CIVIL DISOBEDIENCE MOVEMENT

CIVIL DISOBEDIENCE: A CRUSADE

Mahatma Gandhi's continental campaign of Civil Disobedience against the imperial Government in India was by far the most formidable challenge to British authority in India. Unprecedented as it was, the movement challenged the Government's moral authority and its power to control its subjects. Even the Viceroy of India, Ford Irwin had to admit, "Most of my thought at the moment is concentrated upon Gandhi. I wish I fell sure what the right way to deal with him is". The Viceroy was caught in the horns of a dilemma: he could neither arrest Gandhiji without serious consequences, nor could allow the spread of the movement throughout the country under the Mahatma's inspiration. Irwin's Director of Public Information later pointed out: the Viceroy faced "a desperate dilemma". He was trying for a successful Round Table Conference to solve India's problem. The immediate arrest of Gandhiji would have hampered these efforts. Gandhiji himself put Irwin's dilemma as under: "The Government's plight is that of the serpent which has swallowed a rat. It would find it hard to resort to either course of action allowing me to remain out or putting me behind the bars".

Gandhiji evoked a tremendous popular admiration which was never before enjoyed by any Indian. His role in Indian politics was extraordinary, when seen against the barriers to national leadership created by regional divisions and communal tensions, and by the lack of proper mass media.

A correct evaluation of Civil Disobedience Movement can be made from the following quotation:

"Mahatma Gandhi embarked upon the Civil Disobedience Movement with a sense of spiritual exaltation, guided not by reason but by inner inspiration. He proclaimed the struggle as a holy war, a fight to the finish from which there could be no retreat, and possibly his own 'last chance'. It was this movement which was a crowning point in terms, both of the establishment of his absolute but exalted leadership and of the universal acceptance of the preaching of truth, non-violence, fearless defiance of evil and Swadeshism. Even the wider world also watched the satyagraha experiment with inquisitiveness as to whether the Mahatma could score victory through truth and non-violence or would prove to be a political twister. Judged through this angle, the movement turned out to be a grand saga of stoic determination and peaceful resistance against the mighty power on earth....It was an effort towards the moral regeneration of society and the foundation of a new political order."

† K. K. Chaudhati, Maharashtra and Indian Freedom Struggle, (Government of Maharashtra, Bombay, 1985), p.79.
Bombay Presidency was in the forefront of the movement from the very beginning. Bombay city, which had played a vital role during the Rowlatt Satyagraha, the Non-Co-operation Movement (and later the Quit India Movement), was in the vanguard throughout Civil Disobedience. Bombay's part in the movement was a model for the rest of India. The thrust of the movement was so powerful that the Governor of Bombay, Ford Sykes argued with Ford Irwin that the policy of treating Civil Disobedience in Bombay Presidency, and Bombay City particularly, should not be uniform throughout India and that it could not be dealt under the ordinary laws. The Bombay Government told the Government of India that it considered the ordinary law insufficient to check violation of the salt law, non-payment of land revenue, and picketing of liquor shops and British goods shops. They insisted that Government must act swiftly to check the violation of laws and progress of the movement, to protect the Government's prestige and to support the supporters of Government. The Bombay Government also pressed for more executive powers against the movement and for further assistance from Delhi.

The movement was certainly intense in Bombay, Gujarat, Pune, the coastal districts of Maharashtra, and even the interior parts in the province. Outside the Bombay Presidency, the only provinces where the movement gained momentum were Bengal, Madras and the U. P. In C. P. and Berar the Salt Satyagraha was much less intense, while Civil Disobedience was observed by violation of the forest laws. The movement aroused little enthusiasm and swiftly degenerated into a farce in Punjab, and Delhi showed little interest. Assam and Orissa also did not show active interest in the movement. Just as C. P. and Berar's emphasis was on Forest Satyagraha, so in Bihar Dr. Rajendra Prasad and the Bihar Provincial Congress Committee laid emphasis on local issues, such as, the Chaukidari tax, land revenue, etc.

GENESIS OF THE MOVEMENT

"On 14 February, the All-India Congress Committee at Ahmedabad gave Gandhiji and his followers full powers to initiate Civil Disobedience wherever and in whatever manner they chose. All Congressmen were to adhere to complete non-violence, notwithstanding any provocation. Boycott of law courts and schools was also recommended. In pursuance to the "charter of freedom", as Gandhiji termed it, which was given to him by the Working Committee, he wrote to the Viceroy to concede the substance of independence immediately, failing which a mass movement was contemplated. On hearing from the Viceroy's private secretary to the contrary, Gandhiji set out from Sabarmati to the Dandi beach on 12 March, where he proposed to make salt in defiance of the salt laws.

"The inauguration of Civil Disobedience is an important landmark in the history of Bombay. The advent of the movement generated a polarisation of political, economic and social forces in the city. Civil Disobedience along with the devastating Great Depression affected Bombay with great severity. Unemployment incidental to depression was a significant political factor because the labour force was highly volatile."
The volatility was built up from years of inflation, recession, wage cuts and retrenchment. The Government had failed to solve the city’s pressing social problems. Hence Civil Disobedience also brought in its trail an element of violence. Secondly, it also brought with it boycott of foreign firms and goods, while Government and industrialists vociferously propagated that Civil Disobedience had intensified the evil effects of the depression. The Congress had a ready audience for the view that Government's fiscal policy was the root of the depression, amongst the marketeers and the middle class society. It is, therefore, particularly necessary to furnish a rather comprehensive narration of the ominouns Civil Disobedience Movement in Bombay.

Gandhiji’s choice of violation of the salt law as a symbol of Civil Disobedience was a superbly ingenious choice since condemnation of a tax on a necessity of life imposed by an alien Government was sure to serve as a mass rallying cry and to rouse sympathy in England and America. Just as salt had a publicity value and economic significance, it had also a low violence potential. Hence its choice as a symbol of injustice. The world economic depression, which had caused a catastrophic fall in the prices of agricultural produce and in employment, was another significant factor in the satyagraha campaign. Gandhiji had already tested public temper by seeking response to the pledge of Independence by celebrating 26 January 1930 as Independence Day. It was intended to declare that we will be satisfied with nothing less than Complete Independence, Puma Swaraj, as distinct from Dominion Status. It was a proclamation of "the inalienable right of the Indian people to have freedom and to enjoy the fruits of their toil and have the necessities of life, so that they may have full opportunities of growth". In pursuance of the "charter of freedom", as Gandhiji termed it, he wrote to the Viceroy to concede the substance of Independence immediately, failing which a mass movement was to be inaugrated. On hearing from the Viceroy's private secretary to the contrary, Gandhiji launched on the Dandi march.

The first phase of the Civil Disobedience Movement, the Salt Satyagraha, began with Gandhiji’s marathon march on a 240 mile route from Sabarmati to Dandi on 12 March 1930. This historic walkathon was a dramatic prelude designed not just to publicise Gandhiji's appeal for Civil Disobedience but to educate the people in the struggle for freedom with a religious zeal, as a pilgrimage rather than political gesture. The Collector of Ahmedabad noted the religious aura which surrounded the Dandi march, as Gandhiji’s followers kept quoting the Gospels and singing holy songs. The Collector compared Mahatma with Jesus Christ setting to go to Jerusalem.

Gandhiji, who led the satyagraha in person, designed the march not merely to publicise his appeal for Civil Disobedience but to educate Indians, and particularly villagers, in the qualities essential for true

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Swaraj. The satyagrahis used to sleep in the open and eat the simplest food. All they asked of villagers was the raw food, a clean resting and washing place, and information about human and animal population, Khadi and spinning work, land revenue demand and salt consumption in villages on the way. No servants were allowed, no luxuries. There were no lengthy speeches, Gandhiji spoke briefly about the cruel taxation, Khadi, cow-protection, untouchability, temperance and regeneration of the Indian society to make itself worthy of Swaraj.

Gandhiji reached Dandi on 5 April 1930. The following morning he bathed in the sea and then picked up a handful of salt and mud in violation of the salt laws. This was signal for a nation-wide campaign of Civil Disobedience. Very disciplined batches of satyagrahis then filled up pots and pans of sea water and boiled it to extract salt. There was not much of salt as it had been destroyed by Government employees. The Satyagraha movement was simultaneously inaugurated at Vile Parle in Bombay on the same morning (6 April). The inauguration of the movement coincided with the anniversary of the Rowlatt Satyagraha of 1919.

Gandhiji had nominated Jamnalal Bajaj as the first "dictator" of Bombay. The Civil Disobedience Committee under Bajaj performed the inaugural of the movement at Vile Parle, with elaborate preparations. The chief architects of the movement in Bombay and Maharashtra were Jamnalal Bajaj, K. F. Nariman, Goculbhai Bhatt, Kishorelal Mashruwala, Shankarao Deo. G. V. Ketkar, Vasudev Vithal Dastane, Dr. V. N. Athalye, S. D. Jawadekar and Anant Vasudeo Sahastrabuddhe. The Maharashtra Civil Disobedience Committee, with headquarters at Pune, under the presidentship of Shankarrao Deo, mobilised mass support to the Civil Disobedience at Vile Parle. Several batches of Congress satyagrahis from almost all districts of Western Maharashtra participated in the Salt Satyagraha at Vile Parle. Many of them from Thane, Raigad, Pune, Satara, Jalgaon and Ahmadnagar districts came to Bombay on foot. It were Shankarrao Deo and S. D. Jawadekar who had enthused the satyagrahis with an unflinching determination to confront the Government with the Gandhian way of fighting against tyranny.

The satyagrahis started with prayers in the serene atmosphere at Juhu-Vile Parle in the morning of 6 April. They manufactured edible salt by boiling sea water in cement pans. "It was a grand spectacle to see. Men, women and children brought water and prepared salt, the salt symbolic of India's independence. The inaugural ceremony was so successful that the bureaucracy, in spite of orders of the Viceroy to the contrary, could not but arrest and sentence Jamnalal, Mashruwala, K. F. Nariman (President of the BPCC) and Bhatt to two years' rigorous imprisonment. Kasturba Gandhi and Janakidevi Bajaj were camping in the Vile Parle chhavani till it was declared unlawful in August 1930. They inspired ladies to participate in the operation. Hundreds of ladies broke their traditional seclusion and came on the battlefield."

1, K. K. Chaudhari, Maharashtra and Indian Freedom Struggle, p. 81.
The Salt Satyagraha was more intense in the Bombay Presidency than any other province. The main source of salt supply in this region was sea salt made in the salt works owned or leased out by the Government, the main works being at Dharasana, Chharvada and Wadala. As soon as the Satyagraha started the salt department destroyed natural salt formations. Hence the popular method of violation of law was boiling sea water or water containing brine. The satyagrahis used to boil water in big pans. In order to prevent police destruction of this endeavour, the Congressmen surrounded the operation by several rings of volunteers with tightly linked arms. At times 25 to 30 rings of satyagrahis surrounded the salt works. Some of the rings were formed by women and strong young men. It was an extremely prolonged and exasperating task for the police to break through these rings of volunteers.

Some salt was smuggled from Goa and Princely States on the coast. The sale of contraband salt was quite large.

—Editor.