



From repression to resistance: rethinking the Indian independence movement (1857–1947)

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Abstract

The Indian independence struggle between 1857 and 1947 is re-examined in this essay as a dynamic and intricate process influenced by the ongoing interplay between various forms of resistance and colonial repression. I contend that the movement had several stages, each of which reflected shifting tactics, social engagement, and political awareness, as opposed to being seen as a single, cohesive conflict headed solely by elite leaders. The research emphasizes how early resistance, despite its fragmentation, set the stage for later nationalist activities, starting with the Revolt of 1857. The development of early political groups and the growth of national consciousness, which turned dispersed complaints into coordinated political activity, are then examined. The trend toward radical nationalism and revolutionary movements is further examined in the article, with a focus on their contribution to the escalation of anti-colonial resistance. Gandhian mass movements are highlighted, where civil disobedience and nonviolence redefined resistance as a moral and collective force that allowed for widespread participation. Lastly, the paper looks at the complicated process of independence and partition, demonstrating how international forces, political discussions, and intercommunal conflicts influenced the end of colonial control. Through this approach, I show that the independence movement was characterized by contradictions, diversity, and transformation rather than being linear. This method offers a more complex explanation of how opposition to colonial authority evolved and how it ultimately resulted in both independence and division.

Keywords: Indian independence movement, Colonial repression, Resistance, Nationalism, 1857 revolt, Gandhian movements

Introduction

Rethinking the Indian independence movement from 1857 to 1947 requires going beyond a linear narrative of heroic nationalism and examining the link between colonial repression and resistance. The independence struggle was shaped by numerous social groupings, regional experiences, and evolving strategies, not just a few notable individuals. I want to propose a more critical and inclusive perspective of colonial resistance by concentrating on this dynamic interplay. The 1857 Revolt is an important historical beginning point. Early colonial historians dismissed it as a military revolt, but later researchers have stressed its political and social aspects. R. C. Majumdar claims it was more than a sepoy rebellion and mirrored Indian society's displeasure. Majumdar warns that history should always be based on trustworthy data (Majumdar, 1960, p. xxix) ^[10]. I reject simple or nationalist narratives and investigate the diverse origins and meanings of resistance because of this concern on historical truth. Colonial repression fundamentally shaped their reactions. Indian society was dissatisfied with economic exploitation, administrative centralization, and cultural dominance. Dadabhai Naoroji notably showed how British colonialism drained India's wealth and impoverished its people. He wrote, "India is being bled" (Naoroji, 1901, p. 34) ^[12], emphasizing colonial exploitation's structure. This economic critique highlighted the material underpinnings of repression and laid the conceptual groundwork for nationalist resistance.

I value subaltern historiography, which questions elite-centered narratives of the independence movement, alongside

economic critique. Ranajit Guha notes that elite viewpoints have dominated Indian nationalism, ignoring peasants, workers, and oppressed populations. He calls such historiography "elitism" (Guha, 1982, p. 1) ^[6]. This allows me to reframe resistance as local uprisings, everyday defiance, and collective battles from below, not just organized political activity. Mass politics changed resistance in the early 20th century. Mahatma Gandhi introduced non-cooperation and civil disobedience to the cause. Gandhi said "non-cooperation with evil is as much a duty as cooperation with good" (Gandhi, 1920, p. 5) ^[5]. This strategy galvanized vast numbers of people and reinterpreted resistance as political and ethical. I acknowledge that the independence movement was diverse. Revolutionary movements, socialist ideologies, communal politics, and regional battles all supported anti-colonial efforts. According to Bipan Chandra (1988, p. 15) ^[3], the national movement was "multi-class" and "broad-based struggle". This diversity emphasizes the need to perceive the movement as contested and developing rather than a singular narrative. This book rethinks the Indian independence struggle as a continual interaction between repression and resistance, where colonial dominance created new forms of opposition at different historical eras. I integrate nationalist, economic, and subaltern viewpoints to create a more nuanced and critical assessment of the movement. This method enhances our understanding of history and shows how opposing perspectives, experiences, and voices shape it.

Colonial repression: structures and strategies

Understanding colonial persecution helps me comprehend how resistance developed in the Indian independence movement. British hegemony in India was based on economic control, administrative power, and ideological dominance. Repression systems caused widespread discontent and shaped 1857–1947 resistance. Violence was a prominent form of colonial repression, especially after the Revolt of 1857. The British punished entire populations after defeating the insurgents. According to Bipan Chandra (1988, p. 9) ^[3], the British waged a brutal campaign, burning villages and killing villagers and urban inhabitants. This shows that colonial authorities relied on fear and coercion to oppress citizens as well as troops. Repression occurred outside of crises. It was ingrained in everyday governance through economic exploitation and structural inequity. The colonial state imposed expensive land revenue regimes, disrupted economic links, and favoured British industry over Indian welfare. Dadabhai Naoroji argued that British control drained India's resources. According to Naoroji (1901, p. 34) ^[12], colonialism involves rulers consuming India and removing its resources. Economic persecution impoverished the masses and prepared for broad resistance.

In addition to economic control, the British used administrative and legal methods to preserve power. Laws suppressed political dissent, regulated the press, and controlled public meetings. Peasants and elites were displaced by colonial land ownership and taxation reforms. Modern scholarship notes that colonial land policies caused “a feeling of deep discontent” among diverse groups by interfering with rights and connections (Mukherji, cited in Bhattacharya, 2009) ^[1]. These policies show how bureaucratic repression coexisted with direct brutality. I thought colonial persecution was also ideological and cultural. British claims of civilizing mission and moral superiority justified their control by depicting Indian society as backward and in need of reform. Meanwhile, colonial historiography ignored or misrepresented Indian agency. R. C. Majumdar notes that imperial historians could not adequately reflect Indian history because of their “assumptions of racial superiority” (Majumdar, 1960, p. xxix) ^[10]. It appears that repression shaped Indians' knowledge and depiction of their past and identity. Additionally, colonial repression was purposeful and adaptive. Control was maintained by intimidation and limited changes. The British offered constitutional modifications or compromises after disturbance, but they typically divided political factions or limited meaningful participation. The persecution of extremist leaders and restriction of nationalist activities reveal how the colonial state altered its measures to subdue dissent and maintain power.

I now see that colonial repression was a multi-layered system involving brutality, commerce, law, and ideology. Peasants, workers, intellectuals, and politicians were affected differently. These repressive mechanisms also sparked new opposition to exploitation, injustice, and exclusion. I view colonial repression as both a control tool and a historical factor that molded the independence movement. We can better understand

how resistance evolved in response to colonial rule by studying its forms and techniques. This view of the Indian independence movement as a power-opposition dynamic is more sophisticated.

The Revolt of 1857: from mutiny to national awakening

I like to view the Revolt of 1857 as a complicated and transformative episode in Indian resistance history rather than a “sepoy mutiny”. It signified a move from local uprisings to a broader, fragmented opposition to colonial power. Though it was still young, it planted the seeds of Indian nationalism. Historians have challenged 1857's meaning. British colonial authors called it a “mutiny,” emphasizing its military origins and downplaying its larger importance. Even modern onlookers saw its scope. Benjamin Disraeli called it a “national revolt” before Parliament, emphasizing that the uprising went beyond a military rebellion (Indian Rebellion historiography, 1857). This disagreement shows that 1857's meaning has long been disputed. I think the insurrection started as a military uprising but swiftly became a civic movement involving peasants, artisans, and dispossessed rulers. Different social groups participated, suggesting the revolution was rooted in colonial frustrations. Economic exploitation, political annexations, and cultural involvement fuelled resentment. Some scholars, like Karl Marx, saw the revolution as a broader struggle against imperial rule, calling it a “people's war” against colonial oppression.

I realize that not all historians support the nationalist view. R. C. Majumdar famously said the insurrection was “neither the first, nor national, nor a war of independence” (Majumdar, 1957, p. xvii) ^[9]. His point reminds me that the insurrection lacked a central leader or national philosophy in 1857, and the idea of a unified Indian nation was still developing. Many parts of India were unaffected, and some supported the British. This shows that the revolt is not a nationwide movement. I think calling the insurrection a mutiny minimizes its historical impact. It shaped future resistance even if it was not a national movement. Even though their objectives differed, the uprising united disparate tribes against colonial control. Later nationalist theorists like V. D. Savarkar called it a “revolutionary war” to eliminate foreign control and restore self-government (Savarkar, cited in Sampath, 2019) ^[13]. This interpretation may reflect later nationalist fervour, but it also captures the revolt's symbolic power to inspire future generations.

I also note that the revolt showed early resistance's strengths and weaknesses. It showed Indians might challenge colonial authority on a massive scale. However, its failure revealed the absence of coordination, unity, and modern political structure. Historians say the uprising was typically localized and driven by immediate grievances rather than a national vision. The fragmentation helped defeat it.

I think the Revolt of 1857 changed Indian resistance, notwithstanding its failure. After the British reorganized their region, the East India Company was abolished and India became directly under British administration. More importantly, it inspired later resistance movements. The late

nineteenth and early twentieth centuries saw nationalist leaders and groups inspired by 1857. I regard the Revolt of 1857 as a bridge between repression and organized resistance, not a mutiny or unsuccessful insurrection. It was a turning point when varied and fragmented opposition took on a political purpose. This reinterpretation helps us comprehend how the Indian independence movement grew from localised revolts to a national battle.

Rise of national consciousness and early political organizations

After 1857, India's national consciousness grew gradually through intellectual, social, and political processes. The Revolt of 1857 showed that resistance without structure and identification failed. The rise of educated middle classes, modern education, and early political groupings heralded a new political awakening. This shift was aided by Western education and modern principles like liberty, equality, and nationalism. These concepts inspired Indian intellectuals to criticize colonial governance. Economic criticisms of British policy also boosted nationalism. Dadabhai Naoroji's analysis of economic exploitation showed how colonialism impoverished India, enabling people comprehend that their concerns were systemic. I consider early political organizations as essential to collective resistance. Before a national entity was formed, regional associations like the Indian Association and Poona Sarvajanik Sabha expressed popular opinion and demanded reforms. These groups promoted political discourse and helped Indians build a political identity. The 1885 founding of the Indian National Congress changed this process. First attempt to form a nationwide political organization that could unify disparate organizations across regions and cultures. Bipan Chandra says the Congress was "organized in the form of a Parliament" to represent the people and their demands (Chandra, 1988, p. 25) [3]. This institutional structure reframed politics as a national effort rather than local fights.

Early Congress leaders were moderates who supported constitutional procedures like petitions, resolutions, and negotiation with the British authority. Despite its limitations, this technique helped establish nationalism. Moderates promoted political freedom and Indian unity. They helped organize frustrations into a political movement. Press and public discourse also shape national consciousness. Newspapers and journals promoted nationalism and criticized colonialism. Even British officials were aware of the growing effect of nationalist works, which gave readers "a sincere conviction" about colonial rule's exploitation (Chandra, 1988, p. 98) [4]. The press helped spread political knowledge throughout regions. I acknowledge that early nationalism had limitations. It started with educated elites and excluded the masses. Leaders had different ideologies and approaches, which eroded cohesiveness. Despite its limits, this phase laid the conceptual and organizational groundwork for future major movements.

Historians stress that the early nationalist movement tried to develop political methods. According to Bipan Chandra (1988, p. 82) [4], the national movement was driven by a desire for a

fundamental shift in governmental authority. Thus, Indian nationalism was emerging with direction and purpose from the start. I see the growth of national awareness and early political organizations as a shift from scattered opposition to organized political action. Indians began to perceive themselves as part of a greater country with shared interests and ambitions during this time. Later in the independence movement, mass engagement and more radical strategies would arise from this transition. Thus, I view this phase as essential to Indian nationalism's evolution. The ideas, structures, and techniques of resistance were first carefully formed here, enabling the struggle against colonial control to become a powerful and enduring national movement.

Radical nationalism and revolutionary movements

I conclude that radical nationalism and revolutionary movements constituted a major change from moderate political means to more aggressive and sometimes militant forms of opposition in the Indian independence movement. Due to moderate politics' constraints and frustration with colonial repression, this phase, notably in the early 20th century, arose. This stage saw nationalism become increasingly ardent, action-oriented, and centered in immediate self-rule. I think the Swadeshi Movement (1905–1908) after Bengal's division changed this. This movement broadened nationalism's social basis and added boycott, passive opposition, and mass mobilization. Bipan Chandra states that the Swadeshi movement marked a significant advancement in the Indian national struggle (Chandra, 1988, p. 102) [4]. This illustrates that radical nationalism emerged from earlier nationalist movements and gained momentum through wider engagement. Radical nationalist figures like Bal Gangadhar Tilak, Bipin Chandra Pal, and Lala Lajpat Rai shaped this new phase. They promoted self-reliance, mass action, and national pride over moderates' slow and cautious ways. They believed political freedom should be actively sought by the people, not gradually granted by the British. According to Bipin Chandra Pal, true freedom requires a natural and healthy evolution of innate life forces, emphasizing the significance of indigenous power and self-confidence.

Radical nationalism also started revolutionary movements, especially among young. These groups believed violent resistance to colonialism was justifiable. Revolutionary groups like Anushilan Samiti and Abhinav Bharat challenged British rule across India. Modern historians say revolutionary nationalism involves "young Indians adopt[ing] violent means to challenge British rule". This suggests the revolution was motivated by a desire to overthrow colonial rule. I find it important that revolutionary nationalism was strongly linked to political processes. The Swadeshi movement fostered radical ideals. According to Bipan Chandra (1988, p. 104) [4], "most major political trends... from moderate to extremist" emerged during this period. This shows that radical nationalism was part of a larger independence movement transition where multiple methods coexisted and interacted. I understand revolutionary movements' limitations. They frequently had little backing and were centered in Bengal and Maharashtra.

Additionally, their use of secret organizations and violence occasionally alienated them from society. Despite these obstacles, they inspire courage and sacrifice. Bhagat Singh and other revolutionaries stood up to colonial power. Radical nationalism's psychological influence is also essential. It opposed colonial rule's image of Indian inferiority and promoted self-respect and defiance. Later interpretations say revolutionary ideologies attempted to "unite and liberate suppressed groups through anti-imperial movements". This ideology helped nationalism evolve from a political demand to a struggle for dignity and identity.

Gandhian mass movements: non-violence as resistance

I find that Gandhian mass movements changed resistance strategy and purpose during the Indian independence movement. Non-violence (ahimsa) and truth (satyagraha) became strong political instruments in this age, unlike moderate petitions or revolutionary violence. Mahatma Gandhi made resistance a moral, ethical, and collective practice. Gandhi defined non-violence as aggressive opposition based on truth and moral courage. He felt trained non-cooperation and civic disobedience might confront unjust authority. Gandhi said, "Non-cooperation with evil is as much a duty as cooperation with good" (Gandhi, 1920, p. 5) [5]. I think this sentence summarizes his approach: resistance was a purposeful refusal to tolerate injustice. The 1920–1922 Non-Cooperation Movement was the first to use Gandhian methods to change nationalist politics. Indian peasants, labourers, students, and women joined the movement for the first time. This change from elite politics to public mobilization was significant. Bipan Chandra says Gandhi "brought the masses into the mainstream of the national movement" (Chandra, 1988, p. 181) [4]. I think including the masses gave the independence movement more depth and vigor. The Salt March symbolised the 1930–1934 Civil Disobedience Movement. Gandhi broke the salt regulations to link economic hardship to political resistance, a symbolic and strategic move. Gandhi united people across class and region by choosing salt, a basic requirement. Gandhi's initiatives "linked political protest with the daily lives of ordinary people" (Judith Brown, 1994, p. 145) [2], making them effective. This relationship made non-violence a practical and accessible resistance method, in my opinion.

I acknowledge that Gandhian movements had limits. The Chauri Chaura incident showed that big numbers of people have trouble maintaining non-violence. Gandhi called off the Non-Cooperation Movement when violence broke out, emphasizing its morality over political benefits. This reveals that Gandhi believed non-violence was a principle, not a method. The Quit India Movement (1942), the final phase, showed mass resistance's power. Despite intense repression, it showed a popular desire to end colonial control. Sumit Sarkar calls the movement "a spontaneous upsurge of popular anger" against British rule (Sarkar, 1983, p. 412) [14]. This shows Gandhian techniques have instilled collective resistance in the masses. Political consciousness transformation is what I most like in Gandhian mass movements. They made resistance collaborative, ethical, and inclusive. Gandhi valued

participation, discipline, and morality over violence and elite negotiation. His technique exposed colonial rule's dependency on governed cooperation, undermining its legitimacy. Gandhian nonviolence was a new philosophy of resistance that transformed the freedom movement, in my view. It enabled prolonged and organized resistance to colonial control and empowered ordinary people. Gandhi transformed Indian nationalism by converting resistance into an ethical mass movement. I believe Gandhian mass movements were vital to the transition from fragmented resistance to a cohesive and forceful national struggle, where non-violence became a political action and moral reform.

Toward independence and partition

My analysis of the final phase of the Indian independence movement from the late 1930s to 1947 shows a complex and decisive transition from prolonged resistance to independence and partition. Events worldwide, internal political changes, and rising community tensions molded this phase and independence. WWII greatly weakened British control in India. Indian officials were furious that the British entered the war without consulting them, fuelling nationalist demands. Bipan Chandra says the conflict "weakened the foundations of British rule in India" and made it harder for the colonial government to control (Chandra, 1988, p. 459) [4]. This moment showed imperial power's limits and opened fresh opposition avenues, in my opinion. The 1942 Quit India Movement changed this period. It showed Indians' desire for immediate independence. Despite its violent suppression, the movement showed strong hostility to colonial rule. This was "the most massive anti-imperialist upsurge" since the Non-Cooperation Movement, according to Sumit Sarkar (1983, p. 418) [14]. This shows that opposition had peaked, making British withdrawal unavoidable.

I acknowledge that communal tensions, particularly between the Indian National Congress and the Muslim League, increased throughout the independence movement's last phase. Muhammad Ali Jinnah's Pakistan demand expressed worries about political representation and minority rights in an independent India. Jinnah argued that Hindus and Muslims have distinct religious beliefs and should not marry or cohabitate (Jinnah, 1940, p. 3) [7]. This serves as the ideological foundation of the two-nation thesis. This approach helped divide the subcontinent, in my opinion. These conversations between Indian politicians and the British government show how complicated this period was. The Cripps Mission and Cabinet Mission Plan sought a balance between unity and independence. Conflicting political interests and mistrust doomed these endeavours. Deepening political tensions hampered the search for a constitutional compromise, according to Judith Brown (Brown, 1994, p. 312) [2]. This shows that independence was attained through conflict rather than consensus. The 1947 partition of India was a political and humanitarian calamity. It created India and Pakistan but also caused one of the largest mass migrations and significant communal violence. I see partition as the paradox of independence, which brought great misery and loss. Political

decisions made under duress and uncertainty cost lives, as bloodshed and displacement showed. Despite these obstacles, independence ended decades of colonial opposition. A long and varied battle, from early revolts to mass demonstrations and political talks, culminated in the 1947 power transition. Independence did not eliminate all colonial problems, though. Instead, it began a new period in which colonization and partition shaped the region's political and social reality. I see the transition to independence and partition as a complicated and contentious process of unity and division. It symbolizes resistance to colonial rule and the difficulties of nation-building. Critically evaluating this phase helps us comprehend the Indian independence movement's successes and failures and the historical dynamics that molded modern South Asia.

Conclusion

Rethinking the Indian independence movement from 1857 to 1947, I see it as a complicated, dynamic process molded by the interplay between various kinds of resistance and colonial repression rather than as a single, cohesive battle. Every stage, from the Revolt of 1857 to the eventual attainment of freedom, shows how Indians tactically and creatively adapted to shifting colonial conditions. Whether it took the shape of political dominance, economic exploitation, or cultural domination, repression frequently produced new, more structured forms of opposition rather than just suppressing existing ones. I find it noteworthy that this resistance is so diverse. While radical nationalists and revolutionary groups developed more assertive methods of conflict, early political organizations established the groundwork for national consciousness. Millions of common people joined the fight for freedom as Gandhian mass movements emerged, transforming resistance into a widespread, moral, and participatory process. However, as the subcontinent was divided due to political and communal conflicts, the last stage leading to independence highlights the boundaries of unity. In my opinion, rather of being a straight path toward liberation, the history of the independence struggle should be viewed as a dynamic interaction of concepts, deeds, and social forces. It draws attention to the difficulties in creating a cohesive nation as well as the advantages of group resistance. We may better comprehend how resistance develops under settings of dominance and how many voices and experiences impact historical change by critically analysing this process.

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