



Did India really win its independence through non-violence?

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Two years ago, Burma (Myanmar) saw a huge non-violent movement of civic disobedience in response to a military putsch. However, it was ultimately forced to engage in armed self-defense in the face of merciless repression. Was it any different in India? Was independence, the liberation from British colonial rule in 1947, effectively won through the civil disobedience movement embodied by Gandhi? We put this question to Sushovan Dhar.

Myanmar lived, from February 2021, what was perhaps the most far-reaching and widespread movement of non-violent civil disobedience in modern and contemporary history, in response to the army's desire to secure a monopoly on state and political power, which it shared with the National League for Democracy. The very day after the putsch, the vast majority of the public refused to collaborate

with the junta. Had it received the international support it deserved at that time, the military coup would probably have been aborted. This was not the case.

Thanks to this respite, the junta was gradually able to regain the offensive, engaging in a ferocious crackdown which, to date, has cost the lives of more than 4,000 civilians. In the central plain, the popular movement was forced to engage in armed resistance (which was already the case in the ethnic states of the mountain periphery), in the face of ruthless power. The civic disobedience movement was not in vain. The illegitimate nature of the military government became abundantly clear, making it impossible to quickly normalise the regime in the diplomatic arena. Links were forged between all the regions of the central plain and many ethnic states. Resistance was able to develop over time. However, non-violent mass action was not enough to force the army to abandon its policy of terror against the population.

Was it any different in India? We put this question to Sushovan Dhar, a political activist and trade unionist.

Sushovan Dhar – As far as India's liberation movement and Gandhi's non-violence are concerned, it's an exaggerated and sanitised version of Indian history that was presented by the Congress party and liberal historians, particularly after independence.

In fact, the armed resistance groups were very powerful and made a major contribution to the struggle for India's independence. The movement was particularly strong in Bengal, Bihar, Uttar Pradesh (then called the United Province) and Punjab. In addition, there was a series of armed mass movements led by the Left: Telangana, Tebhaga and many other revolts in different parts of India. Bhagat Singh and his comrades in the [Hindustan Socialist Republican Association](#) also played a major role.

Even on the eve of independence, the famous naval mutiny shook the country in 1946. Nor should we forget the role played by the [Indian National Army](#) led by [Subhash Chandra Bose](#).

A number of workers and peasant movements were also part of the Congress. It would therefore be wrong to think that the Congress represented only the tradition of non-violence. In fact, Gandhi only entered the scene in 1920 with his [non-cooperation movement](#). This was an unsuccessful attempt to induce the British government of India to grant autonomy, or *swaraj*, to India. However, the failure of this movement led to Gandhi's loss of control over the Congress. Indeed, the socialist factions of the party, which included sections that did not fully adhere to Gandhi's non-violence, took control of the party. The same thing happened in 1934, when Gandhi renounced his civil disobedience. If we analyse the history of the freedom struggle in India, we find that, until 1942, Gandhi's non-violence movement was not at the forefront of the freedom struggle. Gandhi's politics were largely confined to individual acts ([satyagraha](#)).

Nor can the [Quit India movement](#) of 1942 be described as totally non-violent. If this had been the case, the pressure on the imperial government would have been very limited. Many pressure groups joined the movement. Let us not forget that the senior Congress leaders were all in jail when the Quit India movement was launched. The mid-level party leaders who played a leading role in this movement later joined the Socialist Party and were not committed to the idea of non-violence in the Gandhian sense.

The Indian communist movement was important. Yet it does not seem to have played a major role in 1946-1947?

The importance of the Indian communist movement became apparent as a result of the lawsuits brought by the colonial power. As early as the 1920s, communists were tried in a series of conspiracy cases:

The Peshawar Conspiracy Cases (1922-1927)

The British administration started these in five stages against 50 muhajirs who had founded the CPI in Tashkent in 1920. These leaders received political and military training at Tashkent, which was a part of the erstwhile Soviet Union, as well as at the [Communist University of the Toilers of the East](#) (KUTV) in Moscow. The majority of the muhajirs were Khilafatis, and they had planned to travel to Turkey to fight the British. However, they met [MN Roy](#) in Tashkent, and together they established the first Communist Party of India. They were accused of inciting “a proletarian revolution against the British imperialist oppressors to restore freedom to the masses” and charged under Section 121-A.

The Kanpur Communist (Bolshevik) Conspiracy Case (1924-25)

This was started against communist leaders including MN Roy, [Shaukat Usmani](#), [SA Dange](#), [Muzaffar Ahmad](#), Ghulam Hussain, [Singaravelu Chettiar](#) and others, many of whom were from the Tashkent group and others were peasant and worker activists from different parts of India. The aforementioned individuals were charged under section 121-A because, according to the British Government, they were attempting “to deprive the King Emperor of his sovereignty of British India, by complete separation of India from imperialistic Britain by a violent revolution.”

The [Meerut Conspiracy Case \(1929-1933\)](#)

This trial was the most important in establishing the Communist Party of India as a party of the working class and peasantry. For organising a walkout among employees of the Indian Railways and textile industry, several trade union officials from around India were arrested, along with three Englishmen affiliated with the Communist International, and put on trial. The leaders were [Sohan Singh Josh](#), Muzaffar Ahmed, [Philip Spratt](#), Shaukat Usmani and SA Dange among others. They received a section 121-A citation. The Great Depression led to a wave of trade union

activity, organisation, and strikes in India's major industrial areas in the late 1920s, which was followed by the Meerut trials.

Unfortunately, the Communist Party of India did not take part in the Quit India movement of 1942!

The consequences of the CPI's disappearance?

It left the masses in the hands of the Congress party. The result was a transfer of power and not a social revolution... It led to the independence of the national bourgeoisie and not of the working masses, who played a major role in the struggle for independence. It was achieved at the cost of popular struggles in different parts of the country over almost a century.

There were chances of creating local self-governments in different parts of the country (for example, the [independent government of Tamralipta](#) in Bengal), but the absence of a strong supporting force - the leadership - left these popular uprisings to accept Gandhi's dictum and surrender.

Nevertheless, let's not forget that left-wing popular organisations, namely the trade unions, played a major role in the Quit India movement. Left forces from non-PC traditions ([RSP](#), [RCPI](#), [BLPI](#) and others) participated in the movement with full vigour.

Therefore, 1942 was neither a non-violent movement nor a Gandhi-led movement. However, the national bourgeoisie, which supported Gandhi throughout, unfortunately emerged as the sole victor and played a major role in post-independent India and shaped the course of Indian history, where the fundamental structures of exploitation and oppression (caste, gender, etc.) remained intact even after the end of colonial rule. The Indian experience became a model for the Third World bourgeoisie, which emerged as the main force in most parts of the

decolonised world.

It should be added that posing the questions of violence and non-violence as binary oppositions contributes to elevating methodological or tactical questions above the political content of the struggle. This is true not only of Gandhian politics, but also of its counterfoils, the armed Marxist, Maoist and other guerrilla movements in many parts of the world. We have witnessed the failure of these policies time and again.

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(This discussion between Sushovan Dhar and Pierre Rousset earlier appeared in [ESSE](#) and [International Viewpoint](#))

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