

Gandhi & The Salt March

The Salt Tax

Beginning in February 1930, Gandhi's thoughts swayed towards the British salt tax, one of many economic improprieties used to generate revenue to support British rule, as the focal point of nonviolent political protest. The British monopoly on the salt tax in India dictated that the sale or production of salt by anyone but the British government was a criminal offense punishable by law. Salt was invaluable to the people of India, many of whom were agricultural laborers and required the mineral for metabolism in an environment of immense heat and humidity where sweating was profuse. Occurring throughout low-lying coastal zones of India, salt was readily accessible to laborers who were instead forced to pay money for a mineral which they could easily collect themselves for free. Gandhi's choice met the important criterion of appealing across regional, class, and ethnic boundaries. Everyone needed salt, and the British taxes on it had an impact on all of India.

Gandhi used the British Government's monopoly of the salt tax as a catalyst for a major "nonviolent" campaign. One of Gandhi's principal concepts, "satyagraha" goes beyond mere "passive resistance"; by adding the Sanskrit word "Agraha" (resolution) to "Satya" (Truth). For him, it was crucial that Satyagrahis found strength in their non-violent methods:

"Truth (Satya) implies Love, and Firmness (Agraha) engenders and therefore serves as a synonym for force ... that is to say, the Force which is born of Truth and Love or Non-violence.... [If] we are Satyagrahis and offer Satyagraha, believing ourselves to be strong ... we grow stronger and stronger everyday. With our increase in strength, our Stayagraha too becomes more effective, and we would never be casting about for an opportunity to give it up."

Choosing the salt tax as an injustice to the people of India was considered an ingenious because every peasant and every aristocrat understood the necessity of salt in everyday life. It was also a good choice because it was an issue of enough importance to mobilize a mass following.

The March

In an effort to amend the salt tax without breaking the law, on March 2, 1930 Gandhi wrote to the Viceroy, Lord Irwin: "If my letter makes no appeal to your heart, on the eleventh day of this month I shall proceed with such co-workers of the Ashram as I can take, to disregard the provisions of the Salt Laws. I regard this tax to be the most iniquitous (unfair) of all from the poor man's standpoint. As the Independence movement is essentially for the poorest in the land, the beginning will be made with this evil."

On March 12, 1930, Gandhi and approximately 78 satyagrahis set out, on foot, for the coastal village of Dandi some 240 miles from their starting point, a journey which was to last 23 days. Virtually every resident of each city along this journey watched the great procession, which was at least two miles in length. On April 6th he picked up a lump of mud and salt (some say just a pinch, some say just a grain) and boiled it in seawater to make the commodity which no Indian could legally produce—salt.

Upon arriving at the seashore he spoke to a reporter: "God be thanked for what may be termed the happy ending of the first stage in this, for me at least, the final struggle of freedom. I cannot withhold my compliments from the government for the policy of complete noninterference adopted by them throughout the march I wish I could believe this non-interference was due to any real change of heart or policy. The wanton disregard shown by them to popular feeling in the Legislative Assembly and their high-handed action leave no room for doubt that the policy of heartless exploitation of India is to be persisted in at any cost, and so the only interpretation I can put upon this non-interference is that the British Government, powerful though it is, is sensitive to world opinion which will not tolerate repression of extreme political agitation which civil disobedience undoubtedly is, so long as disobedience remains civil and therefore necessarily nonviolent It remains to be seen whether the Government will tolerate as they have tolerated the march, the actual breach of the salt laws by countless people from tomorrow. I expect extensive popular response to the resolution of the Working Committee (of the Indian National Congress)."

He implored his thousands of followers to begin to make salt wherever, along the seashore, "was most convenient and comfortable" to them. A "war" on the salt tax was to be continued during the National Week, that is, up to the thirteenth of April. There were also simultaneous boycotts of cloth and khaddar. Salt was sold, illegally, all over the seacoast of India. A pinch of salt from Gandhi himself sold for 1,600 rupees, perhaps \$750 dollars at the time. In reaction to this, the British government had incarcerated over sixty thousand people at the end of the month.

On the night of May, 4 Gandhi was sleeping in a cot under a mango tree, at a village near Dandi. Several followers slept near him. Soon after midnight the District Magistrate of Surat drove up with two Indian officers and thirty heavily-armed constables. He woke Gandhi by shining a torch in his face, and arrested him under a regulation of 1827.

Aftermath

The effects of the salt march were felt across India. Thousands of people made salt, or bought illegal salt. This period is to be considered the apex of Gandhi's political appeal, as the march mobilized many new followers from all of Indian society and the march came to the world's attention. After Gandhi's release from prison he continued to work towards Indian independence, which was achieved in August 1947, but Dandi was a key turning point in that struggle.

- 1) Why did Gandhi protest the Salt Tax?
- 2) How did Gandhi protest the Salt Tax?
- 3) How did the British Government react to Gandhi's protest?
- 4) Would you consider Gandhi's protest successful? Why or Why not?