

Post-war Societies (India)

By [Sumit Sarkar](#)

Summary

The decades between the two world wars seethed with tumultuous and momentous events. A complex pattern of opportunities and crises in the aftermath of the First World War inspired diverse agitations against and negotiations with the colonial state. The late 1920s and 1930s again witnessed profound economic changes, new political genres, and constitutional initiatives. They led to freedom with partition and decided the shape of post-colonial politics.

Table of contents

- [1 The Wartime Economy](#)
- [2 Constitutional Changes](#)
- [3 Politics in the Interwar Years](#)
- [4 The Depression](#)
- [5 Nationalisms: Armed and Unarmed](#)
- [Notes](#)
- [Selected Bibliography](#)
- [Citation](#)

The Wartime Economy

The war was thrust upon [India](#), without consultation with Indian political organisations, although many, including [Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi \(1869-1948\)](#), supported the war effort. For most Indians, though, it was a costly war. Massive, sometimes forced, [recruitment](#) exacerbated long-term processes of colonial extraction of Indian resources and [labour](#). There was, in the first place, a drain of manpower, as men were recruited, and later compulsorily dragged off to war zones as coolies and soldiers.¹ The Indian army expanded to 1.2 million and 335,000 men were taken from Punjab alone, significantly damaging its economy.²

Alongside this was the drain of money, and an enormous addition to the national debt of Rs 3 million between 1914 and 1923. This was exacerbated by heavy [war loans and taxes](#), mostly indirect ones laid on essential goods, which especially hurt ordinary people. Since land revenue could not be increased under its established terms, customs duties had to finance a 300 percent increase in defence expenditure. Import duties on cotton textiles were raised by 7.5 percent, while total customs duties rose by 8.9 percent to 14.8 percent. Income taxes yielded only 2 percent of gross revenue in 1911-1912: they went up to 11.75 percent in

1917-1918. The axe fell heavily on Indian business groups, especially as a tax on companies and undivided Hindu business families, and another on excess profits, were added in 1917 and 1919.

Wartime [transport](#) bottlenecks reduced shipping space for non-military commodities. Prices of industrial goods rose steeply as a result, and export prices of agricultural commodities could not keep pace. Peasants, consequently, paid more for cloth, oil and kerosene, but the rice, indigo or jute they produced remained at the same price level. A disastrous decline in the production of food crops occurred in 1918-1919 and 1920-1921. This hurt rich peasants, while poorer peasants and agricultural workers were devastated by the price of coarse food grains, their staple food, which rose far more rapidly than prices of finer rice or wheat. Despite the agrarian crisis, food and fodder were exported to feed the military, bringing parts of the country close to a famine situation. The crisis was deepened by a virulent [influenza pandemic](#), which killed a total of about 12 to 13 million people in India – a number higher than the total [war casualties](#).

Standards of living and consumption declined significantly. At the same time, the impact of the war was uneven in its spread, and distress for some came with opportunities for others. The price differential between agricultural [raw material](#) and industrial goods was followed by a growing war demand for jute sandbags, and for canvas, cloth and leather goods. Their manufacturers enjoyed massive profits, especially as transport disruptions blocked imports and vastly reduced foreign industrial competition. Though this primarily helped British jute magnates in East India, it also laid the basis for Indian investment in jute factories after the war. In Bombay and Ahmedabad, Lancashire cotton goods imports declined sharply as import duties were pegged at 7 percent, while export duties on cotton remained at the older rate of 3 percent. This gap greatly benefitted Indian capitalists. Some scholars think that higher prices of imported yarn led to a decline of handicrafts. Others argue that handicrafts actually expanded in the south.³

However, traders and merchants resented the fluctuating rupee-sterling exchange rate, import cuts and new taxes. Industrialists, too, were disturbed when the exchange rate finally settled at 1s-6d per rupee in 1926. This reduced import prices in the post-war period, cutting into their wartime advantage. As industrial production boomed, the number of factory workers expanded massively, by about 575,000 between 1911 and 1921. There was no increase in real wages that corresponded to increased production, even though the cost of living rose sharply. Large profits contrasted tellingly with workers' distress.⁴

Constitutional Changes

The Imperial Legislative Council enacted the “Rowlatt Acts” in 1918, extending severe wartime restrictions on civil liberties into the post-war years. Almost simultaneously, the Government of India Act of 1919, paradoxically, introduced some reforms. Elected members were now in a majority in the central legislature, but they lacked control over ministers. Their laws could be countermanded by the viceregal veto. In the provinces, an enlarged electorate of 5.5 million could elect ministers, who controlled education, health and agriculture – albeit with limited funds – but critical departments like finance and law and order remained in official hands. “Dyarchy”, therefore, created provincially elected ministries whose hands were tied. Reforms redirected political activism into new channels, once post-war mass movements went into a temporary decline.⁵

Politics in the Interwar Years

The impact of war elicited diverse political responses. On the whole, large business magnates, who were dependent on state support to crush working class turbulence, kept aloof from the Non-Cooperation Movement, although some contributed generously to Gandhi’s ashrams. Small and middling merchants and traders, on the other hand, enthusiastically supported the boycott of foreign goods.

Industrial workers tasted strength as their numbers grew. They keenly resented the wage freeze in the midst of booming business profits. This led to what [Frederic Thesiger, 1st Viscount Chelmsford \(1868-1933\)](#) called “a sort of an epidemic of strike fever”.⁶ Some, like the Bombay textile strike of 1919, began spontaneously, but trade unions were soon organised in places like Madras.⁷ In 1920, the first All India Trade Union Congress met in Bombay. Small communist groups, inspired by the Bolshevik [Revolution](#), and equipped with international networks, began to work in India from the early 1920s. In 1925, the Communist Party was founded at Kanpur. Its mass fronts (the Workers’ and Peasants’ Parties) mobilised factory and municipal workers from the late 1920s, and conducted massive strikes among jute and cotton textile workers in Bombay and Calcutta. A general strike among Bengal jute workers in 1929 followed widespread strikes in 1928, and the Girni Kamgar Union led a massive but peaceful strike in 1928 in the Bombay cotton mills. Waves of municipal scavengers’ strikes swept over Bengal, Bombay and Delhi. The “red spectre” haunted the state. In its first decade of life, the small party faced five conspiracy cases. Strikes intensified in the thirties, as did communist influence. The Kisan Sabha and Congress Socialist Party (a left-wing group founded in the Indian National Congress in 1934) worked among poor peasants.

Communists generally ignored questions of caste. There was, however, self-assertion, at first by educated “low caste” organisations, especially in Bombay and Madras. In 1916, they published the Non-Brahman Manifesto, criticising upper-caste monopolies in higher education and the professions, and denouncing the Congress as upper-caste and indifferent to social discrimination. The 1919 reforms granted them some reserved seats in Madras Legislative Council.

There were further critical voices. [Erode Venkata Ramasamy \(1879-1973\)](#) left the Congress for its discriminatory practices and formed the Self-Respect Movement in the mid-twenties in Madras. It combined atheism, a radical attack on caste and Untouchability, and public burnings of Hindu sacred texts, with an assertion of a Tamil-Dravidian identity against North Indian Brahmanical domination of Indian politics. It propagated a radically transgressive gender egalitarianism.⁸ In Maharashtra, [Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar \(1891-1956\)](#), a Dalit scholar-lawyer equipped with impressive academic qualifications, began to produce an incisive analysis of social inequality and caste. In 1927, he entered the Bombay, and later the national, political arena, initially leading a mass movement to claim the use of well-water adjoining temples, which was prohibited for Untouchables. This expanded into a series of mass demonstrations for access to wells and roads near temples, and even to a temple – all forbidden to Untouchables – between 1927 and 1935. In the 1930s, he argued with Gandhi – who condemned Untouchability but sanctified caste – asserting that Untouchability was inseparable from caste and the annihilation of caste was, therefore, essential to social justice, despite its sacred anchorage. He opposed Mahar *vatan* land relations and the *khoti* system in Konkan – which exploited actual cultivators – and organised a joint strike with communists in Bombay against repressive labour laws. Steadily expanding his agenda beyond caste, he formed the Indian Labour Party.⁹

Dalit organisations supported separate electorates for Dalits, which the colonial MacDonald Award had promised in 1931. But Gandhi refused to separate Dalits from the Hindu community and went on a fast unto death against the award. The Poona Pact of 1932, in which Ambedkar was forced to compromise on separate electorates, reserved a large number of legislative seats for Dalits instead.

Hindu far-right groups also emerged to organise a stratified Hindu community on a plank of anti-Muslim [propaganda](#). In 1919, the All India Hindu Mahasabha was formed to contest elections, representing exclusively Hindu interests, which, they claimed, were threatened by Muslims. In 1925, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh was founded as its pedagogical supplement, with daily sessions to provide young upper-caste, middle-class, urban Hindu men with combat training. It taught them that India is an exclusively Hindu nation in its

cultural essence and that all religions born outside are alien and dangerous, no matter how many Indians profess them. In 1936, a women's wing was formed on identical lines.¹⁰

From the mid-1920s, religious tensions and violence began to assume a sub-continental scale. Muslim Tabligh and Tanzim organisations intensified their conversion and mobilisation programmes even as the Arya Samaj tried to "reconvert" Muslims to Hinduism. Both propagated mutual distrust and discord. In the inter-war years, the Muslim League, the Muslim electoral party, had developed a youthful, modern wing under [Muhammad Ali Jinnah \(1876-1948\)](#), which was keen to come together with the Congress to chalk out a future constitution. Some were uncomfortable with Gandhi's closeness to the traditionalist [Khilafat Movement](#). In December 1916, the Lucknow Pact cemented such mutual accommodation between the Congress and the League.

[Motilal Nehru's \(1861-1931\)](#) reform proposals of 1928, however, bitterly disappointed the League. Largely under Mahasabha influence, he rejected League proposals for joint electorates with reserved seats for religious minorities, one-third Muslim representation in the central assembly, proportional representation in Bengal and Punjab, and the creation of three new Muslim majority provinces. Jinnah's passionate cry – "Believe me, there is no progress for India until the Muslims and Hindus are united" – was ignored. Jinnah ominously called it "the parting of the ways".¹¹

In 1935, a new Government of India Act was passed, offering concessions to stem the tide of discontent. It enfranchised 10 million – one-third of the total population – and granted near-complete autonomy to elected provincial ministries. The League fared badly in the 1937 elections, even in Muslim-majority provinces like Punjab where a composite, multi-community Unionist Party was in power, based on landed magnates from all faiths. To recuperate declining prospects, Jinnah now sought the support of religious leaders for a bill to protect the scriptural inheritance rights of Muslim women, which had been compromised in Punjab by customary restrictions, common to all communities.¹² This protected women's entitlements but also drove a wedge between religious communities.

In Bengal, another Muslim majority-province that the League lost, the Krishak Praja Party, with a Muslim leader and commitment to peasant interests, did well in the 1937 elections. The Congress rejected its offer to join it in a coalition government, and the Party was forced to turn to the League – now irrevocably hostile to the Congress – to form a coalition. Bengal and Punjab politics in these times prepared some of the ground for the later partition of each province.

In the 1920s, women's organisations initiated a suffragist movement, albeit based on existing

franchise terms that entailed high educational and property qualifications. Though this brought only very privileged women into legislative processes, they argued that it was still an improvement on the prevailing gender exclusion. Even elite women, it was argued, would address the needs of all women better than men. The Congress, on the other hand, preferred universal adult franchise to reservation. However, between the 1920s and the 1930s, all provinces gradually conceded the demand. In 1929, nationalist and Muslim legislators agreed to increase the minimum age of marriage for women to fourteen.¹³

The Depression

The [worldwide economic depression](#) hit India in 1929, following a prior depression in prices of agrarian commodities in 1926. It was a catastrophe for India's export-oriented economy.¹⁴ The value of Indian exports came down from Rs 311 crores in 1929-1930 to Rs 132 crores in 1932-1933, while the value of imports fell from Rs 241 crores to 133. The government extracted massive quantities of gold, procured through distress sales, to meet its home charges. Lancashire imports faced a terminal crisis and the government now sought some accommodation with Indian business groups to retain at least indirect control.

Indian industrialists had surpassed Lancashire textile imports, and the sugar, cement and paper industries also flourished. Tata Steel could dispense with protection, and industries spread beyond Bombay, Ahmedabad and Calcutta. Corporate power organised itself in the All India Federation of Indian Commerce Industries in 1927. Workers, however, developed considerable militancy in 1928-1929 as capitalists rationalised production and raised profit margins with large-scale retrenchment.¹⁵

Depression threatened capitalist growth as unsold stocks piled up and Japanese competition entered Indian markets. Indian industrialists now made a decisive political shift towards the nationalists because they seemed a better custodian of business interests than the state.¹⁶ Prices of raw jute, cotton and rice collapsed from 1930, hitting middle peasants especially hard. Landlords and rich peasants sought to transfer their revenue burdens onto indebted small peasants and tenants, by way of increased rent, evicting them when they failed to pay. There were anti-moneylender riots and rural marts were looted.

Nationalisms: Armed and Unarmed

The war rejuvenated revolutionary "terrorists" or militants with hopes for arms from [Britain's](#) enemies. They were also encouraged by the transfer of soldiers to war fronts. Most Bengal revolutionaries, brought together under [Bagha Jatin \(1879-1915\)](#), planned an uprising with the promised landing of German arms off the Orissa coast at Balasore. Supplies did not reach

them, however, and villagers exposed the revolutionaries to police action. Jatin died fighting the police in September 1915.¹⁷ A similar insurrection was scheduled for [Punjab](#) by mostly left-wing expatriate Punjabis of the Ghadr Party. They conspired with Indian garrisons in Punjab to arrive from the [US](#) and [Canada](#) with shiploads of arms in order to trigger mutinies. The movement failed: its leaders were rounded up in 1915, and executed or sentenced to life transportation.¹⁸

Insurrection would temporarily prove somewhat more effective at in Chittagong in April 1930. Here a youthful band of militants captured the armoury, fought a pitched battle with armed forces and managed to cut off all connection with the outside world by paralysing transport for a few days. Two remarkable departures marked [revolutionary](#) activism in the interwar years. In the United Provinces, the Hindustan Socialist Republican Army, under the charismatic young revolutionary [Bhagat Singh \(1907-1931\)](#), combined a socialist vision with plots aimed at the assassination of repressive officials. Singh and his associates, legendary figures, to this day, managed to escape capture for several years using skilled disguises. Eventually, all were executed. In Bengal, in the early 1930s, several young women engaged in direct armed action. One shot at the Bengal governor at a public event, two assassinated a district magistrate, and one led an attack on the European Club at Chittagong, killing several European officials and non-officials.¹⁹

In 1915, Gandhi returned from [South Africa](#) where he had led multi-class, multi-community and multi-region struggles through non-violent passive resistance. In the next five years, he transformed Congress structures and political methods with a full-time working committee, provincial branches and paid-up mass membership. He also developed a cadre base, trained in his values: non-violent passive resistance, rural welfare, avoidance of foreign products, distrust of modern industrial civilisation and commitment to quiet, traditional, crafts and caste-based village life.

With his ascetic ways, loincloth and sparse diet, and his use of accessible Hindustani, he soon appeared to the peasant masses as a holy figure, as well as a man close to themselves. His devotional vocabulary and his stern insistence on facing repression without retaliation gave his movements a great moral edge in the eyes of the world. Rumours abounded about his miraculous powers as people began to imagine Gandhi in many different ways, sometimes, in ways quite contrary to his own messages.²⁰ In practice, his discipline was strict, even authoritarian, and his decisions were unilateral.

In 1917-1918, Gandhi directed three separate movements: one against European indigo planters at Champaran in Bihar, a no-revenue movement among insolvent peasants at Kheda

in Gujarat, and a strike of cotton mill workers at Ahmedabad. Each movement had actually begun under local leaders and Gandhi was called in at a later stage. Gandhian leadership was able to deliver significant successes. In each struggle, Gandhi followed a measured pattern, reaching a compromise after extracting some concessions. And with each, he developed contacts with a range of local leaders – sometimes described as “sub-contractors” – who went on to form the basis of his future national mobilisations. Each focused on issues that turned Indians against colonial rulers, but none addressed power relations among Indians, except for the moderate Ahmedabad strike. Here, too, Gandhi acted as a restraining force upon worker radicalism. Later, he would always oppose industrial strike action. These constituted the core of his political strategies.²¹

His first national action was the ambitious all-India *hartal*, or shutdown of work and services on 6 April 1919, to protest against the repressive Rowlatt Act. The Act extended wartime restrictions on civil liberties even after the war was over. The *hartal* was meant for cities alone and was scheduled for a Sunday when many shops were closed in any case. Remarkably successful, the urban upsurge soon became uncontrolled, with sporadic outbursts of violence. The unnerved government arrested Gandhi, which intensified protests even more. At [Amritsar](#) in Punjab, on 13 April 1919, General [Reginald Dyer \(1864-1927\)](#) opened fire on a peaceful public meeting at the walled Jallianwala Bagh compound. At least 379 men, women and children were slaughtered. [Rabindranath Tagore \(1861-1941\)](#), a towering literary figure and India’s first Nobel laureate, renounced his knighthood in the first public gesture of protest against the atrocity. In the face of the severity and violence of colonial repression, Gandhi called off the Satyagraha, calling it a “Himalayan blunder”.²²

The “Punjab wrong” made another mass uprising imminent, and this arrived in the shape of the Khilafat/Non-Cooperation Movement (1921-1922). This was the first mass Gandhian uprising on a truly national scale, and Gandhi worked out an elaborate programme: a boycott of government titles and honours, courts and schools, national education and arbitration boards, and compulsory spinning and use of *khadi*. Most Congress politicians decided not to contest elections and waited for the fulfilment of Gandhi’s promise of “*Swaraj* within a year”. The Non-Cooperation Movement passed through a series of stages between January 1921 and February 1922. It began with an emphasis on the urban intelligentsia, and in mid-1921 moved towards mass enrolment of members into the Congress. The boycott, and burning, of foreign cloth became a major feature of nationalist strategy in the second half of 1921, accompanied by the large-scale enrolment of volunteers who engaged in militant picketing and courted arrest. Between November 1921 and February 1922, the movement experienced significant radicalisation.

The question of Hindu-Muslim unity played a shaping role in a movement that saw significant experiences of both communal unity and discord. Hindu-Muslim cooperation initiated the movement: Gandhi persuaded the Congress to join Muslim Khilafatist leaders, who were carrying out a campaign for a post-war restoration of the powers of the Ottoman Khalifa, traditional custodian of Muslim holy places.²³ There were two strands among Khilafatists. The first, composed of Bombay merchants, wanted to confine the movement to memorials, meetings and deputations. A second more significant and radical strand, led by the brothers [Muhammad 'Ali \(1878-1931\)](#) and [Shaukat 'Ali \(1873-1938\)](#), began to press for countrywide *hartals* or strikes. This group first initiated the call for India-wide non-cooperation at the All India Khilafat Conference in November 1919 in Delhi. The movement spread rapidly and unexpectedly. Sometimes Muslim peasants translated Khilafat as a movement in *khilaf* (in opposition) to the colonial state: they understood little or nothing about the Khalifa's situation. The result was an extraordinary explosion of unified anti-colonial passion. But at the edges of the movement, amity could reverse into violence. In 1920-1921, Muslim peasants in Malabar, facing severe economic distress, turned against largely Hindu landlords. This unrest soon assumed the character of a major religious conflict. At this point, the communal unity that had characterised the Khilafat/Non-Cooperation Movement broke up.

The movement sometimes veered into autonomous groundswells, even though these often took place in Gandhi's name. Such independent currents were especially visible where the Congress leadership was weakened by repression: when tea plantation labourers escaped en masse from Assam gardens, for instance, believing Gandhi's Raj had set them free. Later, [Alluri Sitarama Raju \(1897-1924\)](#) organised a powerful armed movement among the hillmen of Gudum in the Madras Presidency.²⁴

Gandhi himself preferred tightly controlled mass movements, especially where landlords were absent, so that popular anger would not turn against indigenous oppressors. When a local peasant leader [Baba Ram Chandra \(1864\)](#) organised an autonomous and militant movement among Awadh peasants in the United Provinces, the Congress countermanded it. Gandhi initiated cautious moves towards a more militant strategy in early 1921, authorising a no-revenue campaign in Bardoli in Gujarat. Had this been conducted as planned, it could have expanded the horizons of the movement further. In the event, the Non-Cooperation Movement came to an abrupt and violent end when, in 1922, twenty-two policemen were burnt alive at Chauri Chaura, in the Gorakhpur district of the United Provinces. Gandhi, shocked by the violence and fearing an uncontrollable escalation, called off the movement unilaterally, and the mood of national unity that had characterised the preceding year dissipated rapidly.

The politics of the 1920s thus shifted away from mass mobilisation and towards more quietist moods. Sections of the Congress – Swarajists – now contested elections, promising to wreck dyarchy from within, while Gandhians concentrated on village welfare programmes. Communal riots broke out frequently in the decade, and it was not until 1927-1928 that popular agitations, in the shape of renewed industrial militancy on one hand, and mass nationalist demonstrations on the other, re-emerged at the forefront of nationalist politics.²⁵

The Lahore congress of 1929, where a resolution demanding full independence was passed for the first time, indicated this new temper. Nationalist agitation intensified in 1930, when Gandhi launched the biggest of his movements, full-blown civil disobedience, which shook colonial power significantly. The movement began with the famous salt march in violation of the colonial state's monopoly of salt production, and intensified rapidly. In sharp contrast to the early 1920s, though, Hindu-Muslim unity was relatively absent, except in the north-western frontier provinces under [Bacha Khan \(1890-1988\)](#). Here, Hindu soldiers refused orders to take further part in riot control duty in Peshawar in 1930.

Except for a massive upsurge of urban working-class anger against Gandhi's arrest at Sholapur in Bombay Presidency, the working classes stayed away from the movement. But peasants, especially middle peasants from middling castes, braved dispossession, repression and torture and participated in massive numbers in many parts of the country, especially in Bengal, the Madras Presidency, the United Provinces, and much of southern and western India. Once again, Gandhian leadership stimulated radical anti-colonial [nationalism](#) but also restrained its potential class radicalism: Gandhi strictly forbade rent-refusal movements against landlords among poor peasants, despite the ravages wreaked by the Depression. Peasants picketed foreign goods and liquor shops, broke salt laws by making and selling contraband salt, and refused to pay local taxes and revenues. Women led processions and pickets, and peasant women in Bengal assumed leadership of local councils when village men were arrested.²⁶

The government, taken aback by such militancy, offered a truce. Gandhi accepted it, probably prodded by business interests who, by now, had tired of the movement and wanted to strike a deal with the government. Though Gandhi's demands were mostly ignored, some concessions were, indeed, made to industrialists.²⁷ Gandhi went to London to attend the Second Round Table Conference in 1931, having boycotted the first, but returned empty-handed as Muslims and Dalits refused to accept Congress claims to represent all Indians. Though civil disobedience was reignited from 1932, it soon lost momentum. Gandhi, now locked in combat with an increasingly self-assertive Dalit leadership, turned to welfare work among Untouchables. The Congress successfully contested the 1937 elections and went on to

form ministries in five out of eleven provinces.²⁸

On 3 September 1939, the government of India pulled India into a war with Germany without consulting any Indians. More consistently anti-fascist than the British ruling classes, the Congress nonetheless promised support to the British in return for a post-war constituent assembly and responsible central government. An intractable state refused even these moderate conditions. In 1939, Congress ministries resigned, and in 1942, the main Indian parties rejected the Cripps offer. The Quit India resolution was announced on 8 August 1942, and Gandhi was arrested the next day. The movement, which ran from 1942-1943, represented the fiercest uprising of nationalists in their history. From this point on, Indian politics acquired a qualitatively new shape.²⁹

Sumit Sarkar, Independent Scholar

Notes

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