

The Evolution of the Indian Freedom Movement: From Early Resistance to Independence

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Abstract:

This article traces the evolution of the Indian freedom movement from early resistance to the achievement of independence in 1947. It examines how the struggle began with localized revolts, tribal uprisings, and peasant protests, and gradually developed into organized political movements led by leaders, reformers, and mass participation. The study highlights the role of both radical and non-violent strategies, including revolutionary activities, the Swadeshi Movement, Gandhian satyagraha, and mass civil disobedience campaigns. It also explores the contributions of women, marginalized groups, and regional movements in shaping the national struggle. By reflecting on the successes, challenges, and strategies of the freedom movement, the article provides insights into the political, social, and cultural transformations that laid the foundation for modern India. The study demonstrates that the movement was not only a fight against foreign rule but also a journey toward social unity, justice, and nation-building.

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Introduction:

India, before gaining independence in 1947, was under British colonial rule for almost two hundred years. During this period, the British controlled almost every aspect of Indian life. They dominated politics, managed the economy to benefit themselves, and influenced social and cultural practices. Indian people faced heavy taxes, unfair trade policies, and exploitation, which caused widespread poverty and suffering. At the same time, the British introduced some modern systems, like railways, courts, and schools, but these were mainly designed to strengthen their control. Life for ordinary Indians was often difficult, and many communities felt the weight of foreign rule in their daily lives (Chandra, Mukherjee, & Mukherjee, 1988; Metcalf & Metcalf, 2012).

Studying the evolution of the Indian freedom movement is important because it helps us understand how ordinary people, leaders, and communities gradually came together to fight against injustice. It shows us the ways in which resistance grew, from small local protests to large nationwide movements. It also teaches lessons about courage, unity, and the power of ideas in shaping history. By looking at the freedom

movement, we can better understand how India became the country it is today and how its people achieved independence after years of struggle (Sarkar, 2014; Brown, 1994).

The main goal of this article is to trace the growth of the Indian freedom movement over time. It will look at the early struggles, the formation of organized political groups, and the rise of mass movements led by both non-violent and revolutionary leaders. The article will show how strategies changed over time in response to the actions of the British and the needs of the people. By following this journey from early resistance to independence, we can see the determination, sacrifices, and creativity of the people who fought to make India free (Chandra et al., 1988).

Early Resistance to British Rule (1757–1857)

The period between 1757 and 1857 was a time of major change in India. The Mughal Empire, which had ruled most of the country for centuries, was weakening. Local rulers, called zamindars or princes, began to lose power, and there was political confusion in many regions. At the same time, the British East India Company was growing stronger. Originally a trading company, it slowly became a powerful political and military force, taking control of large parts of India. The Company was mainly interested in making profits, and it imposed heavy taxes on farmers, collected revenues unfairly, and forced people to grow crops that were profitable for Britain, rather than what they needed for their own survival. Indian artisans and small businesses suffered because British goods, especially textiles, were sold cheaply and replaced local products. This economic exploitation caused poverty, hunger, and widespread dissatisfaction among ordinary people (Chandra, Mukherjee, & Mukherjee, 1988; Marshall, 2007).

As the British tightened their control, people did not accept this quietly. There were many early revolts and resistance movements, even if they were local and small in scale. Tribal communities were among the first to rise against exploitation. For example, the Santhals in present-day Jharkhand and Bihar rebelled in 1855–56. They were angry because their land was taken away, their forests were destroyed, and they were treated unfairly by landlords and British officials. The Munda revolt, led by Birsa Munda later in the century, was another example of tribal resistance. These uprisings were often spontaneous and rooted in the immediate suffering of local communities, but they showed the determination of people to protect their land, rights, and way of life (Guha, 1983; Singh, 2008).

Between 1764 and 1857, there were also revolts involving soldiers, peasants, and local rulers. After the Battle of Buxar in 1764, the British gained control over Bengal and its revenues, which caused resentment among landlords and soldiers who had served the previous rulers. These tensions led to smaller revolts across different regions, which, although not united, expressed the growing anger against British rule. The most famous of these was the revolt of 1857, also called the Sepoy Mutiny or the First War of Indian Independence. Soldiers in the British army, called sepoys, rebelled because of unfair treatment and disrespect towards their religious and cultural beliefs. What started as a soldier's revolt soon became a widespread uprising involving peasants, artisans, and local leaders. Even though the British eventually suppressed it, the revolt had a lasting impact (Dalrymple, 2006; Mukherjee, 2002).

The significance of these early resistances lies in how they changed the way Indians fought against the British. At first, protests were local and unconnected, often limited to villages or regions. By 1857, people began to realize that collective action was necessary to challenge British authority. These revolts planted the seeds of national consciousness. People started to think beyond their immediate local problems and saw the larger picture of foreign domination. They learned the importance of unity, leadership, and organization. While independence was still far away, these early struggles laid the foundation for the more organized and nationwide freedom movement that would emerge in the years to come (Chandra et al., 1988; Sarkar, 2014).

The First Phase of Organized Nationalism (1858–1905)

After the revolt of 1857, life in India changed in many ways. The British East India Company, which had ruled large parts of the country for more than a century, was completely removed from power. The British government in London decided to take direct control, and India became a colony under the British Crown. This was called the British Raj. The British wanted to make sure that such a large-scale revolt never happened again. They increased their military presence, reorganized the administration, and introduced strict laws to control people. Landowners and rulers who had supported the revolt were punished or removed from their positions. Ordinary people faced harsh measures if they were suspected of opposing the government. The British wanted to show that they were firmly in charge, and at the same time, they tried to win the support of certain loyal groups by giving them jobs and privileges. This period was marked by both repression and careful planning to strengthen British control (**Metcalf & Metcalf, 2012; Chandra, Mukherjee, & Mukherjee, 1988**).

Even while the British tightened their hold, Indian thinkers and reformers began working to improve society and awaken a sense of national consciousness. Social and religious reform movements became an important part of this phase. Leaders like Raja Ram Mohan Roy worked to remove social evils such as sati, the practice where widows were forced to burn on their husband's funeral pyre. He also promoted modern education and new ideas about equality and human rights. Dayananda Saraswati encouraged people to return to the teachings of the Vedas and to reject blind faith and superstition. These reformers did not directly fight the British, but their ideas inspired Indians to think about justice, freedom, and dignity. They created a foundation for political awareness by emphasizing education, social reform, and self-respect (**Heimsath, 1964; Jones, 1989**).

As people became more aware of political and social issues, they started forming organizations to express their concerns to the British government. The most important development during this period was the formation of the Indian National Congress in 1885. It started as a small group of educated Indians who wanted to discuss problems and suggest reforms to the British authorities. At first, the Congress was mainly made up of lawyers, teachers, and journalists. They believed in working with the British and wanted to make their voice heard through petitions and meetings rather than through rebellion (**Brown, 1994; Chandra et al., 1988**).

The early nationalist strategies were moderate and focused on dialogue. Leaders wrote letters and petitions to British officials, asking for reforms in administration, education, and taxation. They also advocated for civil rights, such as the right to hold public office and the ability to participate in government decisions. These early efforts were slow and cautious, but they marked a major shift in Indian politics. Instead of isolated revolts, Indians began to organize and speak in a united voice. They learned that change could also come from knowledge, discussion, and persistence. Even though the British often ignored their requests, these moderate strategies laid the groundwork for a more assertive and mass-based struggle in the decades to come (**Sarkar, 2014; Chandra et al., 1988**).

This period showed that Indian nationalism was growing. People were learning how to combine ideas, reforms, and organization to demand their rights. The seeds of modern political movements were being planted, and India was slowly moving toward a collective struggle for freedom (**Brown, 1994**).

Radical Nationalism and Mass Movements (1905–1947)

The period from 1905 to 1947 was one of the most intense and dynamic phases of India's struggle for freedom. During these years, the movement grew from small political groups to a mass movement that involved millions of Indians from all walks of life. It was a time when both radical ideas and non-violent methods shaped the fight for independence (**Chandra, Mukherjee, & Mukherjee, 1988; Sarkar, 2014**).

The first major event that stirred strong feelings against the British was the partition of Bengal in 1905. The British decided to divide Bengal into two parts, saying it was for administrative convenience. In reality, it was a way to weaken growing political unity and create divisions among people on the basis of religion. People were angry because the partition threatened to separate communities that had lived together for centuries. This anger led to the Swadeshi Movement, where Indians boycotted British goods and promoted the use of locally made products. Shops selling British goods were closed, and people wore Indian-made clothes instead of British fabrics. Schools and colleges encouraged patriotic education, and newspapers carried messages of resistance. At the same time, some young Indians believed that stronger action was needed. They formed revolutionary groups that carried out daring activities against British officials. Leaders like Bhagat Singh, Chandrasekhar Azad, and Subhas Chandra Bose became symbols of courage. They risked their lives to inspire people and showed that the fight for freedom could not be ignored **(Sarkar, 2014; Datta, 1997; Gordon, 1990)**.

During this time, Mahatma Gandhi emerged as a central figure in the Indian freedom struggle. He introduced a new approach based on non-violence and civil disobedience. In Champaran and Kheda, he helped farmers who were being forced to grow indigo and pay unfair taxes. Gandhi encouraged people to protest peacefully, refusing to obey unjust laws. His methods showed that ordinary people could challenge the British without weapons. Inspired by his leadership, the Non-Cooperation Movement began in the 1920s. Millions of people refused to attend British schools, boycott government jobs, and stop paying taxes. In the 1930s, the Civil Disobedience Movement gained momentum. One of the most famous events was the Salt March in 1930, where Gandhi and his followers walked hundreds of miles to the sea to make salt, breaking the British monopoly. This act captured the imagination of people all over India and brought international attention to the struggle **(Brown, 1994; Hardiman, 2003)**.

Political organizations played a key role in this period. The Indian National Congress became the main force guiding the freedom movement. Leaders like Jawaharlal Nehru, Vallabhbhai Patel, and Gandhi worked together to organize protests, negotiate with the British, and inspire people. At the same time, the Muslim League and regional movements started to play an important role. Differences between communities began to emerge, sometimes leading to tensions and disagreements about the future of India. Even with these challenges, the freedom movement continued to grow, involving more people from cities and villages alike **(Chandra et al., 1988; Jalal, 1995)**.

Women and marginalized groups played a crucial part in the struggle during this period. Women leaders like Sarojini Naidu and Kasturba Gandhi joined protests, organized marches, and worked tirelessly to support the movement. Peasants, workers, and tribal communities also contributed, often facing the harshest punishments from the British. They carried out strikes, joined satyagraha campaigns, and supported the movement in ways that were vital to its success. The involvement of these groups showed that the fight for freedom was not limited to political leaders or educated elites, but belonged to every Indian who dreamed of a free country **(Forbes, 1996; Omvedt, 1994)**.

This period of radical nationalism and mass movements transformed the freedom struggle. It brought together people from all regions, religions, and social classes, united by the common goal of ending British rule. The combination of revolutionary courage, non-violent resistance, and organized political action made the movement stronger and set the stage for India's eventual independence in 1947 **(Chandra et al., 1988; Sarkar, 2014)**.

Towards Independence (1942–1947)

By the early 1940s, India's struggle for freedom had reached a critical stage. The country had already seen decades of protest, both moderate and radical, and millions of people were ready to demand complete

independence. In 1942, Mahatma Gandhi launched the Quit India Movement, calling on Indians to demand an immediate end to British rule. The movement encouraged mass civil disobedience, asking people to refuse to follow British laws, boycott government offices, and protest peacefully. People from every corner of India joined in. Students left schools, workers stopped working in British-controlled offices, and ordinary villagers organized protests. The British reacted harshly. They arrested thousands of leaders, including Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru, and used force to suppress protests. There were violent clashes in many places, and many people lost their lives. Even with this repression, the movement demonstrated the determination and unity of the Indian people. It made it clear that India would not accept colonial rule any longer (**Chandra, Mukherjee, & Mukherjee, 1988; Sarkar, 2014**).

At the same time, the world was in the middle of the Second World War. The British Empire was heavily involved in fighting in Europe and Asia, which weakened its ability to maintain control over India. Indian leaders used this situation to press for independence, arguing that India should be free to govern itself instead of being drawn into a war that was not theirs. The British tried to negotiate and sent officials on missions, like the Cripps Mission in 1942, to offer India limited self-government after the war. These proposals were rejected because they did not satisfy the demand for complete independence. There were also events like naval mutinies, where Indian sailors in the British Navy refused orders, showing that even within the military, British authority was weakening. These developments increased pressure on the British government and made it clear that the future of India could not be delayed any longer (**Metcalf & Metcalf, 2012; Brown, 1994**).

By the mid-1940s, negotiations for independence became unavoidable. The Indian National Congress and the Muslim League, the two main political parties, were at the center of discussions. The Congress wanted a united India with self-rule, while the Muslim League demanded a separate nation for Muslims to ensure their rights and safety. After long and tense negotiations, the British agreed to transfer power to Indian leaders. In 1947, India gained independence, but it was accompanied by a painful partition. The country was divided into two nations: India and Pakistan. Millions of people had to leave their homes and move to the new countries based on religious identity. Families were separated, and widespread violence and suffering occurred during this mass migration. Despite the difficulties, independence marked the end of nearly two hundred years of British rule and the beginning of a new chapter in Indian history (**Jalal, 1995; Talbot & Singh, 2009**).

This period showed how persistent struggle, courage, and negotiation finally brought freedom to India. It reflected the sacrifices of millions of ordinary people, the leadership of political leaders, and the resilience of a nation that had faced centuries of foreign domination. Independence was not achieved overnight; it was the result of years of struggle, learning from failures, and uniting diverse groups for a common cause (**Chandra et al., 1988**).

Conclusion:

The story of India's freedom movement is a long and remarkable journey that shows how people can come together to fight against injustice. It began with early revolts and local uprisings, where tribal communities, peasants, soldiers, and artisans resisted unfair policies and exploitation. These early struggles were often limited to villages or regions, but they planted the idea that ordinary people could stand against oppression. Over time, resistance became more organized. Leaders, thinkers, and reformers helped Indians think about justice, equality, and self-rule. Political organizations, like the Indian National Congress, gave a voice to these ideas and provided a platform to demand change from the British.

The movement gradually grew into a nationwide struggle that included both radical and non-violent methods. Some believed in revolutionary action, while others, inspired by Mahatma Gandhi, used civil

disobedience and non-violent protest to challenge the British. People from every part of India participated, including men and women, workers, peasants, students, and tribal communities. Movements like the Swadeshi campaign, the Salt March, and the Quit India Movement showed how unity, courage, and persistence could challenge one of the most powerful empires in the world.

The freedom movement shaped modern India in many ways. It taught the value of democracy, civil rights, and equality. It showed that political change is possible when people are determined and work together. Independence brought the opportunity to build a nation based on justice, diversity, and self-determination. At the same time, the movement highlighted challenges, like differences between communities and the need to include all sections of society in the process of nation-building. The experience of the freedom struggle continues to influence India's politics, society, and culture today.

There are important lessons to learn from this history. It teaches that social change is rarely sudden. It requires patience, planning, and the courage to take risks. It shows that both ideas and actions are important in a struggle for justice. It also reminds us that ordinary people can make a difference when they unite for a common cause. The Indian freedom movement was not just a political struggle; it was a social and cultural transformation. It united people from different backgrounds and inspired generations to believe that freedom, equality, and justice are worth fighting for.

The evolution of the movement, from early revolts to mass mobilization, tells a story of resilience, hope, and determination. It is a story that continues to inspire, not only in India but across the world, as an example of how courage, unity, and vision can bring about lasting change.

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