
UNIT 15 CIVIL DISOBEDIENCE MOVEMENT*

Structure

- 15.1 Introduction
- 15.2 Background
- 15.3 The Lahore Session
- 15.4 Spread of the Movement: Popular Response and Regional Pattern
- 15.5 Social Base of the Movement
- 15.6 Gandhi-Irwin Pact and the Second Round Table Conference
- 15.7 Back to Agitation
- 15.8 Critical Assessment of the Civil Disobedience Movement
- 15.9 Summary
- 15.10 Exercises

15.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter aims at critically analysing and locating the Civil Disobedience Movement (1930-34) and evaluating its significance in the context of the broader anti-imperialist movement coordinated under the leadership of Gandhi since 1920s in India. The Civil Disobedience Movement, considered as the second major Gandhian mass movement, popularly labelled as the Salt Satyagraha, made a distinct advance in broadening the social reach of the anti-imperialist struggle compared to the Non-cooperation Movement, launched during the early 1920s. In this Unit, we shall discuss the backdrop under which the movement was launched, the issues addressed in its programme, the pattern and trend of popular response at various regional levels and thereby mapping its achievements and limitations.

15.2 BACKGROUND

The Indian National Congress suffered a sharp decline in its membership soon after the suspension of Non-cooperation Movement by Gandhiji in 1922. It also made a large section of the people feel let down and demoralized. Many in the Congress lost faith in the efficacy of the Gandhian strategy and a section of the youth turned to revolutionary violence to achieve their political objectives. The 'No-changer' group focused on the Gandhian constructive programme in rural areas whereas the 'Pro-changers', especially the Swarajists, got involved in council politics. Significantly, the mid-1920s also witnessed the alienation of the Muslims from the national movement and the resultant occurrence of communal riots at several places, such as Calcutta, Dacca, Patna, Delhi, United Provinces and the North Western Frontier Province. The perceptible demoralisation within the anti-imperialist movement however sought to be overcome with the revival of momentum for evocative nationalist politics around 1927.

* Resource Person: Prof. Chandi Prasad Nanda

The immediate cause was the announcement and formation of an all-White Simon Commission in November 1927, tasked with the responsibility to decide and recommend whether India was ready for further measure of constitutional progress or not. Being an emotive issue, this radically affected the political mood of the country. The Commission had already become a suspect in the eyes of the people by not representing a single Indian and this had the opposite effect to the one intended. Therefore its arrival in India during February 1927 proved to be a political disaster. It was subjected to hostile demonstrations and boycotts, wherever Congress influence was strong enough.

This period also saw the Hindu-Muslim chasm grow as the Hindu critics of nationalism's espousal of Khilafat on the one hand, and the Muslim leaders' outcry against the alleged betrayal of the same Khilafat, on the other, undermined the platform of communal unity which the Non-Cooperation Movement in early 1920s had so splendidly built up.

The anti-Simon boycotts heralded the revival of anti-imperialistic movements from 1928 onwards. Middle-class students and youth dominated the urban demonstrations during the years 1928 and 1929. This period also witnessed student and youth conferences and associations, raising demands for complete independence and socio-economic change. Bombay and Calcutta witnessed militant communist-led workers movement, which alarmed Indian businessmen and British officials alike. Bhagat Singh's Hindustan Socialist Republican Association introduced a new secular and socialistic tone, leading to a revival of revolutionary groups in Bengal and Northern India. Added to these developments, Vallabhbhai Patel's Bardoli Satyagraha in Gujarat in 1928 against the enhancement of land revenue spawned peasant movements in various regions. This was also the time when Jawaharlal Nehru and Subhas Bose, strongly influenced by socialist ideas and a politically restive population, raised the demand for Purna Swaraj or Complete Independence replacing the usual demand for Dominion status. Simultaneously the rise and impact of left wingers within the Congress led Gandhiji to support the demand for complete independence at Lahore session of the Congress in 1929.

In the meantime, the popular resentment against Simon Commission made it apparent that the future constitution of India should be framed by the Indians themselves. The Congress convened an all-party conference in February 1928 and constituted a committee to draft a constitution under Motilal Nehru in May 1928. In fact, the Nehru Committee was the nationalists' response to the appointment of Simon Commission. Lord Birkenhead, the Secretary of State, had challenged the Indians asking them to frame a constitution acceptable to all political groups in the country. The Indian opinion on this vital issue was united. The Nehru Committee Report suggested a constitution based on the principles of dominion status. The Congress, which met in December 1928, declared that if the British government did not accept the Nehru Report by the end of 1929, it would give a call for a new civil disobedience campaign at its next session to be held at Lahore.

Another development that had far-reaching effects on the national movement was the World Economic Depression of 1929-33. Political and economic tensions steadily aggravated under the British colonial setup as it failed to accommodate emerging Indian interests during the late 1920s and early 1930s. British tariff

policy was lopsided and led to large scale discontent amongst the various business groups. Textile imports from Lancashire increased the anxiety and concerns of the local manufacturers; the British jute interests and the Birlas were at loggerheads in Calcutta; while in Bombay coastal shipping was a source of friction. Large scale retrenchment of the workers spawned agitations with unprecedented virulence and organisation.

15.3 THE LAHORE SESSION

The launch of a programme of civil disobedience including non-payment of taxes was the tactic the Congress authorized at the Lahore session in 1929 along with a request to all members of legislatures to resign their seats. Although Gandhi was empowered to launch the agitation at a time and place of his choice, he was desperately in search of an effective formula. He submitted a minimum demand of 11 points among which the major ones were: the demand for the reduction of rupee-sterling ratio to 1s4d, reduction of agricultural tax by 50% and making it a subject of legislative control, abolition of salt tax and salt monopoly of the government, reduction of military expenditure and salaries of highest grade services, release of all political prisoners, protection for Indian textiles and reservation of coastal shipping for Indians and so on. The demands were ignored. Jawaharlal Nehru regarded these demands as ‘a climb down from *Purna Swaraj*’ and Gandhi was still in two minds.

It was in February 1930 that Gandhi began to talk about salt: ‘There is no article like salt outside water by taxing which the State can reach even the starving millions, the sick, the maimed and the utterly helpless. The tax constitutes therefore the most inhuman poll tax the ingenuity of man can devise.’ He informed the Viceroy Irwin that on the 11th of March he would proceed with the co-workers of his Ashram at Sabarmati to violate the salt law. It was a brilliantly conceived plan though a few could grasp its significance when it was announced. With seventy-eight members, among whom were men belonging to almost every region and religion of India, Gandhi decided to march from Ahmedabad to Dandi through the villages of Gujarat for about 240 miles. He declared that upon reaching the Dandi coast, he would break the salt laws. It was, as turned out later, a deceptively innocuous and devastatingly effective move. As people began to converge at Sabarmati Ashram in thousands, before the movement began, to witness the dramatic events that would unfold. Gandhiji painstakingly explained his plans, gave directions for future actions, impressed on the people about the necessity for non-violence and prepared them for the Government’s response. Gandhiji said ‘Wherever possible, civil disobedience of salt laws should be started... Liquor and foreign cloth shops should be picketed. We can refuse to pay taxes if we have requisite strength. The lawyers can give up practice; the public can boycott the courts by refraining from litigation. Government servants can resign their posts... I prescribe only one condition, viz., let our pledge for truth and non-violence as the only means for the attainment of Swaraj be faithfully kept.’

The proposal of making the issue of salt central to the launching a mass civil disobedience movement proved quite decisive. ‘You planned a fine strategy round the issue of salt’, Irwin told Gandhi later. A concrete and universal grievance of the rural poor, the salt laws had no socially divisive implications. The breaking of the salt law by Gandhi meant a rejection of the government’s claim on the allegiance of the people. Furthermore, in coastal areas, illegal manufacture of

salt could provide the people with a small income which was no less significant. Above everything, the Dandi March and the widespread violation of the salt laws over large areas of the country subsequently demonstrated the tremendous power of a non-violent mass struggle. While Gandhi was marching to Dandi his comrades took up the far more difficult task of organisation, fund collection and touring towns and villages to spread the nationalistic message among the people.

15.4 SPREAD OF THE MOVEMENT: POPULAR RESPONSE AND REGIONAL PATTERN

Once the way was cleared by Gandhi's extraordinary political ritual at Dandi, defiance of the salt laws started all over the country. The Satyagrahis held salt marches in Assam, Bengal, and Madras, Sindh, Orissa and at many other places. In Tamil Nadu, C. Rajagopalchari led a march from Tiruchirapally to Vedaranniyam. In Malabar, K. Kelappan led a march from Calicut to Poyannur. Noted Gandhian leader Gopabandhu Choudhury led the first batch of Satyagrahis from Cuttack to Inchudi in Balasore sea-coast in Orissa. In Assam, Satyagrahis walked from Sylhet to Noakhali (Bengal) to make salt. In Andhra, a number of Sibirams (camps) came up in different districts as headquarters of salt Satyagraha.

This period also witnessed a new kind of no tax campaign – the refusal to pay the chowkidari tax. The chowkidars as village guards, supplemented the small contingent of rural police, were paid out of the tax levied specially on the villages. The popular antipathy for chowkidars had continued as they were often perceived as spies acting in favour of the Government and also as retainers for the local landlords. The movement against this tax, calling for the resignation of chowkidars, and of the influential members of chowkidari panchayats first started in Bihar in May 1930, in lieu of salt agitation due to the land-locked nature of the province. The tax was refused in the Monghyr, Saran and Bhagalpur districts: 'Chowkidars were induced to resign, and a social boycott used against those who resisted. The Government retaliated by confiscation of property worth hundreds and thousands in lieu of a few rupees of tax and by beatings and torture. Matters came to a head in Bihpur in Bhagalpur on May 31 when the police, desperate to assert its fast-eroding authority, occupied the Congress ashram which was the headquarters of nationalist activity in the area. The occupation triggered off daily demonstrations outside the ashram. The visit by Rajendra Prasad and Abdul Bari from Patna became the occasion for a huge mass rally, which was broken up by a lathi charge injuring Rajendra Prasad. As elsewhere, repression further increased the nationalist' strength and prevented the police from entering the rural areas.'

In Bengal, as salt manufacturing became difficult with the onset of the monsoon, the shift to anti-chowkidari and anti-Union Board agitation emerged as distinct options. As in other places, villagers here braved and 'withstood severe repression, losing thousands of rupees worth of property through confiscation and destruction, and having to hide for days in forests to escape the wrath of the police.' The non-payment of chowkidari tax and demand for its abolition marked a new high in coastal districts of Orissa particularly in Balasore with the petering out of salt Satyagraha around June in view of advent of rains. People refused to pay the tax under the belief that the very payment of tax had been 'forbidden by the Congress people'. Collective forms of protest as well as assault on police surfaced when

the authorities attempted to attach the property of the people who refused to pay chowkidari tax.

No-tax movement in the shape of refusal of land revenue also surfaced in Kheda, Bardoli taluqa of Surat district, and Jambusar in Broach of Gujrat. It saw remarkable exodus of thousands of people, with family, cattle and household goods, from British India into the neighbouring princely states such as Baroda where they camped for months together in the open fields. On the other hand, the British authorities retaliated by breaking open their houses, destroying their belongings and confiscating their lands. The police did not even 'spare Vallabhbhai Patel's eighty-years-old mother, who sat cooking in her village house in Karamsad; her cooking utensils were kicked about and filled with kerosene and stone.' Vallabhbhai continued to provide encouragement and solace to the hard-pressed peasants of his native land. In the face of terrible oddities compounded by meagre resources and demoralisation, 'they stuck it out in the wilderness till the truce in March 1931 made it possible for them to return to their respective homes.'

Forest laws were defied and it assumed mass proportions in Maharashtra, Karnataka and the Central Provinces, 'especially in areas with large tribal populations who had been the most seriously affected by the colonial Government's restrictions on the use of the forest.' At some places, the size of the crowd that broke the forest laws swelled to 70,000 and above. The infamous 'Cunningham circular' evoked powerful agitation led by students in Assam. The circular unjustly had forced students and their guardians to furnish assurances of good behaviour to the colonial government.

The popular response all over the country to Jawaharlal Nehru's message delivered at Lahore in December 1929 has been ecstatic. Nehru had reminded his countrymen: 'Remember once again, now that this flag is unfurled, it must not be lowered as long as a single Indian, man, woman, or child lives in India.' It is in this context, 'attempts to defend the honour of the national flag in the face of severe brutalities often turned into heroism of the most spectacular variety.' The exemplary courage of Tota Narasaiah Naidu who preferred to be beaten unconscious by a fifteen-member police force rather than give up the national flag at Bundur, on the Andhra Coast had an electrifying effect all over the country. This was followed with similar determination displayed by P. Krishna Pillai, a Calicut based nationalist who later on became a prominent communist, in suffering lathi blows. In a novel idea of defying the repeated attempts by police to snatch away the national flag from their hands, a group of children in Surat would stitch khadi dresses in the three colours of the national flag, and thus these little, 'living flags' triumphantly paraded the streets and made the police utterly helpless to snatch the national flag anymore. The national flag which came to be spotted in the nook and corner of the rural India now onward came to symbolise the unprecedented sprit of nationalism.

The Civil Disobedience Movement evoked remarkable response in the initial months in U.P., but got quietened as colonial repression stepped up. But it led to the call for a movement combining both no-revenue, no-rent campaign. The no-revenue part was a call to the zamindars to refuse to pay revenue to the Government, the no-rent a call to the tenants not to pay rent to the zamindars. As the zamindars were largely loyal to the Government, this became primarily a no-rent struggle. Though no-rent was in the air, it was only in October the

campaign picked up again when Jawaharlal Nehru, 'out of jail for a brief period, got the U.P. Congress Committee to sanction the no-rent campaign'. Based on intensive propaganda for two months, the campaign came to be launched in December; by January however, severe repression had forced many peasants to flee the villages. The two districts of Agra and Rae Bareilly remained the nerve centres of this campaign.

A variety of forms of mobilization came to be popularized as Civil Disobedience Movement crystallized as a major nationalist form of anti-colonial politics. For instance, formation of volunteer corps, organisation of *sankirtan* processions to move around towns and villages to popularise the message of *swaraj* or *prabhat pheris*, wherein people including women and children in the villages and towns went around at dawn singing nationalist songs, tours by activists and leaders organizing public meetings in the rural and urban areas, organisation of magic lanterns shows and secret circulation of booklets containing nationalist literature in the villages to spread nationalist ideas amongst people and setting up of underground Congress ashrams became the familiar modes of nationalist activities. Interestingly, rural market places, temples and Gandhian ashrams became significantly new sites of nationalist activities. Besides, widespread circulation of 'illegal' news-sheets or 'congress bulletins' or *patrikas* either handwritten or cyclostyled even sometimes by 'mango sellers and girl inmates of orphanage' not only sought to contest the legitimacy of obnoxious Press Act but also emerged as the innovative ways of mobilizing people. Children volunteered to organise them into *vanara sena* or monkey squads and 'at least at one place the girls decided they wanted their own separate *manjari sena* or cat army!'

Nehru's arrest in April 1930 for defiance of the salt law evoked huge demonstrations in Madras, Calcutta and Karachi. Gandhi's arrest came on May 4, 1930 when he had announced that he would lead a raid on Dharsana salt works on the west coast. Gandhi's arrest was followed by massive protests in Bombay, Delhi, Calcutta and Sholapur, where the response was the fiercest. After Gandhi's arrest, the Congress Working Committee sanctioned three significant measures: (i) Non-payment of revenue in Ryotwari areas; (ii) No-chowkidari-tax campaign in Zamindari areas; and (iii) Violation of forest laws in the central provinces.

Under pressure and social boycott, many lower-level government officials including police men resigned from their services. As the agitation gathered momentum, the government, in retaliation, let loose a reign of brutality, methodically bashing unresisting men to a bloody pulp, as the American journalist Webb Miller observed. Such repression and its heroic defiance evoked admiration and sympathy which quickly turned into active participation, releasing the movement from its initially narrow confines. But then the movement turned violent, weakening the Gandhian restraint because his followers were already behind the bars.

When the Salt Satyagraha attained a critical high, three major developments occurred which went beyond the confines of Gandhian Civil Disobedience. Firstly, Revolutionary nationalism in Bengal considerably deepened British alarm. For example, the Chittagong armoury was captured by the Bengal revolutionaries on April 18, 1930 after which they fought a pitched battle on Jalalabad hill on April 22. Civil disobedience in Bengal was accompanied by revolutionary nationalism,

with 56 incidents in 1930 (as compared to 47 in 1919-29). Secondly, in Peshawar, the arrest of Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan on April 23, 1930 gave rise to a massive upsurge when Hindu soldiers refused to open fire on a Muslim crowd in a fine instance of patriotic self-sacrifice, non-violence and communal amity. Thirdly, a textile workers' strike in Sholapur led to attacks on liquor shops, police outposts and government buildings, giving rise to something like a parallel government for a few days in early May. However, illegal salt manufacture became difficult due to the onset of monsoon, and the Congress took to other forms of mass struggle like non-payment of land revenue, refusal to pay *chowkidari tax* and Satyagraha in forest areas. Though the government retaliated with force, the peasants held firm and resorted to violent confrontations with the police in many places.

However, some regional studies on the Civil Disobedience Movement reveals that Gujarat and the Gujarati business-cum-professional community of Bombay city became the classic heartland of Gandhian controlled mass mobilization through Satyagraha. The interests of substantial landholding peasants like the Patidars of Bardoli and Kheda fitted in well with Gandhian strategies and controls, because rent was not much of an issue. In the areas where the Congress was weaker or where internal zamindar-peasant divide was quite pronounced, rural movements tended to be much more uninhibited. This was seen in Central Provinces, Maharashtra or Karnataka, where non-cooperation had little impact and Gandhian ideas came to be associated with a near millenarian flavor and novelty, mostly absent in the well-established strongholds like Gujarat, coastal Andhra or Bihar. This inverse relationship between organization and militancy had been brought out in district-level comparisons in U.P. A strong organisation and a few big zamindars in parts of Agra district followed the Bardoli pattern, while in taluqdar-dominated Rae Baraeli, peasants' exerted pressure. In Bengal, the Congress was weak and faction-ridden, there was a communal divide in the eastern districts and the presence of a left alternative made matters complicated.

15.5 SOCIAL BASE OF THE MOVEMENT

In the urban areas, the support for Gandhian nationalism around 1930 was less than what it had been during the Non-Cooperation Movement and only a few lawyers gave up their practice and a few students joined 'national schools' instead of government controlled institutions. Revolutionary nationalism attracted the educated youth more in Bengal, and for a brief period Bhagat Singh became more popular than Gandhi in the north Indian towns. Muslim participation was low, and there was communal discontent in Dhaka town and Kishoreganj village in May and July 1930. There were frequent hartals in towns, but to the relief of British officials the Congress did not include industrial or communication strikes in its programme. That lacuna was largely made up by the massive peasant mobilization and considerable support from the business groups, at least during the initial stages. As the movement implied violations of law, the number of jail-goers was more than three times the 1921-22 figures. There was solidarity with the nationalist movement by the Calcutta Marwaris headed by G.D. Birla at this stage, and merchants in many towns gave up imports of foreign goods for some months. Due to picketing and the overall impact of the Depression worldwide, there was a spectacular collapse of British cloth imports from 1248 million yards in 1929-30 to only 523 million yard in 1930-31.

Another important feature of the Civil disobedience Movement was the widespread participation of women. Women from socially conservative professional, business or peasant families picketed shops, faced lathis and went to jail. This, however, did not entail any drastic change in the traditional image of women. But women's participation in revolutionary nationalism, especially in Bengal, did come under sharp attack. Even Rabindranath Tagore with his impeccable progressive outlook wrote a novel *Char Adhyay* criticizing such 'unfeminine' behaviour.

15.6 GANDHI-IRWIN PACT AND THE SECOND ROUND TABLE CONFERENCE

Civil Disobedience passed on to an apparently contradictory phase in the last few months of 1930. The effect of the Depression increased the pressures for no rent, which the UP Congress reluctantly sanctioned. Though incidents of peasant and tribal militancy increased, official reports indicated a marked decline of enthusiasm and support among urban traders, many of whom started selling foreign goods on the sly. Industrialists grumbled about the limits of patience while Homi Mody complained of the frequent hartals dislocating trade and industry. The ruthless seizure of property by the government reduced the nationalistic ardour of the rich peasants. Gandhi had to retreat probably due to all this as also owing to the fact that almost all leading congress leaders were in jail. He had a talk with Irwin, ending in the Delhi Pact or Gandhi-Irwin Pact of March 5 1931. The pact proposed another round table conference to discuss the agreements reached in the first; the immediate withdrawal of Civil Disobedience; the discontinuation of boycott of British goods; the withdrawal of ordinances promulgated, release of prisoners and remission of penalties; and with the exception of people living by the seashore, no breach of the salt law. There was feeling of unhappiness all over, more so when Gandhi's request was ignored and three revolutionaries – Bhagat Singh, Sukhdev and Rajguru – were executed on March 23. Nehru wrote that Civil Disobedience had died, 'not with a bang but a whimper'. People felt let down, especially the peasants who had sacrificed their land.

The compromise in the form of Gandhi-Irwin pact has been a subject of debate among some historians. R.J. Moore who first pointed out that bourgeois pressure was a significant factor behind the compromise, a point which Sumit Sarkar developed later to argue that the Indian bourgeoisie played a 'crucial' role both in the initial success of the movement as well as in its subsequent withdrawal. This position has also been accepted by other historians across the ideological spectrum like Judith Brown, Claude Markovits and Basudev Chatterjee. It is argued that the alliance between the Congress and the capitalists was uneasy and vulnerable from the very beginning and now uncontrolled mass movement unnerved the business classes who wanted to give peace a chance. Hence, the pressure was on Gandhi to return to constitutional politics which ultimately resulted in the Gandhi-Irwin pact. But the problem with this thesis is that the business groups hardly represented a homogeneous class in 1931 and did not speak with one voice. As A.D.D. Gordon puts it, the enthusiasm of the industrialists was dampened by the Depression, boycott, hartals and the social disruption, and they wanted either to destroy Civil disobedience or broker a peace between Congress and the Government. But on the other hand, the marketers and the traders still remained staunch supporters of Gandhi, and their

radicalism even increased as Civil disobedience made progress. More significantly, as other critics of this theory point out, although business community supported the movement and could partly claim credit for its early success, they were never in a position to pressurise Gandhi to withdraw the movement. Gandhian Congress was projecting itself as an umbrella organisation, which would incorporate all the different classes and communities. So it was highly unlikely that Gandhi would take such a vital decision only to satisfy the interests of one particular class. However, it is important to remember that the CDM had helped to the growing radicalisation of certain lower classes that often refused to remain under the official control of local congress leaders. Against this larger backdrop, Gandhi had assessed the appropriateness of suspending the movement by agreeing to effect an understanding with Irwin lest the movement should turn violent and thereby spark off colonial repression. But by then the movement had registered remarkable success in terms of moral-ideological victory over the enemy!

The Second Round Table Conference (September-December 1931) proved to be a fiasco with Gandhi squabbling endlessly with Ambedkar and Muslim leaders who had asked for separate electorates, which the British watched with unconcealed glee. The session was a pointless exercise primarily because Gandhi had given up during the Delhi negotiations the demand for majority representation for his party which had led to the rejection of Irwin's offer in December 1929.

15.7 BACK TO AGITATION

The failure of the Second Round Table Conference and the empty-handed return of Gandhiji from it resulted in the resumption of the Civil Disobedience Movement in early 1932. Despite severe repressive measures taken by the British Government to crush the agitation, the movement continued with vigour for about a year and half. In April 1932, Lord Wellington described Bengal and Bombay as the 'two black spots'. In Bengal militant activities increased with vigour along sporadic agrarian unrest. The popular response to Gandhi-Irwin pact in Orissa was remarkably celebratory: the pact was seen as victory for Gandhi and the Congress as well as people in general in many parts of the province. It was this sense of victory that scored against the British rule and emboldened the people to carry forward the struggle in the face of repression and arrest of leaders in the 1932-34 phase. Local-level leaders and Satyagrahis in the coastal Orissa during this phase, tried out diverse and innovative methods of struggle to keep up the movement. These methods included resistance to the police, rescue of arrested Satyagrahis, recapture of the already-seized Congress ashrams (sometimes by women volunteers) and the attempt to sell contraband salt in the court premises.

Attempts at attacking colonial symbols, such as tearing off the uniforms of the policemen and chowkidars, damaging of postboxes and disruption of court proceedings during revenue sales also surfaced. The small traders of Gujarat strongly supported the Congress. However, in rural areas, the movement evoked less enthusiasm than it was in the earlier phase. The rich peasants groups, who had showed greater militancy during the first phase of the Movement (1930-32) felt betrayed by the movement's withdrawal and remained unstirred in many places, such as Coastal Andhra, Gujarat or UP, when the Congress leaders wanted to mobilise them the second time. Some aspects of the Gandhian social

programme such as his crusade against untouchability simply did not appeal to them belonging mostly to the higher caste, and even above hostile response. On the other hand, Gandhiji's Harijan campaign failed to impress the Harijans themselves. In Marathi-speaking Nagpur and Berar, which had been the strongholds of Ambedkar's Dalit (Untouchable) politics, the Untouchables refused to switch their allegiance to the Congress.

In the urban areas, the relationship between the business groups and the Congress was marked by a certain degree of ambivalence. There was an open estrangement between the Congress and Bombay Mill owners, who under the leadership of Homi Mody, asked Gandhiji not to resume the movement. The other sections of the Indian big business were also in a dilemma. As Claude Markovits argues, under the strain of this ambivalence, the unity of the Indian capitalist class broke down. By 1933, the weakening economy and growing violence even crushed the enthusiasm of the staunchest of Gandhian supporters – the Gujarati and Marwari merchants. The urban intelligentsia also felt less inclined to follow the Gandhian path since the picketing of shops was frequently punctuated by the use of bombs which Gandhi failed to stop. The labour remained apathetic and the Muslims often antagonistic. Severe Government repression led to the imprisonment of thousands of Congress volunteers. Under these circumstances, Gandhi who himself was in prison, decided to temporarily suspend the Movement in May 1933. The movement was formally withdrawn in April 1934.

15.8 CRITICAL ASSESSMENT OF THE CIVIL DISOBEDIENCE MOVEMENT

The Civil disobedience movement for the Congress was by no means a failure. By 1934, the Congress had mobilised great political support and gained a moral authority, which were converted into a massive electoral victory in 1937. Though the Congress was forced to withdraw the movement, its prestige among the masses remained high. In fact, the vertical and horizontal reach of Congress had grown stronger in 1930s as compared to its position in early 1920s.

From the logic of Civil disobedience itself, many left alternatives emerged which emphasised the need for combining nationalism with radical social and economic programmes. Hereafter, the Congress drifted towards greater radicalisation. For example, the land reforms directed towards curbing and eventually abolishing Zamindari were coming to be included in the official Congress programme by the mid-1930s, in total contrast to its earlier pronouncements. This shift in the orientation of the Congress was earlier indicated in the Karachi Resolution (1931) on Fundamental Rights and Economic Policy that came just after the Gandhi-Irwin pact.

Though some scholars opine that Gandhi's decision to suspend the civil disobedience movement as agreed under the Gandhi-Irwin pact was a retreat, it was not really so. The move was warranted due to some practical reasons. Firstly, it is important to understand that mass movements are necessarily short lived and the capacity of the masses to make sacrifice unlike that of the activists is limited. Secondly, there were clear signs of exhaustions after September 1930 especially among shopkeepers and merchants who had participated so enthusiastically. Besides, the sporadic incidents of anti-police resistance which

continued in Bengal, Bihar, Andhra, and Gujarat or the no-rent campaign which picked up in late 1930s should not be seen as a scenario indicating still a vibrant and energetic mood on the part of the masses all over the country to carry on further with the anti-colonial struggle when Gandhi decided to cry halt to the movement. Gandhi had realised that the 'vast reserves of energy' expected to flow into the movement were instead fast petering out. No wonder the colonial government ruthlessly suppressed the movement soon in 1932. It was against this backdrop, the viable option was to suspend the movement and consolidate whatever gains have been scored so far. In an anti-colonial mass movement what matters most is the 'moral-ideological' victory on the part of the colonised subjects and a resultant hegemonic weight *vis-à-vis* the colonial state.

It is also true that many Congress supporters on the whole, especially the youth were considerably disappointed. Peasants of Gujarat were disappointed because their lands were not restored immediately (they got back their lands during the rule of the subsequent Congress Ministry in the province). But vast masses of people were undoubtedly jubilant that the British Government had to regard their movement as significant and treat their leader as an equal thereby signing a pact with him. In fact, in many parts of the country the political prisoners were given a hero's welcome upon their release from jails.

15.9 SUMMARY

The Civil Disobedience movement was a milestone in India's struggle for independence. It was formally launched in 1930 with the Dandi March by Mahatma Gandhi and his followers. It immediately spread in most parts of the country. The colonial rulers responded by initiating severe police action and by imprisoning a large number of protesters. But they failed to suppress the movement. The movement was temporarily withdrawn in the wake of Gandhi-Irwin pact. However, after the failure of the Second Round Table Conference in 1932, the movement was resumed. It was finally fully withdrawn in 1934.

15.10 EXERCISES

- 1) What were the factors responsible for the launch of the Civil Disobedience Movement?
- 2) Describe the various activities undertaken during the course of the movement.
- 3) Analyse the successes and failures of the movement.