



And Then Gandhi Came: Nationalism, Revolution, and Sovereignty

By Anita Ravi

How did nationalism contribute to the Quit India movement? What about the idea of being a member of a community, and sovereignty? Historical sources help us understand the fight for Indian independence from British imperial rule.

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Since the 1900s, millions of people have fought for independence. They wanted freedom from colonial governments. This has created over 50 new states. Why did so many people fight for independence? What makes an independence movement successful?

What is nationalism?

Benedict Anderson studied history and politics. He wrote a book about nations and nationalism. It was called *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*.

Anderson believed three factors make a nation. First, nations are imagined. We do not know most members of our nation. Still, we imagine ourselves as members of the same group.

Second, it matters how a nation imagines itself. One example is nations born from revolution. These nations imagine themselves as independent. Independence would let them rule themselves.

Finally, nations have community. Citizens of a new independent nation have the same beliefs. Their beliefs bring them together. These beliefs define their nation. Anderson's ideas help us study the Indian independence movement. It was one of the first modern independence movements.

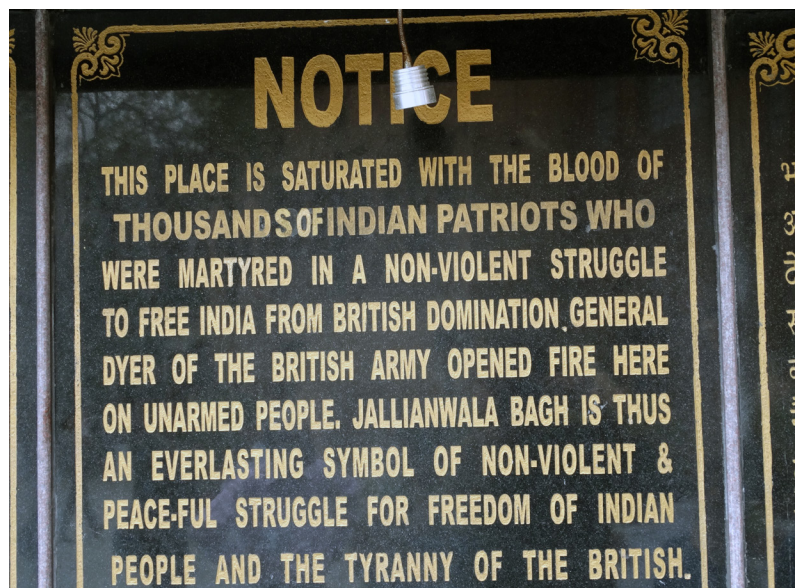
Defining the new nation: Indian independence

By 1900, India had been under British control for almost 200 years. The British controlled most Indian trade and government. However, Indians were also fighting back. The British wanted to stop them. They made harsher rules for the Indian people.

The Amritsar Massacre was an important moment. It helped start the revolution. It took place on 13 April 1919. British general Reginald Dyer led the massacre.

Vincent Sheehan was a historian then. He wrote about the massacre. Sheehan said an English headmistress of a school had been attacked. In response, General Dyer made cruel punishments. Indians had to crawl down the street where she was attacked. They could be beaten if they disobeyed. They felt humiliated.

Next, there was a gathering in the city of Amritsar. It was a peaceful religious celebration. It was also an independence rally. General Dyer posted some signs banning the event. However, many people never saw the signs. General Dyer ordered his troops to fire into the crowd.



Memorial plaque honoring the victims of the Amritsar Massacre, Jallianwala Bagh, India. In 1951 after India won its independence, the park became a national monument of remembrance for the victims. By Adam Jones, CC BY-SA 2.0.

The British interviewed General Dyer about the massacre. They made a record of the interview. Dyer said he chose not to warn the crowd to leave. He feared the people would laugh at him. Instead, he told his troops to shoot. Hundreds of people were killed. Dyer's cruel actions pushed Indians toward independence. In their new nation, people would be treated with respect.

Mohandas Gandhi was an Indian leader. He was important for India's independence. Jawaharlal Nehru was independent India's first prime minister. He wrote a book called *Discovery of India*. Nehru wrote about Gandhi.



Jawaharlal Nehru and Gandhi at a meeting of the All India Congress, Mumbai, 1946. By Max Desfor, public domain.

Nehru says Gandhi was fearless. He brought fresh ideas about freedom, independence, and community. They weren't all new ideas. Some of them came from ancient Indian religious texts, for example. Still, Gandhi's ideas came together into one idea. It was called satyagraha. Satyagraha had three parts. They were truth, nonviolence, and self-suffering. Satyagraha was a plan for starting a revolution.

Satyagraha guided the Quit India movement. The movement was a nonviolent path toward Indian self-rule. The first step was to resolve conflict with discussion. Step two came from Hindu traditions and the ideas of satyagraha. It includes preparing for self-suffering. Self-suffering means not fighting back. Gandhi also asked people to boycott British products. He encouraged them break unfair laws. By encouraging these forms of protest, Gandhi united millions of people. The final step was taking the government by force. This is a recipe for revolution.

Conclusion

Let's return to Benedict Anderson's description of nationalism. Remember, it has three qualities: imagined, self-ruling, and community. How do these three qualities apply to India?

Imagined: Satyagraha was a key idea. It guided the Indian independence movement. It also defined the independent state Indians imagined.

Self-ruling: The Amritsar Massacre made Indians even more set on ruling themselves. They needed self-rule to be free.

Community: Community is necessary for revolution. Everyone has to agree to protest together. Community is key for a successful revolution.

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Image credits

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Memorial plaque honoring the victims of the Amritsar Massacre, Jallianwala Bagh, India. In 1951 after India won its independence, the park became a national monument of remembrance for the victims. By Adam Jones, CC BY-SA 2.0. [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Plaque_Memorializing_1919_Amritsar_Massacre_-_Jallianwala_Bagh_-_Amritsar_-_Punjab_-_India_\(12675316515\).jpg#/media/File:Plaque_Memorializing_1919_Amritsar_Massacre_-_Jallianwala_Bagh_-_Amritsar_-_Punjab_-_India_\(12675316515\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Plaque_Memorializing_1919_Amritsar_Massacre_-_Jallianwala_Bagh_-_Amritsar_-_Punjab_-_India_(12675316515).jpg#/media/File:Plaque_Memorializing_1919_Amritsar_Massacre_-_Jallianwala_Bagh_-_Amritsar_-_Punjab_-_India_(12675316515).jpg)

Jawaharlal Nehru and Gandhi at a meeting of the All India Congress, Mumbai, 1946. By Max Desfor, public domain. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Nehru_gandhi.jpg#/media/File:Nehru_gandhi.jpg



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