

The History of the Twentieth Century

Episode 252

“Mahatma Gandhi Ki Jai”

Transcript

[music: Fanfare]

“Nonviolence is the first article of my faith. It is also the last article of my creed.”

From Mohandas Gandhi’s defense statement at his 1922 trial.

Welcome to *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

[music: Opening Theme]

Episode 252. *Mahatma Gandhi Ki Jai*.

The last time we took a look at events in India, episode 223, we ended in August 1920 with the death of Bal Gangadhar Tilak, which left Mohandas Gandhi as the most prominent leader of the Indian nationalist movement, and Gandhi was already hard at work organizing the ultimate satyagraha, a full-on nationwide non-cooperation movement.

I want to wind the clock back a couple of months, though, to May of this year, 1920. This was the month when the Allies in Paris presented the Ottoman Empire with the Treaty of Sèvres, episode 194. As you know from our 1919 World Tour, the government in Constantinople agreed to, or acquiesced in, the Treaty, but the nationalist movement in Ankara did not, and would eventually force the Allies to settle for a more evenhanded agreement.

Few people would have predicted that outcome in May of 1920. But if you were a Muslim in May of 1920, you certainly would have noticed that the Ottoman Empire, the largest and strongest Islamic nation in the world, whose sultan was also the Caliph and the custodian of the holy city, was having his lands and his power stripped from him by a bunch of Europeans, and in particular, they were removing Mecca from the Sultan’s rule, leaving the future of the city, the future of the Hajj, perhaps the future of Islam itself, uncertain.

The sovereignty that included the world’s largest Muslim community at this time was the British Empire, and the portion of the Empire with the largest Muslim population was India. A delegation of Indian Muslims had traveled to London in 1919 to lobby the British government to

respect the religious authority of the Sultan. They were unsuccessful. In response to the Treaty of Sèvres, Muslims in India launched the Caliphate Movement, or Khilafat Movement, as it is known in South Asia, in protest.

The Khilafat Movement was quickly embraced by Mohandas Gandhi. He was a Hindu, but he saw in the Khilafat Movement an historic opportunity for Hindu-Muslim cooperation that would strengthen the movement for *swaraj*. The leaders of the Khilafat Movement accepted Gandhi's program of nonviolent noncooperation with the British Raj. This was also the time at which the Hunter report on the massacre at Amritsar was released. The kid-glove treatment that the perpetrator, Reginald Dyer, had received angered Indians of all faiths; the Khilafat Movement represented for all Indians an opportunity to register their displeasure with the British.

The movement kicked off its protest with a general strike on August 1. Gandhi demonstrated his personal support for the movement by giving back the medals the British had awarded him for his earlier work in South Africa, organizing wartime ambulance units. August 1 was also the day that Tilak died.

Gandhi then turned to the Indian National Congress in September to propose that all Indians join in the noncooperation program. Gandhi pledged that it could produce *swaraj*, self-rule, in a year, if properly implemented. Older hands in the Indian nationalist movement, like Annie Besant and Muhammad Ali Jinnah, opposed the idea, but the new, younger generation of Indian nationalists accepted Gandhi's leadership with enthusiasm, and he was able to win the support of the Indian National Congress for his satyagraha campaign. The Congress also reorganized itself at Gandhi's behest, for the first time opening membership to anyone, and thousands of new, younger activists signed up.

Gandhi called on Indians to take a series of steps amounting to withdrawal from and noncooperation with, British rule. First, all Indians would surrender their British titles and honors. Indians would not stand as candidates in the elections scheduled for next year, and students and teachers alike would walk out of all schools and colleges across the country.

Step two would be a boycott of the British-run government and courts. All Indians working in government would leave their posts. All Indian judges and lawyers would leave the court system. Step three would be a boycott of goods produced outside of India. And the final step, once the British Raj was sufficiently weakened: Indians would leave the police and the Army and refuse to pay taxes. The British Raj would not so much be defeated as rendered irrelevant, without anyone firing a shot.

The campaign proved effective at first. More than a hundred Indians resigned their British titles and honors, though that was a small fraction of the more than 5,000 Indians who held such honors. Schools closed. Stores shut down. Gandhi himself traveled the length and breadth of India, exhorting Indians to join the protest. He called for a complete boycott of all foreign-made goods, and more than that, urged all Indians to spend at least a couple of hours a day spinning

and weaving their own cotton cloth. Indians had once clothed themselves entirely with domestic, handmade cotton cloth; Gandhi proposed that they do it again. Bonfires of British cloth were held, including an enormous one in Bombay, presided over by Gandhiji himself.

The response to the non-cooperation campaign was huge, and it came as a powerful shock to the British Raj. This time it was not only professionals, students, and intellectuals, it was farmers and factory workers and shopkeepers. Nothing like it had ever been seen before in India, perhaps because no one had ever invited the farmers and the factory workers and the shopkeepers into the movement before.

It was also the high-water mark of Hindu-Muslim cooperation in the Indian independence movement, but there were also Muslim leaders who were not satisfied cooperating with the Hindus and wanted a religious movement, not a secular one. They began to push farther than most Hindus were willing to follow, calling for Muslim soldiers and police to quit their jobs. There were even mutterings of jihad.

By July 1921, the one-year anniversary of the non-cooperation campaign was approaching; the deadline by which Gandhi had rashly promised *swaraj* would be a reality. In fact, the movement was losing steam. Lawyers and litigants were trickling back into British courts, students back into classes. Shops were reopening, stocked with goods imported from Britain. Thousands of peaceful protestors had been arrested, but not Gandhi. British authorities had learned their lesson; imprisoning Gandhi only enhanced his stature.

That month, Muslim leaders of the Khilafat movement, meeting at a conference in Karachi, voted a resolution that declared service in the Indian Army a sin against Islam. This amounted to a call on Muslims to desert, which the British could not ignore, and they began arresting leaders of the movement. In South Malabar, poor Muslim peasant farmers rose up against their Hindu landlords and the British authorities in violence that claimed the lives of thousands. Gandhi traveled to Madras in September in an attempt to quell the outbreak; he was confronted with an unruly mob that would not listen to him. Gandhi decided on the spot that he would henceforth wear nothing but a loincloth, as was common among the poorest of the poor in India. It was a gesture of solidarity with the common people, but also an act of penance for the violence he was unable to stop.

Gandhi seemed miffed that he himself hadn't been arrested. In November, he publicly declared that he should have been, for if he had been at the meeting in Karachi, he too would have endorsed their resolution. He proposed that at the next meeting of Congress, it too pass a resolution declaring that Indian service in the Army or the police was "contrary to national dignity."

That same month, the Prince of Wales made a visit to India. British authorities had hoped the Prince's presence would inspire patriotism, but instead, it inspired a general strike, called for the day of the Prince's arrival. It quickly degenerated into violence, especially in Bombay, where

there were five days of rioting that killed 58 people and injured hundreds. Rampaging rioters chanted the Mahatma's name as they beat people on the street and looted stores, much to Gandhi's distress.

Three months later, in the village of Chauri Chaura in the United Provinces, non-violent protestors were attacked and arrested by police. The next day, a further protest was held, this time against the police. Police fired their weapons into the air, but that only enraged the crowd. They attacked. Police gunfire killed three. The police then retreated into the police station, which the crowd set on fire, killing all 23 of the police officers inside.

The British declared martial law in the region. One hundred and seventy protestors were sentenced to death, and 19 were ultimately executed in retaliation for the killings. Six others died in custody. Gandhi responded with despair. He called off the non-cooperation movement, declaring that Indians were not yet sufficiently well trained to execute a non-violent resistance.

Gandhi suddenly pulling the plug on the campaign that was now almost 18 months old was a shock and a disappointment to his supporters, thousands of whom had gone to prison for the cause, including both Nehrus, father and son. The movement was demoralized, and the British Raj saw its opportunity and struck. In February 1922, Gandhi was arrested and tried for inciting disobedience in the Army. This was the trial where he made the statement I quoted at the top of the episode. He pled guilty to all charges, and was sentenced to six years in prison.

The Khilafat Movement was also sputtering out. As you may recall, in 1922 the Ottoman Sultan was deposed—not by the Allies or the British, but by the Turks themselves. And in 1924, the Caliphate was abolished. Muslim Indians felt betrayed by Gandhi first enthusiastically supporting them and then pulling the rug out from under the protests. Muslim leaders retreated to the Muslim League and other Muslim organizations, and India would never again see that level of Hindu-Muslim political cooperation.

[music: *Raga Number Two*]

I told you in episode 240 the story of how the first Labour government under Ramsay MacDonald came to power in the UK in January 1924. By this time, the now-54-year-old Gandhi was not doing well in prison. He'd only served two of his six years, but he had been weakened by a protracted bout of dysentery, and was in need of surgery for appendicitis. The new Labour government, more sympathetic to Indian nationalists than the Tories, released him from prison for humanitarian reasons just days after taking office.

The nationalist movement was divided, with some of its leaders, including Motilal Nehru, breaking with Gandhi over the question of whether nationalists should stand in legislative elections, which the Mahatma opposed. With most of the Muslims walking out, and the predominantly Hindu Congress quarreling among themselves, the movement was in disarray. You have to think this was also part of the British calculation: that the death of Gandhi in British

custody might spark a new sense of purpose among his followers, while a Gandhi who faded away quietly at home might save them a lot of trouble.

But Gandhi did the British no favors; he got better. By June of that year, he was well enough to attend a Congress Committee meeting, where he asked Congress to reaffirm the commitment to non-violence and to domestic manufacture of cotton cloth, including a call that all members of Congress spin their own thread. But Congress was getting a little tired of Mohandas Gandhi. Some of his former supporters, including Nehru, walked out of his speech. Gandhi was too radical for the older generation; too eccentric for the younger generation. The meeting did narrowly approve Gandhi's call to non-violence, but the small margin felt like a rebuke, even to him.

He did not give up on his principles. In 1925, he declared that *swaraj* depended on three ingredients, Hindu-Muslim unity, the abolition of untouchability, and the charkha, or spinning wheel. But neither of the first two appeared likely; Hindus and Muslims were moving their separate ways. The Dalits learned from the example of the Muslims and also began organizing themselves, independent of the Congress. Gandhi spent the next three years at his ashram, reading, studying, teaching, and spinning cotton thread. He remained removed from politics, while the independence movement struggled with divisions between Hindu and Muslim, landlord and peasant, worker and capitalist.

The Government of India Act, passed back in 1919, had called for a Parliamentary commission to be established in ten years to evaluate the success of the Act and to make recommendations to Parliament for further reforms. In 1927, two years out from the deadline, the Conservative government in Westminster moved to form the required commission. A general election would need to be held by 1929, and there was fear among the Tories that they might be voted out, in favor of a new Liberal or Labour government that would be more sympathetic to Indian nationalism, so it seemed prudent to create a commission they could control themselves. The seven-member Parliamentary commission that emerged is known to history as the Simon Commission after its chair, Sir John Simon, a Liberal who had previously served as Home Secretary.

It's notable to us in hindsight that this commission included Labour MP Clement Attlee, who, spoiler alert, would eventually oversee Indian independence as Prime Minister. But that's not going to happen for another twenty years. What was far more notable to people in 1927, was that the commission charged with deciding India's future was composed of seven white men born in Britain.

Divided though the nationalist movement might have been, it was easy enough for them to agree that this arrangement was not only inconsistent with the West's supposed respect for the right of self-determination, it was downright insulting. Gandhi didn't like it. The Nehrus, father and son, didn't like it. Muhammad Ali Jinnah and the Muslim League didn't like it. Its composition was a

slap in the face, suggesting that the British government still believed Indians were incapable of deciding their own destiny. In response to this criticism, some British officials publicly threw down the gauntlet: if Indian nationalists don't like the idea of white Britons deciding their country's form of government, then let them produce a plan on their own, one that all of the movement's quarrelsome factions could agree upon.

That was quite a challenge, but the one thing India's quarreling factions could and did agree upon was their opposition to the Simon Commission. Most of the factions in the Indian National Congress rejected it and called on its members to shun the commission in December 1927. Congress voted for the first time in support of full national independence for India, and took up the challenge issued in London, assigning a group headed by Motilal Nehru to come up with an Indian plan for self-government as a Dominion within the British Empire. Gandhi was also part of the project.

This demand for Dominion status was actually less than the Non-Cooperation Movement of 1920 had demanded, but you have to take into account that the decade of the 1920s saw the British Dominions—Canada, Newfoundland, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, and the new Irish Free State—gradually gain full self-government and effective independence. This would become formalized and official with the passage of the Statute of Westminster in 1931, which we haven't gotten to yet, but note that Dominion status was becoming a better deal all the time.

When the Simon Commission visited India, in February 1928 and again in November of that year, they were greeted with strikes, protests, black flags, and banners that read "Simon Go Back." And often with violence. At the end of the year, Congress met in Calcutta to vote on the Nehru plan. The opposition was led by Nehru's own son, Jawaharlal, and other younger radicals like Subhas Chandra Bose, who wanted to demand immediate and total independence.

Congress was deeply divided and it might have split down the middle, were it not for the timely arrival of Mohandas Gandhi, who entered the meeting to wild applause. The Mahatma suggested a compromise. The British would be granted one year, until December 31, 1929, to grant India Dominion status. If the British government refused, then Congress would launch a new non-cooperation movement, one that would not quit until India had complete independence.

Gandhi was leading the nationalist movement once again. The hard truth was that the non-cooperation campaign of the early 1920s had not produced any tangible gains. But in 1929, after the aimless bickering of the preceding five years, that earlier campaign was now being remembered as a rare moment of unity and focus, when Indians of all backgrounds had worked together with a co-operative spirit and it had been Gandhiji who had brought it about. If he did it once, surely he could do it again.

Congress approved the plan by acclamation, but Gandhi had further demands: Indians would spin and weave their own cloth and boycott foreign fabrics. An end to untouchability. Greater rights for women. Abstention from alcohol. Congress approved them all.

But Congress would not approve Muhammad Ali Jinnah's proposed amendments to the Nehru plan that would guarantee power-sharing with Muslims, leading Jinnah, the most prominent Muslim in the Congress to walk out and ally himself with the Muslim League. The League also rejected the Nehru plan, issuing its own Fourteen Points, a list of Muslim demands including that one-third of the seats in the national legislature be reserved for Muslims, and the creation of Muslim-majority provinces. Not even the return of Gandhi into leadership would restore that brief but glorious moment when Muslims and Hindus had worked side by side.

The year 1929 was an eventful one, for reasons you may already have guessed. I have multiple episodes in the pipeline that will examine these events, but for now I'll just note the 1929 general election in the UK, which led to a second Labour government, this one also led by Ramsay MacDonald. The Labour Party was far more sympathetic to Indian nationalists than either the other two British political parties. After the 1929 election, the Viceroy in India, Lord Irwin, traveled to London to consult with the new government. After those consultations, he returned to India, and on October 31, 1929, announced that the British government now accepted Dominion status as the next logical step in India's constitutional progress. The details would be worked out at a Round Table Conference in London next year.

Lord Irwin, whom you may know better by his future title, Lord Halifax, was a Tory, but a moderate one, a religiously devout man who not only believed in the Wilsonian principle of self-determination of peoples, but dared to think that principle applied even in Asia. He further believed, along with Ramsay MacDonald, that it had always been implicit in the 1919 reforms that the British Raj was guiding India toward Dominion status, and hoped he as Viceroy could be the one to make it a reality. Stanley Baldwin, the Tory Leader and now Leader of the Opposition in the House of Commons, supported both Irwin and the new government's India policy.

In India, Lord Irwin's announcement was greeted with cautious optimism. It was what most Indians wanted to hear, but most Indians still remembered bitterly the massacre at Amritsar and how so many Britons treated the perpetrator as a hero rather than the criminal they knew him to be.

This caution proved wholly justified, once the news of Lord Irwin's announcement made it back to Britain. David Lloyd George, now leader of the Liberal Party, was opposed. So were the Lords Birkenhead and Reading, a former India Secretary and Viceroy, respectively. Sir John Simon and his commission, still working on their recommendations, were furious at having them overruled before they'd had a chance to make them.

But no one was angrier than the British politician who would emerge as the most prominent and vocal opponent of self-government for India: Winston Churchill. Churchill was no doubt already in a foul mood. Just coming up on his 55th birthday, he was out of government, following Labour's victory earlier in the year, and he was out of money, following the stock market crash in New York just weeks earlier, which we will get to, I promise. Nonetheless, he still lived like a

lord and spent like a lord. You'll recall I mentioned he'd previously taken up writing as a way of earning money when he was not in Cabinet. Following the 1929 election, which ended his tenure as Chancellor of the Exchequer, he returned to his writing. Just a few days earlier, an article of his had appeared in Lord Northcliffe's magazine *Answers*, titled "Will the British Empire Last?" in which he had written, "The idea that India is a nation, or could ever be fashioned into a nation is known to be a delusion by everyone acquainted with the facts."

Don't hold back, Winston. Tell us what you *really* think.

When the Labour government's India policy was debated in the Commons, Liberal leader Lloyd George attacked it, whilst Tory leader Baldwin defended it and his Party colleague, declaring, "If ever the day comes when the Party which I lead ceases to attract men of the caliber of [Lord Irwin], then I have finished with my Party."

Meanwhile in India, Gandhi was huddling with other Congress leaders, crafting a response to Lord Irwin. Moderates in the Congress were thrilled; they welcomed the Round Table Conference and believed the British were prepared to make significant concessions. The radicals thought the Viceroy's offer was too little, too late. It was crucial that Indians reply to the British offer with a single voice, so it was up to Gandhi to produce a statement everyone could agree with.

Mohandas Gandhi has an historical reputation as a man with a quiet, humble manner that concealed a steely resolve to pursue his own goals in his own way, regardless of the opinions of others. But this doesn't give him enough credit as a negotiator. His leadership of the movement now was based on his presumed status as the only person who could keep the various factions together. What came from these talks, known as the Delhi Statement, was a masterpiece of compromise. It laid down four conditions for Indian participation in the coming talks. These were first, that all political prisoners be released, second, that the majority of the Indian representatives at the talks come from the Indian National Congress, the only organization that spoke for all Indians, third, that India be granted Dominion status before the talks, which, fourth, would focus exclusively on devising a proper constitution for the new Dominion of India. Meanwhile, the December 31 deadline, now less than two months away, stood. If India did not have Dominion status by that date, the next non-cooperation campaign would begin.

Gandhi felt prepared for another satyagraha. The 1920 campaign had devolved into violence, but Gandhi had spent the past several years refining the program and testing these refinements in smaller, provincial-level campaigns, and he believed it was ready. The earlier campaigns had called on everyone, but violence had broken out because ordinary people had been pushed beyond the limits of their endurance. The new form of satyagraha was different. Only designated volunteers would challenge the British with their noncooperation tactics, people trained to take insults, rough treatment, even violence without meting out violence in return. Everyone else, the common folk, would assist the campaign as witnesses, to keep their eyes on the British, watch

how they respond, and testify to how India's rulers met non-violence with violence, civility with barbarism.

Three days before Christmas, Lord Irwin was riding his special viceregal train back to Delhi and a planned meeting with Mohandas Gandhi. As the train chugged along an embankment, not far from the capital, a bomb went off underneath it.

Fortunately, no one was killed, or even seriously injured. The would-be assassins had intended the bomb to go off under the locomotive, blowing it off the tracks and sending it tumbling down the slope, dragging the carriages along with it. But the attackers' timing was off. The engine and the first three cars had already passed over the bomb before it exploded, and their weight was enough to hold the rest of the train on the tracks.

Displaying an admirably stiff upper lip, Lord Irwin appeared on time for his meeting with Gandhi and other nationalist leaders, including Motilal Nehru and Muhammad Jinnah, hoping that his brush with death would earn him credibility with the more moderate nationalists.

It did not. The nationalists expressed their happiness that the Viceroy had survived the attack, but insisted there was no room for compromise. The December 31 deadline stood, and Gandhi himself vowed to have nothing to do with the Round Table Conference unless all their demands were met.

As the two-and-a-half hour meeting drew to a close, Lord Irwin asked Gandhi if he questioned British sincerity in offering India self-government. Gandhi replied that he believed in Lord Irwin's personal sincerity in making the offer, but questioned the sincerity of the British government and the British nation.

The following week was Congress's end-of-year conference. The usual divisions appeared. The moderates wanted to give the British more time. The radicals wanted to form an Indian government immediately. Both of those resolutions were defeated. A resolution applauding the Viceroy's surviving the assassination attempt passed, barely. And Congress passed a resolution declaring that unless the British granted Dominion status by midnight, New Year's Eve 1929, Congress would pursue *purana swaraj*, complete independence. That resolution passed overwhelmingly, amid cries of *Mahatma Gandhi ki jai!* Which means something along the lines of "Victory to Mahatma Gandhi."

On New Year's Day 1930, Winston Churchill published a piece including these words: "I do not think that we need fear any shock in India of violence. Strength will be given us in proportion to our need."

That same day, on the other side of the world, in Lahore, where Congress was meeting, its newly elected president, Jawaharlal Nehru, raised the flag of independent India. It included a stripe of

saffron, representing Hindus, a stripe of green representing Muslims, and a stripe of white, representing the other faiths of India. In the center, a charkha, a spinning wheel.

Congress decided that January 26 would be the official Independence Day. On that day, a declaration penned by the Mahatma was read out across India:

We believe that it is the inalienable right of the Indian people, as of any other 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. We believe also that if any government deprives a people of these rights and oppresses them, the people have a further right to alter or abolish it. The British government in India has not only deprived the Indian people of their freedom but has based itself on the exploitation of the masses, and has ruined India economically, politically, culturally, and spiritually. We believe, therefore, that India must sever the British connection and attain Purana Swaraj, or complete independence.

We'll have to stop there for today. I thank you for listening, and I'd especially like to thank Morgan for the kind donation, and thank you to Scott for becoming a patron of the podcast. Donors and patrons like Morgan and Scott help cover the costs of making this show, which in turn keeps the podcast available free for everyone, so my thanks to them and to all of you who have pitched in and helped out. If you'd like to become a patron or make a donation, just visit the website, historyofthetwentiethcentury.com and click on the PayPal or Patreon buttons.

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And I hope you'll join me next week, on *The History of the Twentieth Century*, as we take a look at a country we've been neglecting for a while, Spain. You already know that Spain was granted control over a portion of Morocco in 1911, but getting a grant from the major powers in Europe and exercising actual control are two very different things, as we'll find out when we examine the Rif War and meet Alfonso the African, next week, here, on *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

Oh, and one more thing. I hope I'm not giving away too big a spoiler here if I tell you that the 1930 declaration of independence in India would not be accepted by the British government. Nevertheless, we have already seen that attitudes in Britain toward Indian independence had become significantly more accepting during the decade of the 1920s.

There are a number of reasons for this. For those who like to look at everything through an economic lens, there was a definite economic shift. India was becoming less valuable to Britain as an economic asset and it was becoming increasingly expensive to hold on to.

Also, the British government's concession of Dominion status to Ireland made it that much more difficult to deny the same status to India. If the bonds between Britain and Ireland could be loosened, how can you argue that the same sort of loosening is impossible with India?

And then there was the Mahatma himself. His international profile was rising; he attracted admiration even among many who were skeptical of the case for Indian independence. Nowhere was this more true than in the United States, where it was easy to see Gandhi in the same light as the leaders of the American Revolution. And with the UK's economic difficulties during this era, especially after 1929, the British government needed to stay in the good graces of the USA, the British had to at least appear to be moving toward greater democracy and self-rule in India.

And they were. Most British leaders saw their task as preparing India for self government, although most of them also would have said this was a gradual transition that would take decades, at a minimum. This lethargic drift toward Indian self-rule satisfied them, but most Indian nationalists viewed it as little more than an elaborate scam: the British offering the minimum level of concessions necessary to placate just enough Indians to forestall a push for more rapid reforms.

The gap between what the Indian nationalists demanded and what the British government was willing to concede remains, at least for now, too wide to bridge.

[music: Closing Theme]