

The History of the Twentieth Century

Episode 276

“The Salt March”

Transcript

[music: Fanfare]

In 1930, Mohandas Gandhi led the most famous—and most widely covered—protest of his career. With a sympathetic Labour government in Britain, could a breakthrough in the political conflict between Britain and Indian nationalists finally be at hand?

Not according to Mr. Churchill.

Welcome to *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

[music: Opening Theme]

Episode 276. The Salt March.

Edward Wood was born on April 16, 1881, the sixth child and fourth son of the Viscount Halifax. His mother was the daughter of the Earl of Devon. His father was the head of the English Church Union, an Anglo-Catholic organization that emphasized the Catholic heritage of the Anglican Church; hence, his son was raised with a deep spiritual commitment to Anglicanism with a Catholic slant, and with an equally deep commitment to fox hunting, which he loved, despite the challenge of having been born without a left hand.

By the time he was ten years old, his three older brothers had passed away, leaving him heir to his father’s title, estate, and seat in the House of Lords. In the meantime, he stood for a seat in the House of Commons in 1910 as a Conservative. In 1921, he was made Under-Secretary for the Colonies, a junior post under the Colonial Secretary, Winston Churchill. By all accounts, the two of them did not get along, even then.

After the Conservatives returned to power in 1924, Churchill returned to Parliament as a Conservative and was made Chancellor of the Exchequer, episode 240, while Wood was also named to the Cabinet as Minister for Agriculture. A year later, the King suggested Wood be appointed Viceroy of India. He was also appointed the Baron Irwin, so we’ll be calling him Lord Irwin for now.

You've already met him under that name in episode 252. You'll recall from that episode that after the 1929 general election in the UK returned Labour Party leader Ramsay MacDonald to the premiership, Lord Irwin traveled to London to consult with the new government on its India policy. The Labour Party was far more sympathetic to Indian aspirations than the Tories or the Liberals, as was Lord Irwin. After consulting with the government, Lord Irwin returned to India and announced that the British government accepted that the next logical step for India was Dominion status within the British Empire.

This was a dramatic step. Lord Irwin felt that Dominion status for India was implicit in the reforms begun by Edwin Montagu with the Government of India Act of 1919, episode 223. As of 1929, there were six Dominions within the British Empire: Canada, Newfoundland, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, and Ireland, and every one of them was governed by white people of European ancestry. Now Lord Irwin and the government were proposing for the first time a Dominion governed by non-white people—people of color, as we would say in our time.

What made it even more dramatic was that the privileges of the Empire's six Dominions were rapidly growing broader, led by the government of Canada, which was pushing for something very like full independence for the Dominions. The British government had agreed to this in principle in 1926, and it would become official with the passage of the Statute of Westminster in 1931. I'll have more to say about that in a future episode, but for now, let me just emphasize that not only did Dominion status mean for India more self-government than earlier generations of Britons would ever have imagined, but also that Dominion status was becoming something more like full independence with every passing year, more so than Edwin Montagu ever imagined even in 1919. Recall that Montagu himself passed away in 1924 and did not live to see this moment.

The Irwin Declaration provoked controversy both in Britain and in India. In Britain, it was Labour government policy, supported by a Tory Viceroy and by the Conservative opposition leader, Stanley Baldwin, but harshly criticized by the Liberal Party leader, David Lloyd George, as well as by right-leaning Tories, the most prominent Tory critic being Winston Churchill, who would make opposition to self-government for India the main focus of his political life for the next five years, even at the cost of burning most of his bridges to other members of his own party. Even Lord Irwin wrote Churchill a letter in which he assured his critic that, "I am not wholly insane."

At the same time in India, the independence movement was divided between moderates who saw their hopes all but realized in the British offer to radicals who remembered the massacre at Amritsar ten years ago with bitterness and doubted both the sincerity of the Labour government and its ability to get self-rule for India through its own Parliament, even if its intentions were honorable. Recall that it took about thirty years between the moment when the Liberal Party in Britain embraced Irish Home Rule and when it was finally able to get Home Rule approved by Parliament.

You'll also recall the radicals had already attempted to assassinate the Viceroy shortly after his announcement, and came uncomfortably close to success.

Gandhi had negotiated a delicate balance within the Congress that produced the Delhi Declaration in response, which cautiously welcomed the Irwin Declaration, but insisted, among other things, that Dominion status be granted up front, with negotiations limited to hammering out an Indian constitution, and that it be granted by the end of the year 1929, or else India would declare unilateral independence. Lord Irwin and Gandhi held face-to-face negotiations, and it seemed that the two of them got along well enough personally—they were both deeply spiritual people—but they could not come to an agreement. And so, in January 1930, the Indian National Congress declared independence. Gandhi was the acknowledged leader of the independence movement, perhaps the only leader every faction in Congress could agree upon, so the Congress leadership deferred to Gandhi to choose the time, place, and manner in which Indians would assert their independence from the British Raj.

And then...waited. And waited.

While they waited, the Mahatma lived at his ashram, spun cotton into thread, and pondered the next move. Previous campaigns of nonviolent resistance to British rule had degenerated into violence. Satyagraha was not easy. Recently, though, in Gujarat, some of Gandhi's followers had concluded a successful satyagraha campaign against an increase in property taxes that had forced a suspension of the tax increase without violence by using a new strategy. Instead of asking everyone to participate in the protest, special volunteers would test the British. These volunteers would be trained to take insults, rough treatment, even violence without issuing violence in return. Everyone else, the ordinary people, the untrained, would support the satyagraha as witnesses, who could testify to the response of the British government and tell the world how India's rulers had met non-violence with violence, civility with barbarism.

Gandhi would still have to decide what would be the target of the satyagraha. You can't campaign against a declaration, or an Act of Parliament, or a proposal for the composition of a provincial legislature.

But you can protest a tax.

Salt is an essential human nutrient. Meat and animal products naturally include adequate amounts of salt for human consumption, but the grain-and-vegetable diets most humans eat in agricultural societies require added salt. Our English word *salad*, for example, comes from Latin and literally means "salted," reflecting the Roman practice of salting leafy greens. Salt also has value as a food preservative, and is used for that purpose just about everywhere.

Salt has been a valued commodity in every human civilization from the earliest days of history. It was often used in trade and sometimes as a currency. Our English word *salary* is also derived from the Latin word for salt, although the reason for this is unclear. The common claim that

attributes this to a Roman practice of paying soldiers their wages in salt has no historical foundation.

In many cultures, salt has spiritual connotations. The Jewish Bible speaks of a “covenant of salt.” The Gospel of Matthew records Jesus calling his followers “the salt of the earth.” In some Eastern religious traditions, salt is used for ritual purification, or to ward off evil.

And in India, where Hindus and people of some other faith traditions eat vegetarian diets, salt is an essential supplement. In India’s climate, and absent refrigeration or canning, salt is an essential preservative.

Salt has been taxed in India and in China for more than two thousand years. The British East India Company controlled a monopoly on salt in India; when the British Raj was established, it took over the monopoly. In the twentieth century, it was unlawful in India to manufacture, possess or transport salt, unless that salt had been purchased through the government monopoly and tax had been paid on it. You can think of it as something like Salt Prohibition.

Revenue from the salt tax amounted to about 10% of government revenue in India. And since rich and poor alike consume roughly the same amount of salt, the salt tax was highly regressive. The poorer you were, the greater the burden the salt tax was on you.

When Gandhi announced that the next satyagraha campaign would be against the salt tax, the reaction among Indian nationalists ranged from incredulity that Gandhi would choose to focus his campaign on such a trivial target to incredulity at the genius of it. For you see, everyone paid the salt tax. Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs, Dalits, everyone. The injustice of it was easy to grasp and easy to explain to a foreigner. An Indian nationalist might struggle to explain to, say, a reporter from the United States their objection to Hindus and Muslims voting for parliamentary representatives in separate elections, but the injustice of the salt tax was crystal clear.

India has a long coastline, which includes many marsh regions where salt accumulates naturally. Under the British salt monopoly, it was unlawful even to walk to the seashore and collect salt deposits that were literally just lying around waiting to be picked up.

And that was exactly what the Mahatma proposed to do. On March 2, he sent a letter to Lord Irwin. It opened, “Dear Friend,” and listed eleven grievances against British rule. Unless redress was offered, Gandhi announced that he would break the salt laws and encourage his followers to do likewise. Lord Irwin replied with a brief note expressing regret that Gandhi had chosen to break the law. As Gandhi put it, “On bended knee I asked for bread, and I received stone instead.”

In keeping with his new satyagraha strategy, Gandhi chose 78 companions who would march with him to the sea and collect salt in defiance of the British ban. The group included Hindus,

Muslims, Dalits, Sikhs, and Christians. The youngest was 16 years old. The oldest was 61: Gandhi himself.

Everyone else would be witness to the demonstration, and to the British response, and Gandhi made sure there were plenty of witnesses. The march took 24 days over 400 kilometers. The route was published in advance, and Gandhi stopped to speak at every village along the way, to crowds that routinely numbered in the tens of thousands. And beyond that, the entire world bore witness, through a mob of newspaper reporters from across India, Europe, and North America who followed Gandhi's journey. Film crews recorded every step of the way, for newsreels that appeared on movie screens on six continents.

Gandhi and his fellow marchers reached the village of Dandi, on the coast of the Arabian Sea on April 5, 1930. Along the way, he had repeatedly warned his followers of the possibility of British violence, but there had as yet been no British response. In Delhi, officials recommended using police to disperse the crowd and arrest Gandhi, but Lord Irwin rejected their recommendation. In his view, that would be playing right into Gandhi's hands. Privately, he was amazed at the stamina of this skinny old man and was hoping Gandhi's health would fail, that he would be forced to end the march or perhaps even drop dead along the way.

He did not, and the following morning, a crowd watched him go down to the seashore, scoop up a muddy ball of salt, and declare, "With this salt, I am shaking the foundations of the Empire."

[music: Thakuri and Shukla, "Qadam Qadam Badhaye Ja."]

In a matter of days, Gandhi's individual act of defiance spread across India, turning into a mass movement of defiance. Millions of Indians made and sold salt in defiance of British law. Protests spread from the salt tax to property taxes, forest regulations, and new boycotts of British imports. Significantly, and for the first time, women were widely involved in these protests.

Over the next month, the British-led Indian government outlawed the Indian National Congress and arrested an estimated 60,000 people, but the protests continued. Those arrested included a number of Gandhi's closest associates, including such prominent names as Mahadev Desai, Rajendra Prasad, Jawaharlal Nehru, and two of the Mahatma's own sons. But not Gandhi himself. The British authorities still saw that as too dangerous.

Protestors boiled sea water on the beach to make salt, while other protestors linked arms and formed concentric circles around them, as many as thirty circles in one instance, forcing the police to club their way through row upon row of protestors to reach the salt violator, while hundreds more bore witness to the violence. In these circumstances, protestors sometimes lost their cool and fought back, even if it was contrary to Gandhi's principles. On April 23, rioting broke out in Peshawar. British officers ordered their troops to fire on civilians. Some refused and were arrested themselves, although most followed their orders. Estimates of the number killed range from 60 to 250.

You'll recall that in past satyagraha campaigns, when violence erupted, Gandhi called off the protest. That happened after Amritsar in 1919, episode 223 and after Chauri Chaura in 1922, episode 252. But this time was different. Gandhi was unmoved, as he put it.

But still the British did not arrest him. Gandhi raised the stakes by declaring a satyagraha against the Dharsana Salt Works in Gujarat. Again, he wrote to Lord Irwin in advance, announcing the campaign. This time, he was in fact arrested and taken to prison, where he was held in the same cell that held him in 1922, eight years ago. But even without him, the protest at the salt works went on as planned. Non-violent protestors approached the salt works. They had been instructed not to resist in any circumstances. As the hundreds of protestors approached, they were clubbed violently by Indian police. An American newspaper reporter, Webb Miller, was present at the scene and reported the attack in words that were reproduced around the world:

Not one of the marchers even raised an arm to fend off the blows. They went down like ten-pins. From where I stood I heard the sickening whacks of the clubs on unprotected skulls. The waiting crowd of watchers groaned and sucked in their breaths in sympathetic pain at every blow.

Those struck down fell sprawling, unconscious or writhing in pain with fractured skulls or broken shoulders. In two or three minutes the ground was quilted with bodies....At times the spectacle of unresisting men being methodically bashed into a bloody pulp sickened me so much I had to turn away....

Bodies toppled over in threes and fours, bleeding from great gashes on their scalps. Group after group walked forward, sat down, and submitted to being beaten into insensibility without raising an arm to fend off the blows. Finally the police became enraged by the non-resistance....They commenced savagely kicking the seated men in the abdomen and testicles. The injured men writhed and squealed in agony, which seemed to inflame the fury of the police....

Meanwhile, back in Britain, the Simon Commission—remember the Simon Commission?—finally published its report. It recommended an end to diarchy—remember diarchy, the system the British introduced in 1919, under which Indians would control some aspects of provincial government, including health and education, while other aspects, such as revenue and policing, would remain British-controlled? Diarchy hadn't done much to satisfy the nationalists. Indian control over, say the provincial ministry of health, meant little when the size of the ministry's budget was still controlled by British officials. The Simon Commission recommended full control of provincial affairs to elected governments, while the national government remained in British hands. The report did not address the question of future Dominion status for India, and it seemed to take for granted that the future of Indian government was a matter to be debated and decided in Westminster, without any input from Indians.

The Labour government of Ramsay MacDonald understood that the Simon Commission report was already obsolete on the day it was delivered. Even moderate Indian nationalists were far past the point where provincial government would be enough, while even the Viceroy, Lord Irwin, was frustrated by the Commission's refusal to endorse Dominion status.

So Lord Irwin proposed that British and Indian political leaders gather together in a grand summit meeting to hash out the future government of India. These meetings came to be known as the Round Table Conferences, and the first one was held in November 1930 in London and chaired by Prime Minister MacDonald. It included 74 representatives from India, but none from the largest nationalist group, the Indian National Congress, which refused to participate.

The British side included representatives of the Labour, Conservative, and Liberal parties. Sir John Simon, the head of the Simon Commission, was not invited, much to his annoyance. But he wasn't half as annoyed as Winston Churchill. Churchill had been outspoken in calling for a crackdown on the protests in India generally, and on Gandhi in particular. He'd been slightly mollified by Gandhi's arrest, but the Round Table Conference infuriated him. To Churchill, this was a disloyal socialist Labour government abandoning British rule over India. He wanted to see the Conservative Party boycott the conference as well, but Party Leader Stanley Baldwin sent four members, two from the Lords and two from the Commons, to represent the Tories.

It was at this point, if not before, that Churchill went to war with his own party over the India question. He spoke against Gandhi, against the Conference, and against any concessions to the nationalists. Some thought perhaps this was the beginning of a leadership challenge.

The Round Table Conference lasted nine weeks and produced a pretty slogan, an "All-India Federation," which everyone agreed would be the framework for a political solution, though exactly what it meant remained unresolved. And with Congress boycotting the Conference, it was unclear whether the work of the Conference even mattered. It was Hamlet without the prince, as Gandhi described it. The Mahatma himself remained in prison, but he was still the unchallenged leader of the movement. At the end of the year 1930 in the United States, *Time* magazine named Gandhi its "Man of the Year," and compared his protests against the British salt tax to colonial American protests against the British tea tax.

The Round Table Conference ended with little accomplished. In Britain, Churchill's hard line on India seemed to be gaining ground among the Tories; it seemed he might even carry the day against Stanley Baldwin. Something had to be done, and Lord Irwin made the decision to do it. In January 1931, he ordered Gandhi released from prison. In February, he and Gandhi began a series of meetings intended to break the political impasse.

On March 5, Lord Irwin and Gandhi announced an agreement. The Congress would end the satyagraha and participate in a Second Round Table Conference. The government would release all prisoners, lift the ban on the Congress, and permit peaceful protest. Indians living on the

coasts would be permitted to manufacture their own salt for personal use, though the British salt monopoly would otherwise remain in place.

Once again, as he had before, Gandhi called off his satyagraha in exchange for British concessions that were only a small portion of the campaign's stated goals. Protestors had marched and been beaten and imprisoned and had gotten very little in return. Motilal Nehru had died in January; his son Jawaharlal mourned the death of both his father and the dream they had striven to make real. Something precious was gone, he lamented.

Gandhi insisted the agreement was a victory. "Today Dominion status is a certainty," he told his doubtful followers.

But no one in India was as unhappy with this agreement as was Churchill in Britain. Reportedly, Stanley Baldwin was almost at the point of offering his resignation over India policy, which would have forced a showdown between the pro-Irwin and anti-Irwin factions of the Party, and which might have put Churchill in as Party Leader. But now that the government's, and Baldwin's, India policy seemed to be leading to a peaceful settlement, Churchill began losing his Tory support. Not that this moderated his views any. Churchill had actually been involved in the negotiations that led to Dominion status for South Africa and Ireland, but here he drew the line. Dominion status for India was inevitable, he agreed, but only when India was ready, which would not be in his lifetime or those of his colleagues in government. Anyone who knew anything about India knew that, Churchill insisted to anyone who would listen, although where he personally got his expertise on the political situation in India was left unexplained.

Churchill resigned from the Party Business Committee. He expected the Tories to win the next general election, but planned to refuse any offer of a Cabinet post in protest. In public, he was a sharp critic of the government's India policy. On February 23, as the Gandhi-Irwin talks were ongoing, Churchill spoke before the West Essex Conservative Association. Churchill is famous for his speeches, and this one is among his most frequently quoted, although in this case, not usually in admiration:

It is alarming and also nauseating to see Mr. Gandhi, a seditious Middle Temple lawyer now posing as a fakir of a type well known in the East, striding half-naked up the steps of the Vice-regal Palace, while he is still organizing and conducting a campaign of civil disobedience, to parley on equal terms with the representative of the King-Emperor. Such a spectacle can only increase the unrest in India and the danger to which white people there are exposed.

When the Gandhi-Irwin Pact was announced, Conservative sentiment shifted at once. The Irwin policy of peaceful negotiation had been vindicated and Churchill's dark predictions that ever-greater concessions in India would produce nothing more than ever-greater violence had proved wrong.

Not that Churchill would give in. He would continue to be the leading Parliamentary voice against concessions in India for years to come, even at the cost of marginalizing himself as a hopeless extremist within Parliament and even within his own Party.

[music: Thakuri and Shukla, “Qadam Qadam Badhaye Ja.”]

When I described Gandhi’s return to India in 1915 after 21 years in South Africa in episode 223, I told you then that Gandhi would only ever leave India once more, in 1931. Well, here we are. For those who are counting, this is Gandhi’s fifth and final visit to the British capital, but unlike the previous four occasions when hardly anyone noticed him, this time he came as an international celebrity, a name and a face known around the world, his life story the subject of at least five admiring English-language biographies.

He was mobbed wherever he went by hundreds of reporters, photographers, admirers, and the merely curious, come to see this funny little man, dressed only in a loincloth and a shawl against the cold and damp of London, who had caused such a tremendous fuss.

Gandhi was in London as the sole representative of the Indian National Congress to the Second Round Table Conference. There were other Indian representatives, who spoke for Hindus, Sikhs, Muslims, Dalits, Parsis, and many other groups, but in the middle of them was Mohandas Gandhi, quietly insisting that only the Congress spoke for all India.

But what did that mean, and could anyone be said to speak for all India? Extremist Indian nationalists saw Gandhi as a sellout. He had left India with protestors’ chants of “Down with the traitor Gandhi!” ringing in his ears. In March, just after the Gandhi-Irwin Pact had been announced, communal violence broke out in Cawnpore, the same Cawnpore that had seen a massacre of British civilians during the 1857 uprising. Over 150 Muslims and 100 Hindus died in the rioting. Violence broke out in Punjab on the very day Gandhi arrived in Britain.

This communal violence in India underscored the most difficult problem the Second Round Table Conference had to deal with: whether and how an Indian constitution would safeguard the rights of minorities in a Hindu-majority nation. Gandhi personally chaired the Committee on Minorities that was tasked with proposing a solution, but the arguments were endless. Representatives of various Indian communities argued for separate proportional representation province by province in a hypothetical future self-governing India, while Hindus generally opposed them. Gandhi himself was open to separate representation, but only for Muslims and Sikhs.

He encountered the harshest opposition from the Dalit community. These are the people sometimes called “untouchable.” There was a Dalit delegation at the Conference, led by Dr. Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar, a Dalit who held a degree from Columbia University in the United States and was sometimes described as “the highest of the lowest.” Ambedkar wanted separate representation for Dalits in future Indian parliaments, an idea Gandhi opposed. Gandhi deplored

the cruel treatment of Dalits by higher-caste Hindus and argued for its abolition, but at the same time, he saw Dalits as an integral part of the Hindu majority, and saw behind talk of separate representation the old British tactic of “divide and rule.” But to Ambedkar, this was arrogant presumption. How could a person who was not himself a Dalit and had no personal experience of the burdens they carried presume to decide their political future?

In the end, the discussions broke down over the tricky question of power-sharing in the Punjab, where Hindus, Muslims, and Sikhs lived side by side.

Things were breaking down on the British side too, even as the Second Round Table Conference proceeded. Britain was struggling with the Great Depression as the wave of bank failures on the Continent threatened to bring down the Bank of England. Britain was forced to accept a humiliating loan from the US, go off the gold standard again, and hold a contentious general election that returned a large Conservative majority. More relevant to Indians than any of those developments, the British-led government in New Delhi devalued the rupee in tandem with the pound, a decision which meant, like it or not, Indians were going to share fully in Britain’s economic pain. More about that next week.

Gandhi left England on December 5, 1931. The Conference had not produced a consensus solution to the question of an Indian constitution. He told the press: “My last words to England must be: Farewell and beware! I came a seeker after peace. I return fearful of war.”

A political solution in India remained elusive. In the absence of a consensus, it was left to the British government to decide the political questions unilaterally, a process unlikely to placate the Indian nationalists. Gandhi’s visit had been a tremendous personal success; he had come to Britain and hobnobbed with the most prominent people in the Empire. He’d even taken tea at Buckingham Palace with King George V, despite the King’s initial reluctance to meet with what he described as a little man with no proper clothes. One of Churchill’s allies called it “tea with treason.”

We’ll have to stop there for today. I thank you for listening, and I’d especially like to thank Myriam for her kind donation, and thank you to Per for becoming a patron of the podcast. Donors and patrons like Myriam and Per 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.

The podcast website also contains notes about the music used on the podcast. Sometimes it’s my own work, sometimes it’s licensed, but many times, the music you hear here is free and downloadable. If you hear a piece of music on the podcast and you would like to know more about it, including the composer, the performers, and a link to where you can download it, that would be the place to go. While you’re there, you can leave a comment and let me know what you thought about today’s show.

And I hope you'll join me next week, here on *The History of the Twentieth Century*, as we examine those British economic struggles I alluded to a few minutes ago, and consider the recipe for The Empire Christmas Pudding. That's next week, here, on *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

Oh, and one more thing. Before I go, I should call your attention to one of the members of the Simon Commission, a 48-year-old Labour MP named Clement Attlee. His immersion into Indian politics and meetings with the major political figures in India had left him well acquainted with the situation in that country and convinced him that British rule was alien to India and would never produce the social or economic progress that country needed.

These views made him one of Parliament's strongest supporters of Indian independence, and at least on that question, Winston Churchill's most steadfast opponent. The story goes that Churchill once described Attlee as "a modest man, with much to be modest about," although this can't be confirmed. Churchill and Attlee will eventually find themselves in a complicated political relationship as both partners and rivals, although that is certainly a story for another episode.

[music: Closing Theme]