 Gandhi at his writing table.

of self-cleansing or self-suffering to atone for errors, though non-violent, could be harshly coercive.

Gandhi never claimed to speak for Hinduism, and he did not seek an avowedly Hindu India. Indeed the non-violence that he preached has never been a core value of the Hindu tradition. Unlike latter-day Hindu nationalists, Gandhi sought an India built on a coalition of religious communities, not one of Hindu dominance. Nevertheless, Gandhi's entire manner, dress, and vocabulary were suffused with Hinduism. Religion, in his view, formed the binding glue of the nation. Even as he reached out to other communities, this 'mahatma' inevitably embodied a deeply Hindu sensibility. As the years went by he shrewdly turned it to political advantage. The costs, however, were substantial.

Gandhi's personality alone cannot explain his ascent to the leadership of the Indian national movement. In a largely pre-literate society much of his appeal lay in the visual symbolism he projected, travelling the country like the ordinary peasant, in third-class railway carriages, wearing the loin cloth of the Hindu holyman (*sannyasin*). At every station stop on his travels he would emerge to speak at a mass rally. These images were then amplified by news reports and photographs and the new medium of the movie newsreel. Gandhi

offered India's political elite, moreover, a compelling strategy of political action. While a few moderates still clung to constitutionalist protest, the failure of such a strategy, after the Amritsar massacre, was only too obvious. So too had the populist politics of the 'street' outlived their usefulness. From the time of the 1892 cow protection campaign onwards, eruptions of popular sentiment testified to an enduring, and deeply felt, animosity towards British colonialism in India. While these movements had some successes to their credit, most notably the revocation of the partition of Bengal, neither the plotting of secret societies nor riotous mobs in the streets offered much prospect of an independent India. Furthermore, as a moralist who sought class harmony, Gandhi offered the educated elite a critical reassurance. The Congress leadership were not Marxists, and they dared not put their own dominance at risk by stirring up class animosities. With Gandhi they had a leader who could at once appeal effectively to those outside the narrow constituency of the educated, and yet contain any potential threat to their own predominance in society.

THE POWER OF GANDHI'S NAME: SUPPORTERS AND OPPONENTS

Although Gandhi by 1919 had found a responsive audience for a new political practice – as crowds turned out in their thousands to shout 'Mahatma Gandhi ki jai' (Long live the Mahatma) – his appeal was never uniform across India, and many, while following him, made of him the 'mahatma' they wanted. To understand Gandhian nationalism, therefore, it is necessary at the outset to take account of who supported him, and why, as well as who did not. Confronted with a lack of enthusiasm throughout much of India, Gandhi secured Congress approval of non-cooperation only by forming an alliance with the Muslim supporters of the Ottoman khilafat. Without their votes, the non-cooperation motion at the September 1920 Congress would have gone down to defeat. Yet the Khilafatists were unlike Gandhi's other supporters in that they were organized separately under their own leaders, and had, at times, their own priorities. Gandhi's most committed followers were those closest to him in background and sentiment. In the province of Gujarat, his home

region, Gandhi set up his ashram, near its capital city of Ahmedabad; and in its rural reaches, he organized his successful experiments in disciplined peasant agitation. What was sometimes referred to as a vani–vakil–pattidar alliance, that brought together traders and professionals with the well-off landowning peasants of the pattidar caste, formed an unwavering core of support for Gandhi's social and moral, as well as his political, activism. Even the wealthiest Gujarati traders and industrialists, whom one might imagine would oppose his hand-spinning utopia, committed their time and money to Gandhi's activities. They shared, after all, common caste and regional values, and, insofar as Gandhi encouraged swadeshi production, they saw profit for their manufacturing enterprises.

Outside Gujarat, Gandhian nationalism flourished most strongly through the middle Gangetic valley, especially in the provinces of Bihar and UP. In this populous heartland of 'Hindustan', Gandhi found devoted lieutenants, men such as Govind Ballabh Pant and Motilal Nehru (1861–1931), together with Nehru's son Jawaharlal (1889–1964), who ultimately became Gandhi's chosen successor. In this region too, as in Gujarat, Gandhi drew to himself the professional elite, the trading community, and the more substantial peasantry. But the commitment to Gandhi's programme among these men was often of a different sort from that of their counterparts in Gujarat. Men like the Nehrus, committed to a modern India that could hold its own with the industrialized West, found little to attract them either in Gandhi's utopian pastoralism or in his moralizing asceticism. The young Jawaharlal Nehru even saw in socialist Russia a model of economic development. As he put it in an address to the Congress in 1936:

I see no way of ending the poverty, the vast unemployment, the degradation and the subjection of the Indian people except through socialism. That involves vast and revolutionary changes in our political and social structure... the ending of private property, except in a restricted sense, and the replacement of the present profit system by a higher ideal of cooperative service... If the future is full of hope it is largely because of Soviet Russia and what it has done.

Yet Jawaharlal had to acknowledge that Gandhi was 'a man of commanding personality who inspired devotion in India's millions',

that because of him the people of India, throwing off their fear of the British, had ‘straightened their backs and raised their heads’. In part simply because Gandhi offered Indian nationalism a prospect of success in place of the deadends of an ineffectual constitutionalism and a self-destructive terrorism, but also because they could take pride in the way this ‘mahatma’ embodied the ‘authentic’ spirit of a resurgent India, the Nehrus, father and son, and many like them, threw themselves into the non-cooperation movement. The price was often high, for Gandhi demanded the return of titles and government honours, the abandonment of often lucrative legal practices, and lengthy periods in jail. Yet the sacrifices were gladly made, for, as Jawaharlal Nehru wrote in his autobiography, we had a ‘feeling of satisfaction at doing effective political work which was changing the face of India before our eyes’, and even, he admitted, ‘an agreeable sense of moral superiority over our opponents’.

In Bihar and UP the cry of ‘Mahatma Gandhi ki jai’ radiated outwards to the foothills of the Himalayas and down to the oppressed tenantry of the region’s great landlords. Yet in these remote areas, as it circulated among an impoverished peasantry, Gandhi’s message took on unexpected shapes. Gandhi, and his volunteer workers in the localities, had devised what they saw as an appropriate role for these peasant masses. They were meant to come out in their thousands and to receive *darshan*, in which the devotee enters the presence of the divine and secures his blessing, in this case that of the ‘mahatma’. They were not, however, to act on their own without instructions, nor were they on any account to challenge the gaping distinctions of class that structured their lives. But it was not easy so to constrain peasant action or peasant belief. From the very beginning of Gandhi’s leadership of the national movement, as Shahid Amin has forcefully argued, the peasantry made of this ‘great-souled mahatma’ the possessor of occult powers, a man able magically to right wrongs and to transform the exploitative power relationships of rural society. His boons even took the form of the regeneration of trees and wells:

In mohalla Humayunpur . . . two dead trees which had fallen in the garden of Babu Yugal Kishore, wakil, have planted themselves back! Many believe that this is due to the grace of Mahatmaji. This [is] because the person who cut the trees said that if the spiritual power of Mahatmaji was genuine the

trees would stand up on their own! Thousands gather at this site every day and *batashas* (a kind of sweetmeat), money and ornaments are offered by men and women alike.

In effect Gandhi, as someone who could remove afflictions, was fitted into the pantheon of Hindu deities; and swaraj took on the shape of the coming end of time, in which taxes and oppression of all kinds would vanish. To hurry on this millennial order the peasants of UP had no hesitation, in Gandhi's name, in looting bazaars and attacking landlords. Eventually, in February 1922, in an incident which caused a horror-stricken Gandhi to call off the entire non-cooperation movement, a peasant mob in Chauri Chaura, Gorakhpur district, locked twenty-two Indian policemen in the local police station and then set fire to the building, killing everyone inside.

In some areas, and among some groups, Gandhi found very little, or at best a reluctant, support for non-cooperation. In the princely states, as well as in the thinly settled hills of central India, Gandhi's message foundered, for the Congress volunteers, frequently urban students, had no way of gaining access. The princes, sustained in power by the British since 1858, were determined to keep their states walled off from nationalism, while railways and newspapers rarely penetrated the jungle-clad districts of the interior. The lowest elements of the social order too, artisans and the landless, preoccupied with desperate struggles for existence, remained outside. Some, indeed, especially among the untouchables, as we shall see, disdain- ing Gandhi's attempt to act on their behalf, preferred to organize separately under leaders who addressed their own concerns.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the most intense opposition to Gandhi, and his new style of political activity, came from those who saw their own pre-eminence threatened by this upstart Gujarati with his novel ideas of non-cooperation. Gandhi's most reluctant converts were those who had led the Congress before 1920, especially the educated elites of Calcutta, Bombay, and Madras. The Bengal bhadrak, for instance, committed to constitutional methods, enjoyed substantial benefits from their participation in the law courts and legislative councils, and did not relish giving them up; nor did they care to unleash mass movements whose outcomes they could not control. C. R. Das (1870–1925), at the head of the Bengal

Congress, joined Gandhi only at the last minute, at the special Congress session of September 1920, when he found he could not defeat the non-cooperation programme. In similar fashion, Tilak's supporters in Maharashtra dragged their feet until Tilak's death in 1920 opened the way to younger, and more militant, political activists. Others disliked what the poet Rabindranath Tagore called Gandhi's focus on one 'narrow' field alone at the expense of a wider cosmopolitan sympathy. 'To one and all', Tagore wrote, 'he simply says: Spin and weave, spin and weave.' Of ultimately great significance, M. A. Jinnah, whose political skills had been honed in cooperation with Gokhale, and who was committed to constitutionalism, resigned from the Congress, and turned to the Muslim League, rather than support what he saw as an unseemly mass movement, suffused with religious symbols.

Often, too, the adherence of one group provoked local rivals to join opposition parties, or remain quiescent. In the Bombay city hartal of 1919, for instance, the lead taken by the Gujarati business classes kept the Maratha industrial workers at home. As one contemporary observer wrote, 'The Marathas rarely forget that they are Marathas, and that he [Gandhi] is a Gujarati; amongst them his vogue has been fitful and wavering.' In Punjab and Madras, provincial caste and class antagonisms restricted Gandhi's base of support throughout the 1920s. In both provinces, the major supporters of the Congress were urban traders and professionals. In Punjab the predominance of this class in the Congress encouraged the majority rural population, both Hindu and Muslim, landlord and tenant, to organize their own competing Unionist Party under landlord leadership. Sustained by the benefits agriculturists had secured under the 1901 land alienation act, their cross-class electoral alliances further cemented by tribal ties, rural Punjabis, defiantly participating in the reformed political system, kept the Unionists in power until the mid-1940s. In the Tamil areas of the south, where the Brahman community had long championed the nationalist cause, and dominated Annie Besant's Home Rule League, suspicious non-Brahmans saw no point in exchanging British for Brahman dominance. They were antagonized as well by Gandhi's preaching of Hindi as a national language. Hence well-to-do non-Brahman landlords organized the Justice Party, which, in office throughout the 1920s, worked with

the British to secure a larger share of government and university places for their community.

The Congress–Muslim alliance, a product, as we have seen, of the 1916 Lucknow Pact, had gained strength as the war drew to a close. With the defeat of Turkey, complemented by the punitive 1920 Treaty of Sevres, increasing numbers of India's Muslims began to fear for the independence of the Ottoman sultan, whose position as khalifa (caliph) of Islam provided, so they argued, an ordering point that sustained the law and faith of Muslims everywhere. The issue stimulated the first mass mobilization of Muslims, employing meetings, oratory, and protest marches. In so doing, the Khilafat agitation, with its distinctive organization and symbolic repertoire, helped define the emerging identity of 'Indian Muslims'.

British support of harsh sanctions against Turkey in the post-war settlement drove large numbers of Muslims, from conservative Deobandis to Western-educated Aligarh graduates, ever closer to Gandhi, for whom the British treatment of Turkey deserved condemnation alongside that meted out to India. At no time, however, did more than a handful of these Muslims join the Congress Party as individuals. The All-India Khilafat Committee, though it coordinated its activities closely with Gandhi, always remained a separate body; and its vision of India's future, as elaborated by the 'ulama of the Jamiat Ulama-e Hind, was no less utopian than that of Gandhi himself. The proposals put forward by the Jamiat imagined an India composed of two separate communities – of Hindus and Muslims – each with its own laws, courts, and educational system. Despite its anti-colonial stance, the Jamiat paid little heed to Congress's call for a sovereign government with authority over citizens who shared common goals and aspirations. Instead, India's Muslims, though scattered all over the country and divided among themselves by language and customs, would live, so far as possible, in a kind of self-imposed isolation, rather like Gandhi's imagined village communities, together yet apart from their fellows.

The Congress–Khilafat alliance has often been evoked by nationalist Indians, in the years since 1947, in a kind of nostalgic reverie, as an era of amity that anticipated a road not taken – to an unpartitioned independent India. To be sure, these years, from 1916 to 1922, were a period of communal harmony never again to be recovered.

But the distinctions between communities were not broken down. Neither Gandhi nor the Khilafat leaders ever envisaged an India in which religious communities were not the primary players. Indeed, the organization of parallel, yet separate, processions and meetings by the Congress and by the Khilafatists only intensified, and so institutionalized, this distinction between communities. Even the khilafat flag itself visibly manifested communal difference by displaying the Muslim crescent, the auspicious constellation known to Hindus as the Saptarishi – the seven rishis – and the Union Jack. Hence, it is not surprising that the union between Hindu and Muslim collapsed once the single thread that linked them had been cut. In 1924 the new secular Turkish regime of Attaturk itself abolished the khilafat. Bereft of this shared grievance, their separate political ambitions heightened by the promise of power held out under Montagu–Chelmsford reforms, Hindu and Muslim leaders turned instead increasingly to mobilizing followers by the use of each religion’s distinctive symbols. The result was an explosive era of rioting and recrimination.

THE COURSE OF NON-COOPERATION

For the British, Gandhi’s turn to non-cooperation posed a seemingly intractable dilemma. Over the years the British had devised ever more effective strategies for dealing with nationalists. The moderates among them could be conciliated, or ignored; the revolutionary terrorists could be clapped in jail and kept there for years on end. But Gandhi’s non-cooperation was a baffling novelty, and the British did not initially know how to respond. The Conservatives at home, along with the military in India, argued for outright repression by force. But the Indian Government, loath to face more Amritsar massacres, and anxious to get some support for the new dyarchy constitution, especially among the large bodies of opinion not enamoured of Gandhi, did not want to risk policies that would antagonize still more of the Indian people. Furthermore, they realized that to club and jail vast numbers of peaceable demonstrators would make the government, if not the British as a whole, look like bullies in the eyes of the world, and even to themselves. Indeed, Gandhi had contrived his style of agitation in part with this objective in mind – by claiming the moral high ground for himself, he wanted

to appeal to the British conscience, and so to make them feel they were violating their own principles if they moved forcibly against him. The government could not, however, openly embrace Gandhi, or accept his political demands. The Raj still mattered to most Englishmen, in part because by the 1920s the Indian market loomed ever larger as a crucial vent for British exports. By and large, too, apart from a few Christian liberals like C. F. Andrews, the British did not trust Gandhi. Churchill's derisive dismissal of Gandhi as 'a half-naked fakir', as late as 1931, resonated with much British opinion. Although viceroys were occasionally tempted, as we shall see, to come to terms with Gandhi, they were always restrained by the strength of imperialist and conservative sentiment.

Hence the British were driven towards a delicate and complex policy of manoeuvre. As they saw it, they had to treat Gandhi gently enough so that he did not become a martyr in Indian eyes. Yet at the same time they had to act sufficiently forcefully to make visible to all that they, not Gandhi, sat in the driver's seat. In practice, this often meant that, rather than placing him under arrest at once, the British would stalk and watch Gandhi, giving him, as it were, an ample supply of rope. During the 1920–22 non-cooperation movement, this policy of restraint paid large dividends. As he ran his campaign, Gandhi was left undisturbed until the Chauri Chaura killings; then, with Indian opinion turning against non-cooperation, and Gandhi having himself called it off, the British felt the time had come when they could safely place him under arrest. Gandhi's subsequent trial for sedition, far from provoking an uprising, only signalled the end of this first movement. By tactical flexibility, using the skills they honed during this first encounter with Gandhi, the British were able to keep nationalism from reaching a crescendo that might overwhelm them. They adroitly waited out eras of excitement, took advantage of periods of quiescence, and so kept control of the process of the devolution of power. But manoeuvre alone could not halt or reverse the continuous draining away of the authority of the Raj.

With the ending of the first Gandhian non-cooperation campaign, British relations with the Congress fell into a pattern that, while it could not be called amicable, still built upon a set of shared assumptions that shaped the growth of Indian nationalism during the quarter-century from 1922 to 1947. First among these was the

British conviction that Gandhi could be relied upon not to raise up a violent revolution. Many among the British, in the early years after 1919, were convinced Gandhi was riding a whirlwind he could not control. The aftermath of Chauri Chaura reassured them that, if not a friend of the Raj, Gandhi was still committed to a course of non-violent action. This made credible the policy of watching and waiting, of mild restraint rather than a ready recourse to force. On Gandhi's side, the British repudiation, after Amritsar, of rule by military might gave hope that perhaps an appeal to British moral values might work, that British consciences might be pricked, and so encouraged Gandhi to stay within the bounds of non-violence. Violent revolution was not only morally wrong, it was unnecessary.

To be sure, under extreme provocation the Congress could, most notably as we shall see in 1942, wink at violence; while the British, when faced with widespread civil disobedience, did sometimes crack down with a brutal harshness marked by lathi charges and mass arrests. Still, a surprising amount of reasonableness, if not of actual goodwill, did pervade dealings between the British and the Congress. Oddly perhaps, this manifested itself most visibly in jail, where Congress leaders were accorded a special A-class accommodation that allowed them books, visitors, and food not permitted ordinary prisoners. Gandhi's 1922 sedition trial set the tone. After describing how the events of 1919 had led him to 'preach disaffection' towards the Raj, Gandhi went on to 'invite and cheerfully to submit to the highest penalty that can be inflicted upon me'. The judge, on his part, said that the charges carried a prison term of six years, but he added that if the government later saw fit to reduce the sentence, 'no one would be better pleased than I'. Gandhi also used the trial to articulate in dramatic fashion central elements of his political style. Refusing to be placed in the powerless and humiliating position of the usual defendant, Gandhi defiantly pleaded guilty and even took upon himself responsibility for the acts of others. In the process he at once embraced, yet repudiated as incompatible with colonialism, British notions of 'justice'. At the same time, by bringing suffering upon himself, he enhanced his saintly role as one who sacrifices for the good of all.

As the collapse of non-cooperation after Chauri Chaura makes clear, the movement towards independence was not to be marked

by a steady unrelenting pressure sustained year after year. To the contrary, Congress activities during the 1920s and 1930s, and into the 1940s, went through a series of ups and downs in both intensity and focus. One can identify, perhaps, three major cycles. Each began with a blundering act of provocation on the part of the British. This would be followed by an escalation of excitement, culminating in a programme of civil disobedience under Gandhi's leadership. The British would respond with a judicious combination of concessions and arrests. Increasingly demoralized, their enthusiasm spent, the nationalist cadres would then slowly lapse into inactivity. The result would be a prolonged period of quiescence. During these years Gandhi would retire from politics, and throw himself instead into what he called his 'constructive' work, above all the promotion of hand-spinning and improvement of the condition of the untouchables. Meanwhile, the more politically engaged members of the Congress, drawn by the lure of the reformed legislatures, which offered ever wider opportunities for wielding power within the system, would abandon non-cooperation in favour of an active participation in the British Indian political order. This style of political activity would continue until yet another provocative incident triggered yet another outburst of nationalist enthusiasm.

After 1922, as active non-cooperation moved into a quiescent phase, a number of prominent Congress politicians, among them C. R. Das and Motilal Nehru, anxious to re-enter the fray, formed the break-away Swarajist Party, and successfully contested elections for the reformed assemblies with the goal, never carried out, of 'wrecking' it from within. Simultaneously, with Gandhi's encouragement, the khadi movement, through the All-India Spinners Association, took on organizational form. For Gandhian nationalists, khadi's significance extended far beyond its role as a signifier of swadeshi production, or even its assertion of the value of artisanal hand-work. Use of this coarse, simple, usually white, cloth, by eradicating distinctions of region, along with those of caste, class and religion, defined the wearer as a member of a universal Indian nation. Rejecting the British view of India as a land of separate communities whose varied clothing styles visually announced their unfitness for self-rule, khadi constructed an India that was united, disciplined, and cohesive.

Khadi further opened up new opportunities for India's women. Whereas before nationalist rhetoric had defined women as the guardians of an inner 'spiritual' India, now, by spinning and by wearing khadi, India's women participated actively in the creation of the nation. This was not an easy or uncomplicated transformation. Many elite women were loath to give up the shimmering silk saris that defined their high status in favour of the rough white cloth previously associated with prostitutes, widows, and the impoverished. Some, not only women but men like Nehru as well, sought a compromise by the use of high-count or textured fabrics. Still, khadi mattered, for, as Gandhi wrote, this cloth 'binds all brothers and sisters of India into one, which purifies and ennobles their soul and will lift them to freedom from the present life of poverty and bondage'. The visual power of khadi is readily apparent in the contrasting apparel of the Congress in 1919 (plate 6.3), when Western dress was still dominant, and a meeting of Congress workers in 1924 (plate 6.4) when simple khadi, with the Gandhi *topi* (cap), predominated.

AGRARIAN AND INDUSTRIAL UPHEAVALS

Alongside the rise of the Gandhian Congress, the immediate post-war years also witnessed the emergence of class-based protest movements. These drew sustenance from the economic dislocation of the last years of the war. During the short period from 1917 to 1920 price levels rose by nearly 50 per cent, with those of the coarse food grains that constituted the staple of the poor rising further than those of higher-quality crops. Combined with the effects of a poor monsoon and the influenza pandemic in 1918, the hardship of these years fuelled a variety of protests. Most prominent were the *kisan sabha* (peasant society) movements of 1920–22 in the UP and Bihar. Under the leadership of the charismatic Baba Ramchandra, this movement, which secured its greatest appeal in the landlord-dominated districts of southern and eastern Oudh, sought to put peasant, not nationalist, interests at the top of the agenda. Counselling tenants to withhold unjust rents, made more onerous by the high food prices, Ramchandra inspired a number of riotous demonstrations on landlord properties. Rioters also sometimes attacked



Plate 6.3 Delegates to the 1919 Congress session in Amritsar.

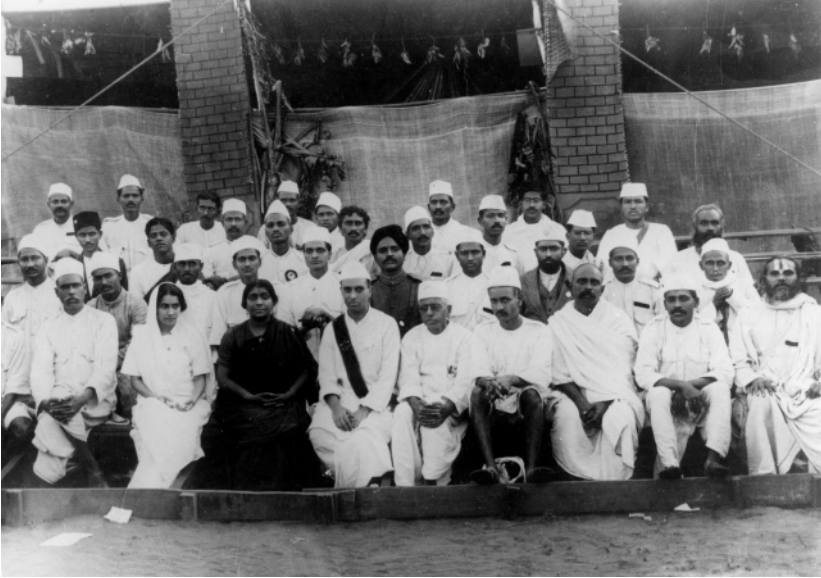


Plate 6.4 Congress Workers in south India, 1924. Jawaharlal Nehru (with sash) in front row centre.

bazaars and merchant property in an effort to secure fixed prices for basic commodities. The residents of the Himalayan foothills expressed their grievances by breaking into reserved forests and setting them on fire. Little, however, came of these peasant protests. The British pushed through, over landlord opposition, legislation that capped rental increases and secured occupancy tenants from eviction. But the act did not fundamentally alter the bases of rural power. Indeed, this challenge to their power only served to propel the landlords into the political arena, where their so-called National Agriculturists Party took office under the dyarchy constitution in the UP.

The Congress offered but little more support to these peasant movements than did the British. Young Jawaharlal Nehru, who had never set foot in a village before in his life, returned in 1920 from a season of ‘wanderings among the kisans’ to express sympathy with their plight. Subsequently, inspired by socialist ideals, as we have seen above, he argued that a more equitable distribution of wealth was essential to full independence. But, drawn away by the nationalist struggle, and frequently in jail, Nehru had no occasion to offer leadership to the countryside. Gandhi, for his part, was positively

hostile to any class-based agitation. He was prepared to countenance rural struggle only when it was directed against the British, as in the early Champaran satyagraha against British planters who forced peasants to grow indigo on unfavourable terms, and in his tightly organized 'no tax campaigns', in which landowning Pattidari peasants in selected areas of his home province of Gujarat, above all in Bardoli in 1928, refused payment of the government's land revenue demand. Inspired by the vision of a society organized apart from capitalist self-interest, he appealed to India's wealthy landlords and industrialists to act as trustees for the less privileged. Such a notion of class harmony of course advanced the political interests of the Congress; when class was not pitted against class, all could work together on behalf of the anti-colonial struggle. Such counsels were, furthermore, not uncongenial to the groups which made up the bulk of the Congress's supporters. Neither the well-to-do Marwari industrialist nor the peasant proprietor who tilled his land with the help of low-caste bonded labourers had much enthusiasm for class warfare or a property redistribution of which he was likely to be the loser. As we shall see, neither during their 1937–9 ministries, nor indeed after 1947, did the Congress enact far-reaching agrarian reform legislation.

The years of unrest following the First World War also saw an unprecedented wave of strikes among factory labour, accompanied by the formation of India's first trade unions. Through the All-India Trade Union Congress, the Congress endeavoured to control, and subordinate to its own nationalist purposes, the burgeoning labour movement. But the middle-class Congress leadership was unable to restrain the militancy of those on the shop floor. Labour organizing thus provided an opening for India's fledgling Communists. Inspired by the success of the 1917 Bolshevik revolution in Russia, the committed revolutionary M. N. Roy (1887–1954), living in exile first in Mexico and then in the new Soviet Union, established the Communist Party of India in 1920. By the middle years of the 1920s, though the party itself was proscribed and Roy remained in exile, Communist organizers had set up unions and organized strikes in India's textile, jute, and steel mills, and in its railway workshops. In 1928, when Bombay textile workers stayed out on strike for over six months to protest wage cuts, workers' mill committees came

together to form the Communist-led Girni Kamgar Union, which at its height had some 60,000 members.

Such successes were, however, short-lived. Government repression was fierce. A ‘conspiracy’ trial, held in 1929, ended with the jailing of all the major Communist leaders for over four years. Lacking support from Gandhi and the Congress, and often regarded with suspicion even by the workers themselves, for many of its leaders were high-caste men who had never engaged in manual labour, the Indian Communist Party had great difficulty consolidating its position. Unlike their Chinese colleagues under Mao during these years, they were never able to penetrate the countryside. They succeeded only in areas where they drew support from discontented kisan leaders such as Swami Sahajanand in Bihar. Abrupt changes in the Communist Party ‘line’ laid down in Moscow further left the Indian Communists adrift and ineffectual.

Altogether apart from ‘official’ nationalism was an enduring populism not disciplined by either communists or the Gandhian Congress. Fuelled by a Hindu sensibility and an admiration of violence, this populism kept alive into the Gandhian era elements of the late nineteenth-century cow protection movement and the early twentieth-century terrorist campaign. Standard histories have taken no notice of it, in large part because, as Christopher Pinney has recently observed, the evidence for it, and indeed the inspiration for the movement itself, took the shape of prints, posters, and other forms of visual imagery. Often couched in allegorical terms, with Hindu deities standing in for political figures, this populist nationalism celebrated martyred heroes who had died confronting the British. Of these the most prominent was Bhagat Singh. In December 1928 Bhagat Singh killed a senior British police official in Lahore; several months later he threw bombs into the legislative chamber. Convicted and hanged, he achieved undying fame for his mimicry of British dress and manners, which enabled him for some time to escape detection. Always depicted in an English trilby hat, he was, like Subhas Chandra Bose after him, the antithesis of Gandhi. The wide dissemination of his image on photographs and posters, with his subsequent inclusion in the nationalist pantheon, testified to the power of that which both the British, and Gandhian nationalism, sought to suppress.

NON-COOPERATION: ROUND TWO, 1927–1934

In 1927, anticipating by two years the statutory revision of the Montagu–Chelmsford reforms, the British Government appointed a commission, under the Liberal Sir John Simon, to recommend a further reform of India's constitution. Instead of the expected gratitude, however, the British reaped only animosity, for the commissioners were all members of the British Parliament. Across an extraordinarily wide spectrum of Indian opinion, from Congress and the Muslim League to Hindu nationalists and moderate Liberals, this all-British commission carried with it the implication that Indians were incapable of deciding their own fate, that they were still children who needed all-knowing parents to legislate for them. This blunder set in motion the second great cycle of Gandhian non-cooperation, which lasted, with a brief truce in 1931, from 1930 to 1934.

Confronted with this unexpected hostility, the viceroy Lord Irwin (1927–31), supported by a Labour government newly come to power in Britain, issued a declaration that the natural outcome of India's constitutional progress would be 'Dominion' status. Much the same had been said by Montagu in 1917, and there was still no timetable for independence. Nevertheless, as the white-settler dominions, such as Canada and Australia, had recently secured full control of both their internal and external affairs, Irwin's declaration implied that Britain had relinquished any hope of retaining lasting authority over an Indian dominion. As Indian distrust of the Simon Commission showed no signs of abating, with plans for another non-cooperation movement underway, the Ramsey MacDonald government was driven, in 1930, to yet another concession. Leaving the forlorn Simon to twist in the wind, the British convened a series of round table conferences in London, to which all elements of Indian political opinion were invited, and from which it was hoped that an agreed scheme for constitutional reform could emerge. In this expectation, MacDonald was to be mistaken.

During 1928, as the machinery was being geared up for non-cooperation, Indian nationalists scrambled to produce some common front that they could present to their rulers. The most notable of these documents, the so-called Nehru Report, named for its author Motilal Nehru, was not only unacceptable to the British, with

its demand for immediate home rule, but widened the gulf already emerging between the Congress and much Muslim opinion. Repudiating the 1916 Congress commitment to separate communal electorates, the Nehru Report laid out a scheme for a federal India much like that which emerged after 1947, with a strong centre possessing all residual powers and no reservation of seats in the central legislature for the Muslim community. Far from assuaging Muslim fears, the Nehru Report only reignited suspicion of a 'Hindu Raj', and united most Muslim political leaders, apart from a small group of 'Nationalist Muslims', in opposition to the Congress. Jinnah, for instance, had been prepared to give up separate electorates if he could secure reservation of one-third of the legislative seats and assignment of residual powers to the provinces. This latter objective was intended to secure relative autonomy for the Muslim majority provinces, but necessarily conflicted with those, like Nehru, who desired a strong central government able to implement India-wide policies.

This distrust was never subsequently to be overcome. The way forward, however, as the Muslim leaders wrangled among themselves, was for a long time unclear. They never sought to institute Islamically based policies, but rather to identify strategies to protect the interests of India's Muslims. Their disagreements turned upon the most effective constitutional means to secure that end. There was, in those years, no vision of a separate Muslim state. As the sometime Khilafat leader Muhammed Ali wrote in 1930, 'I belong to two circles of equal size but which are not concentric. One is India and the other is the Muslim world . . . We belong to these circles, and we can leave neither.'

The second non-cooperation, or civil disobedience, movement had many elements in common with the first. But it also included several unique features. Most startling was Gandhi's decision to inaugurate the movement in March 1930 by a 240-mile march from his ashram to the sea, followed by an illicit manufacture of salt by boiling sea water. As the salt tax was not a major source of government revenue, many within the Congress looked on in dismay, while the British, puzzled, stood by watching. But the salt march was a stroke of genius. Gandhi's frail figure, striding forward staff-in-hand to confront British imperialism over access to a basic commodity,

fast became the focus of sympathetic attention not only throughout India but around the world, above all in the United States where the salt march first brought Gandhi to public notice. The powerful visual imagery of the march was further enhanced by its ranks of khadi-clad demonstrators, including for the first time marching women. Although the government arrested Gandhi soon after the march, the damage had been done. More disciplined in its organization, if less apocalyptic in its expectations, than its predecessor a decade before, the civil disobedience movement spread rapidly throughout India. Its appeal was further enhanced by the Great Depression. As prices fell, farmers caught in a vice between declining returns for their crops and inflexible land taxes readily turned to civil disobedience, while traders found hartals much less onerous in a slump than if times had been prosperous.

This second campaign caught up a number of groups who had not previously participated. Women for the first time came out on to the streets; protests against forest regulations took place in central India; on the North-West Frontier, despite the region's reputation for violence, a movement among Muslim Pathans led by Abdul Ghaffer Khan, who became known as the 'Frontier Gandhi', allied itself with Gandhi. Apart from the Frontier, however, in contrast to 1920, Muslim participation was ominously limited. Most significant perhaps were the inroads that Gandhi now began to make into south India. During the 1920s south India had remained aloof from nationalism. But by 1930, with non-Brahmans securing ever more places in the government and universities, the Justice Party had fulfilled much of its mission. At the same time, Tamil poets and intellectuals, utilizing Tamil symbols, including the construction of the god Shiva as Dravidian in origin and the deification of the Tamil language as a goddess deserving reverence in place of Sanskrit, as Sumathi Ramaswami has shown, had helped create an increasingly self-confident south Indian culture. Neither nationalism nor Gandhi were any longer so threatening. Furthermore, the Congress leadership worked energetically to build bridges to the larger south Indian populace. One element of the Congress programme that struck an especially resonant chord among upwardly mobile peasant groups was its advocacy of prohibition, for in the south tapping

palm trees and drinking the fermented juice marked out low-caste status. By the mid-1930s, pushing aside the inept Justice Party, the Congress had become the dominant political organization in south India. Nevertheless, Dravidian sentiment remained powerful. During these years it took the form of the militant ‘Self-Respect’ movement under the leadership of E. V. Ramaswami Naicker (1880–1974).

Confronted with its growing popular appeal, the British began to fear an ebbing away of their authority into the hands of the Congress. Most alarming perhaps, especially to Conservatives at home such as Churchill, was the spectacle in March 1931 of Gandhi marching up the steps of the recently completed Viceroy’s House in New Delhi, there to parley, seemingly on equal terms, with Lord Irwin. No less devout than Gandhi himself, and moved by a similar sense of moral purpose, Irwin was determined to reach out to his antagonist. The resulting Gandhi–Irwin pact, which brought a temporary halt to civil disobedience and enabled Gandhi himself to attend the second round table conference, secured little for the British, and, denounced by Nehru and others as a ‘sell-out’, even less of immediate advantage for the Congress. Still, these events announced that the Congress had gained an unprecedented legitimacy as the representative of an embryonic Indian nation. In consequence, when the Gandhi–Irwin pact collapsed in early 1932, with Gandhi’s return empty-handed from London, the new viceroy Lord Willingdon (1931–6), anxious to reassure Britain’s supporters in India that the Raj was still in control, cracked down on the Congress with exceptional severity. Some 40,000 Indians were arrested within three months, and many, including Gandhi himself, languished in jail for up to two years.

NEW OPPORTUNITIES, AND NEW CONFLICTS

With the Congress out of action, the British moved forward on their own to restructure the government of India. Most significant was the endeavour to bring India’s princes into the political system. Walled off from each other until the creation of the Chamber of Princes in 1920, the princes stood forth as the ideal representatives

of the 'feudal' India the British had created to assure their predominance. As the Congress movement gathered strength, the princes, jolted into an awareness of their own vulnerability, proposed that British and princely India be joined into a single federal state. Such a scheme had advantages not only for princes, who would now be built into the new India at the outset, but for others as well. Some of the Muslim leaders saw in federation a way of securing conservative allies against the Congress, while for the British a federal state provided a heaven-sent opportunity to blunt the power of the Congress juggernaut. Most British Conservatives had never been reconciled to the prospect of an independent India. After 1931, with a Conservative-dominated national government in power in London, they determined to devise ways of holding on to India, or, as the Indian secretary Samuel Hoare put it, of giving 'a semblance of responsible government' to Indians while keeping 'for ourselves the threads that really direct the system of government'. This meant that Congress politicians should be diverted to and then kept bottled up in the provinces, while the central government, with power shared among Muslims, princes, and other groups such as Sikhs and untouchables, would be in the hands of those who could be relied upon to secure Britain's interests.

In pursuit of this objective, the 1932 Communal Award sought to give special treatment, including separate electorates, to a variety of so-called 'minorities'. These included above all the untouchables, who had begun to organize themselves under B. R. Ambedkar (1891–1956), in opposition to Gandhi. Unwilling to see untouchables split off from the larger Hindu community, and imagining himself as the guardian of these downtrodden people, whom he called *harijans* (children of god), Gandhi, while still in jail, embarked on a momentous 'fast to the death' to secure the abrogation of this award. As Gandhi grew weaker, a compromise was reached in which separate electorates restricted to untouchable voters were replaced by seats reserved for untouchables in the various Indian legislatures. Although this brought the immediate crisis to an end, and, combined with promises of equal access to wells, roads, temples, and other public places, portended the inclusion of untouchables as equal members into the Indian state, significant improvement was

to be a matter of decades. Even at the present time, untouchables, now known as *dalits*, can hardly be said to be fully free of the stigma of their depressed status.

The Communal Award was followed by the Government of India Act of 1935. Meant to set in place a framework for the Conservative vision of India, it made provision for a federal centre and, doing away with dyarchy, substantially extended provincial autonomy, with ministers responsible to their local legislatures now in charge of all branches of the government. This act was to have far-reaching consequences, though not, for the most part, those intended by its Conservative authors. The federal centre was to come into existence when one-half of the major princes acceded to its terms. By 1935, however, the princes were rapidly getting cold feet. Fearful of the loss of sovereignty entailed by federation, and content to sit back and watch the politicians of British India fight among themselves, they started bargaining for better terms, and so in the end torpedoed the whole scheme. The British, on their part, were reluctant to push these men too hard, for the princes had powerful friends among the 'diehard' Conservatives in Parliament, and the officials in New Delhi were in any case not unwilling to see the centre remain in British hands for a few more years. The appearance, in the later 1930s, within a number of states, of popular movements for the reform of princely autocracy, some supported by local Congressmen, reinforced the princes' waning enthusiasm for federation. The princes were, however, to pay a heavy price for this short-sighted behaviour. For, when their British patrons went home, they found themselves left behind, like beached whales, with few friends, and no institutional base in the new political order.

In the provinces the new act energized politics. The electorate had been substantially extended, so that some 30 million Indians – one-sixth of the adult population, including some women – now had the vote. Released from an increasingly sterile confrontation, the Congress leaders, as a decade before in the mid-1920s, looked forward eagerly to a resumption of electoral activity. They were, however, in a much stronger position than before. The prestige of the Congress, with Gandhi at its head, had reached unparalleled heights as a result of the civil disobedience campaign, while

volunteer workers had spread its message throughout the country. All that was required was to turn this enhanced stature, as India's pre-eminent nationalist organization, into votes. With the elections under the 1935 Act, Congress began the process of transforming itself from a mass movement into a political party. In a stunning triumph, winning 758 of some 1,500 seats in the various provincial legislatures, the Congress in 1937 formed governments in seven provinces, including Madras, Bombay, the Central Provinces, Bihar, and UP.

In office the Congress did few of the things it had said it would do. It did not subvert the 1935 Act, but rather cooperated amicably with the British provincial governors, and enforced law and order much as its predecessors had done. An organization of commercial and professional elites and substantial peasants, it did not, apart from measures to relieve indebtedness, enact extensive agrarian reforms. The Congress was also caught up in an enduring tension between its India-wide structure, with a High Command dictating policy, and the increasing importance of the provinces, where local leaders pursued their own interests supported by their own followers. Nevertheless, the long-term effects of the Congress ministries were immense. One was simply the training Congress politicians, used only to agitation and opposition, received in the practice of government. By the time war broke out in 1939, capable and experienced, they were well prepared take up the reins and themselves rule India, as they were to do only a few years later.

Unfortunately, however, the Congress governments were wholly unsuccessful in winning over their Muslim compatriots. Much of this was the product of unintended slights, together with an insensitivity to deeply felt anxieties. In the UP, for instance, as the new government was being formed, the Congress disdained overtures from the Muslim League for a coalition. They arrogantly told its provincial leader Chaudhuri Khaliqzaman that the League's members could participate in the new government only by dissolving the League and accepting the discipline of the Congress Party. The Congress, with an absolute majority of legislative seats, had no need of League support. They seemed not to notice, or care, however, that, while they had won the bulk of the open seats in the UP legislature, the Muslim League had won twenty-nine of those

reserved for Muslims, and the Congress none at all. In addition, men like Nehru, with his socialist idealism, mistrusted the League's leaders as representatives of 'feudal' landlord interests. Whatever its motives, this high-handed treatment did not reassure Muslim opinion.

Enraged by this humiliation at the hands of the Congress, the Muslim League redoubled its efforts to gain a mass following. This was not to be an easy task. Throughout India, in the 1937 elections, the League had received under 5 per cent of the total Muslim vote, and had emerged as the predominant party in none of the Muslim majority provinces. In the Punjab and Bengal, regional parties took office. Although the leaders of these parties were themselves Muslims, as were the bulk of their followers, and they undertook to support Jinnah on all-India Muslim issues, neither party was formed along communal lines. In Bengal, Fazl al-Haq's Krishak Praja Party, which led various coalition governments after 1937, was dedicated to the uplift of the East Bengal tenantry; while in the Punjab Sikan-der Hayat's Unionist Party, which had long had Hindu members, always represented itself as the defender of all Punjab's agricultural classes.

Elsewhere, in the provinces with substantial Muslim minorities, Congress and the League each jockeyed for position during the later 1930s. In an attempt to reach over the heads of the Muslim politicians, Congress embarked on a 'mass contact' campaign, which only further antagonized Muslim leaders and facilitated their efforts to enroll new members in the League. Muslim leaders, on their part, complained of favouritism towards Hindus, and propagation of Hindu symbols such as the cow and the Hindi language, by the Congress governments. Such allegations had little substance at the level of policy, for the Congress leadership tried scrupulously to be fair, but the flood of new recruits into the party, many from villages, others seeking jobs and power, inevitably enhanced its Hindu character. By 1939, fearful of a Congress takeover of the centre, many Muslims began to cast about for new ways of securing their interests. Among them was the novel idea that India's Muslims comprised a nation entitled to a separate state of their own. Others remained committed to a united India. Maulana Azad, as Congress president in 1940, phrased this position most forcefully:

I am proud of being an Indian. I am part of the indivisible unity that is Indian nationality . . . Islam has now as great a claim on the soil of India as Hinduism. If Hinduism has been the religion of the people here for several thousands of years, Islam has also been their religion for a thousand years. Just as a Hindu can say with pride that he is an Indian and follows Hinduism, so also can we say with equal pride that we are Indians and follow Islam.

INDUSTRY AND THE ECONOMY

The interwar years were marked not only by dramatic political upheavals, but by a grinding economic decline which fuelled much of the nationalist frustration. Many of the crises which hammered India, among them the influenza pandemic of 1918 and the Great Depression of the 1930s, had their origins elsewhere. They had nevertheless a devastating impact. After a period of relative stability in the mid-1920s, the Depression touched off a precipitous fall in prices. As a result, the value of the crops grown by India's peasantry fell by one-half, while the country's overseas markets for agricultural produce dried up. To make matters worse the prices of food and raw materials fell further than those of imported manufactured goods. The squeeze was made even more intolerable by the fact that the agriculturalists' costs, especially their land taxes and their accumulated indebtedness, fixed in cash, remained unchanged; hence their effective burden was doubled.

Within India, a vicious combination of population growth and soil exhaustion combined to worsen the larger impact of the slump. Until the 1920s, India's population had been kept in check by a high death rate, the product of famine, poverty, and disease. Modest improvements in public health, with the almost complete disappearance of major famines for fifty years after 1910, set in motion a slow but accelerating growth in population. During the interwar years this increase amounted on average to over 1 per cent per annum. Unfortunately, population growth was not matched by a corresponding increase in food production. To be sure, commercial cropping expanded, as did the area under irrigation. But this was largely confined to the Punjab, which during these years, the beneficiary of a vast network of perennial canals fed by Himalayan rivers, took up the role it has retained to the present, of South Asia's bread-basket.

Elsewhere, especially in India's rice-growing regions, ever more intensive cultivation kept production at best up to previous levels. As a result, India saw an overall decline in the per capita output of food grains. In Bengal, the decline amounted to almost 40 per cent over the period from 1911 to 1941, a shortfall made good only by imports of rice from Burma.

Industry, though still only a tiny fraction of the larger Indian economy, fared substantially better than agriculture. During these years, even though it remained under British rule, India began the process of disengaging its economy from its long colonial subservience to Britain's. The process was most visible in India's pre-eminent manufacturing industry, that of cotton textiles. Textile imports, which had crested at 2,400 million yards of cloth in 1913, fell off dramatically in subsequent years. By the late 1930s Indian mills had secured up to two-thirds of the domestic market for piece-goods. At the same time industry began to spread outside its established centres in western India, while several communities long active in trade, among them Marwaris and Chettiars, for the first time began investing in manufacturing. The ideals of *swadeshi* were recruited to encourage consumer purchases in a growing urban middle-class market. The advertisement in plate 6.5 shows how one textile firm sought to identify its products with India itself.

Responding to the increasing importance of India's manufacturing industry, and anxious to secure the support of the country's industrialists in the struggle with Gandhian nationalism, the colonial government, over howls of protest from Britain, abandoned its long-standing solicitude for the interests of British industry. From the mid-1920s a measure of 'discriminating protection' was granted to such major industries as iron and steel, textiles, sugar, paper, and matches. The effects of these measures were, however, inhibited by the government's fiscal constraints. Especially during the economic crisis of the 1930s, hamstrung by a commitment to deflationary finance, which India shared with Britain, the government stood by helplessly. Nevertheless, the new industrial and tariff policy set in motion a process that over time freed India's economy from European dominance, yet walled it off from the world. Reinforced by nationalist sentiment, this inward-looking pattern of growth persisted until the 1980s.

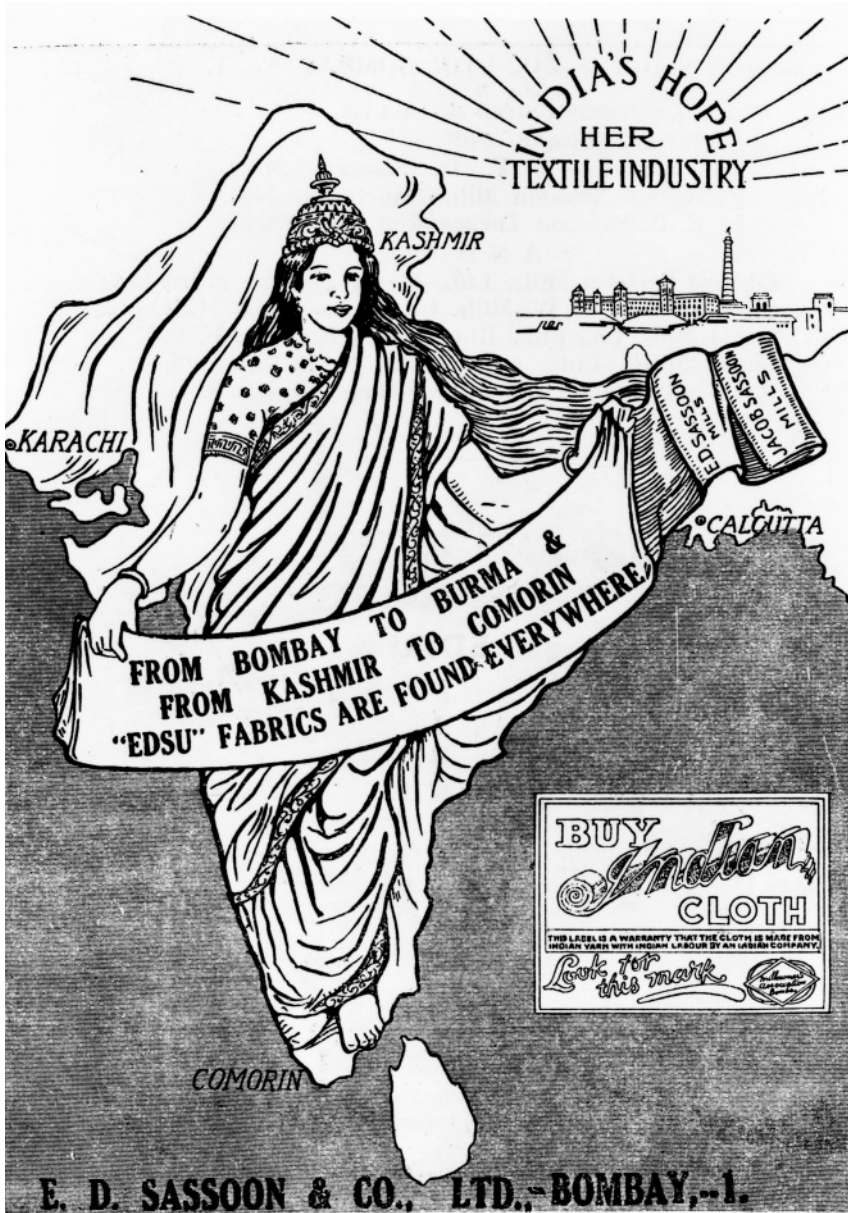


Plate 6.5 Advertisement for E. D. Sassoon & Co. 'EDSU' fabrics, with sari-clad women plotted onto the map of India.

The interwar years, when Congress and the British remained locked in wary combat, set precedents, and established institutions, that endured for decades to come. Above all, this extended period of struggle created in the Indian National Congress a disciplined nationalist movement, with a tested leadership at the centre and devoted workers throughout India's myriad villages. Unparalleled among the other 'new nations' that emerged from the upheavals of mid-century, this organizational structure, with its ability to turn out people in their thousands, whether to demonstrate in the streets or to vote at the polls, insured the Congress dominance of the Indian political system until the 1970s. Indeed, for many years, as the only nationwide body apart from the government, the Congress visibly represented the 'imagined community' of the nation. Although the dramatic confrontations with the British on such occasions as the salt march stirred the public imagination, more important in the long run was the slow widening of the circle of the public. Increasingly, from the dyarchy legislatures on through the ministries of 1937–9, Indians secured spaces in which they could take some responsibility for running their country. Not least in importance was the institutionalization of elections as the appropriate device for popular participation in politics. By the time of independence, democratic ways had become so deeply rooted in India that their repudiation was unthinkable. In the end, one might argue, the ritual 'dance' of the Congress and the Raj over so many years enforced compromise and taught each the limits of the possible in ways that facilitated not just a smooth transfer of power but a lasting commitment to a liberal society.

Yet, at the same time, this new politics widened fissures in society that had previously been of little importance, and might well have faded away had self-government been secured in the 1920s. Instead, descriptive categories – Muslim, non-Brahman, agriculturalist – deployed by the British for their own purposes, now became the focus of intense competition. As more and more people gained access to power, but found the centre shut off, these local tensions of caste and community acquired a new political salience, and fluid boundaries hardened into engrained practice. The act of voting itself, by forcing people as individuals to make conscious choices,

accelerated this process. As the Congress strove to unite all Indians under its own tent, other allegiances, especially at the newly empowered level of the province, found receptive soil as well. Nation and community, Gandhian universalism and intensely felt parochialisms, emerged together strengthened from the schooling of the interwar decades. They were to make the 1940s a period of triumph – and of tragedy.