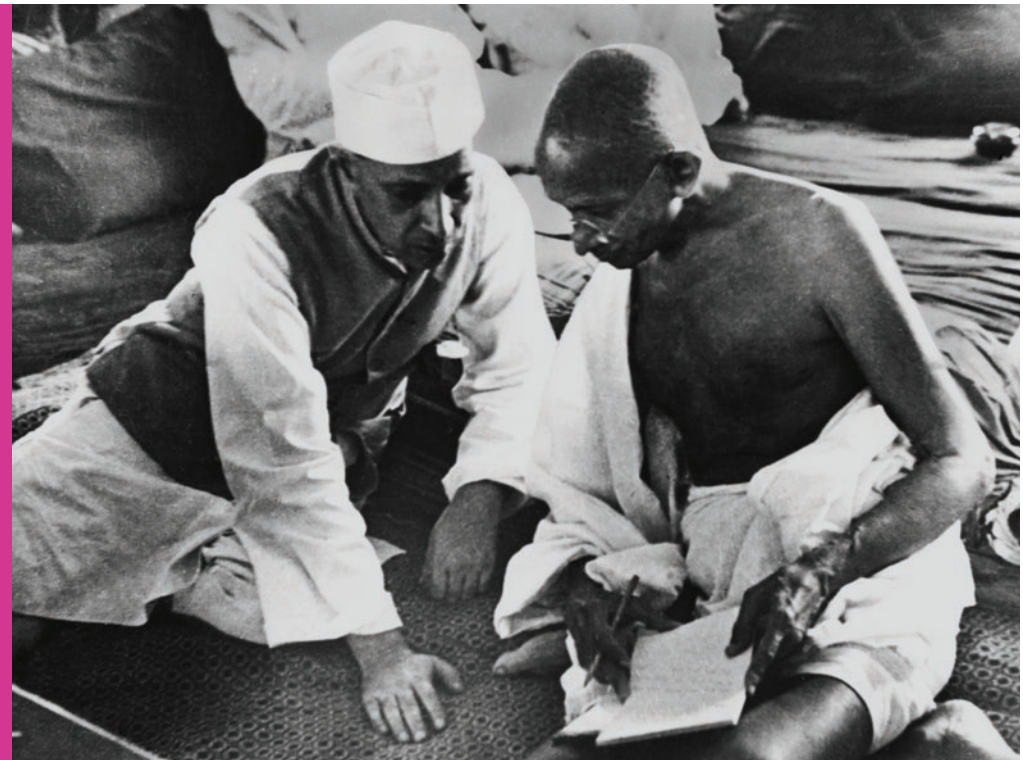


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# AND THEN GANDHI CAME

Nationalism, Revolution  
& Sovereignty

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A HISTORIAN'S JOURNAL ENTRY / BY ANITA RAVI

Over the last 100 years, millions of people rose up in revolt against foreign, colonial governments and founded new, independent nations.



BIG HISTORY PROJECT



Since 1945 alone, over 50 newly independent states have been formed. The twentieth century could be nicknamed the century of “power to the people.” But how and why did these revolutions come about? What motivated so many people in so many different places to come together and insist on independence? What are the features of successful independence movements?

#### WHAT IS NATIONALISM?

To start, I’m going to turn to Benedict Anderson, a historian who writes about nations and the development of nation states in the modern era. Here’s how he talks about the features of nationalism and the concept of the nation in his book, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*:

*It [the nation] is imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion...*

*In fact, all communities larger than primordial villages of face-to-face contact (and perhaps even these) are imagined. Communities are to be distinguished, not by their falsity/genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined. (5)*

I think Anderson is saying that in order to feel part of a nation, you have to imagine that you are part of something that includes people you will never meet and never know, and that it is bigger than yourself and your immediate city or neighborhood. He’s also saying that the “style” in which a nation is “imagined” is important. By “style,” I think he means the features or characteristics of the nation. Will it be a democratic one where all people have a say? Will it be authoritarian where there is a ruling elite, but the rest of the people buy into it because the nation gives them a sense of importance or power (like the Nazis did in Germany)? Here’s more of Anderson’s analysis:

*It [the nation] is imagined as sovereign because the concept was born in an age in which Enlightenment and Revolution were destroying the legitimacy of the divinely-ordained, hierarchical dynastic realm. Coming to maturity at a stage of human history when even the most devout adherents of any universal religion were inescapably confronted with the living pluralism of such religions, and the vast [differences] between each faith’s [textual] claims and its territorial stretch, nations dream of being free and, if under, God, directly so. The gauge and emblem of this freedom is the sovereign state.*

*Finally, [the nation] is imagined as a community, because, regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship. Ultimately it is this fraternity that makes it possible, over the past two centuries, for so many millions of people, not so much to kill, as willingly to die for such limited imaginings. (7)*

So he’s saying that in the modern era, the imagined, new nations put the concept of sovereignty, or independence, at the center. The concept of freedom was tied to the concept of independence – you can’t be free unless you are sovereign. Lastly, he’s saying that the concept of community is what unites everyone under a common vision. As a new, sovereign nation, citizens share a set of beliefs and ideas that they would die for that sets them apart and defines them as a nation. This, in essence, is nationalism. Now I’m going to use Anderson’s concepts of imagined, sovereign, and community to look at one of the first modern revolutions for independence.

#### DEFINING THE NEW NATION: INDIAN INDEPENDENCE

By 1900, European colonization was in full swing. The Atlantic revolutions in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries had already introduced the idea that people could indeed throw off their colonizers and become independent. India had endured British colonialism for almost 200 years. In that time, the British had taken control of commerce and government in most of the subcontinent. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Indians organized many uprisings against the colonial British government’s policies. This led the British to fear further resistance and to put in place harsher policies toward Indians. The turning point toward independence was an event called the Amritsar Massacre, which took place on 13 April 1919 and was led by Reginald Dyer, who had been appointed by the British government as a temporary brigadier general in this region of India. Here’s a brief account of what led to the massacre from Vincent Sheehan, a historian of the period:

*[General Dyer] ordered that all Indians passing through a certain street, where the English headmistress of a school had been beaten by a mob on April 10, must crawl on all fours. This applied to Indian families who had no other means of reaching their homes. Any Indian in a vehicle had to dismount and crawl; any Indian with a parasol had to furl it and crawl; any Indian was ordered to salute or salaam an English officer in these districts. A whipping post was installed at the spot where the school mistress had been beaten, and this was used for flogging such Indians as disobeyed any of the orders. (qtd. in Moore and Eldredge 191)*

From this account, it appears that an English headmistress of a school had been attacked, and in response, General Dyer put in place really harsh punishments for Indians who walked on the street where she was beaten. Forcing Indians to crawl down the street is just humiliating. The climax came when General Dyer ordered his troops to fire on a peaceful gathering in a park in the northern city of Amritsar. The park only had five exits: four of these were narrow pathways while soldiers blocked the fifth, and largest, exit. I learned from Sheehan's account that this gathering was a combination of a rally for independence as well as a celebration of Baisakhi day, a national religious festival for Sikhs, Hindus, and Buddhists. General Dyer issued a statement prohibiting this meeting and the notices were posted throughout the city. However, Dyer's warning was not broadcast throughout the city or published in the newspaper, which meant that many people did not get the message, especially those who were traveling into the city of Amritsar from nearby villages. Here is part of General Dyer's testimony before the committee that investigated the Amritsar incident:

*Q: When you got into the Bagh (clearing) what did you do?*

*Dyer: I opened fire.*

*Q: At once?*

*Dyer: Immediately. I had thought about the matter and don't imagine it took me more than 30 seconds to make up my mind as to what my duty was.*

*Q: How many people were in the crowd?*

*Dyer: I then estimated them roughly at 5,000. I heard afterwards there were many more.*

*Q: On the assumption that there was that risk of people being in the crowd who were not aware of the proclamation, did it not occur to you that it was a proper measure to ask the crowd to disperse before you took that step of actually firing?*

*Dyer: No, at the time I did not. I merely felt that my orders had not been obeyed, that martial law was (ignored), and that it was my duty to immediately disperse by rifle fire...*

*Q: Did the crowd at once start to disperse as soon as you fired?*

*Dyer: Immediately.*

*Q: Did you continue firing?*

*Dyer: Yes.*

*Q: What reason had you to suppose that if you ordered the assembly to leave the Bagh, they would not have done so without the necessity of your firing and continuing firing for any length of time?*

*Dyer: Yes, I think it quite possible that I could have dispersed them perhaps even without firing.*

*Q: Why did you not recourse to that?*

*Dyer: They would have all come back and laughed at me, and I should have made what I considered a fool of myself... My idea from the military point of view was to make a wide impression. (qtd. in Saund 151 —53)*

So it appears that General Dyer ordered his troops to massacre hundreds, if not thousands, of Indians that day so that he would not make a "fool" of himself. This testimony and the harsh policies described above reveal how little regard for human life and dignity this general had for the Indians he supposedly ruled. By humiliating and killing the local population, the colonial government itself actually plays a role in bringing about revolt. Through the policies and event described above, General Dyer pushed Indians further toward an imagined, sovereign nation in which people could be treated with dignity. In order to learn a bit more about how India gained its independence, I am going to do some research on Mohandas Gandhi, or the Mahatma, as he was known throughout the world. Here's what independent India's first prime minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, had to say about Gandhi's importance to India's independence in his book *Discovery of India*:

*We seemed to be helpless in the grip of some all-powerful monster; our limbs were paralyzed, our minds deadened. The peasantry were servile and fear-ridden; the industrial workers were no better. The middle classes, the intelligentsia, who might have been beacon-lights in the enveloping darkness, were themselves submerged in this all-pervading gloom...*

*What could we do? How could we pull India out of this quagmire of poverty and defeatism which sucked her in?...*

*And then Gandhi came. He was like a powerful current of fresh air that made us stretch ourselves and take deep breaths; like a beam of light that pierced the darkness and removed the scales from our eyes; like a whirlwind that upset many things, but most of all the working of people's minds. He did not descend from the*

*top; he seemed to emerge from the millions of India, speaking their language and incessantly drawing attention to them and their appalling condition. Get off the backs of these peasants and workers, he told us, all you who live by their exploitation; get rid of the system that produces this poverty and misery.*

*Political freedom took new shape and then acquired a new content. Much that he said we only partially accepted or sometimes did not accept at all. But all this was secondary. The essence of his teaching was fearlessness and truth, and action allied to these, always keeping the welfare of the masses in view. The greatest gift for an individual or a nation, so we had been told in our ancient books, was abhay (fearlessness), not merely bodily courage but the absence of fear from the mind... at the dawn of our history, [our leaders had said] that it was the function of the leaders of a people to make them fearless. But the dominant impulse in India under British rule was that of fear—pervasive, oppressing, strangling fear; fear of the army, the police, the widespread secret service; fear of the official class; fear of laws meant to suppress, and of prison; fear of the landlord's agent; fear of the moneylender; fear of unemployment and starvation, which were always on the threshold. It was against this all-pervading fear that Gandhi's quiet and determined voice was raised: Be not afraid. (391 — 93)*

What Nehru is saying in this very powerful passage is that Gandhi brought fresh ideas about freedom, sovereignty, and community. They weren't all new ideas. Some of these ideas came from Hinduism — the “ancient texts” Nehru refers to — such as abhaya. Some of these ideas came from Indian history before the invasions of the Mughals and the British. These ideas came together in a single concept that was the basis of the Indian Independence movement. This concept was called satyagraha. The components of this idea were truth, nonviolence, and self-suffering. It was actually a strategy for waging a revolution. This central idea drove the Quit India movement, a nonviolent path toward a sovereign India. Here are the strategies for nonviolent revolution as outlined by Gandhi:

- 1. Make every effort to resolve the conflict or redress the grievance through negotiation and arbitration; when that fails,*
- 2. Prepare the group for direct action through exercises in self-discipline and, for Indian satyagrahis, purification fasting;*
- 3. Institute an active propaganda campaign together with demonstrations, mass-meetings, parades, and slogan-shouting;*

- 4. Issue an ultimatum such that offers the widest scope for agreement and face-saving and that offers a constructive solution to the problem;*
- 5. Organize an economic boycott and forms of strike; noncooperation such as nonpayment of taxes, boycott of schools and other public institutions, ostracism, or even voluntary exile;*
- 6. Perform civil disobedience by breaking laws that are either central to the grievance or symbolic; and finally,*
- 7. Usurp the functions of the government and form a parallel government. (qtd. in Johnson 23)*

Each step outlined above is really a strategy for challenging and ultimately usurping power. What's interesting is that step 2 really comes from Hindu traditions. When he says “self-discipline,” he's referring to the principles of satyagraha. Individuals need to reflect on truth, promote nonviolence, and get ready for self-suffering, which means not fighting back. He's asking people to be problem-solvers and to demonstrate openly. He's also advocating economic boycotts as well as legal resistance. In step 6, he specifically asks people to target unjust British laws by breaking those laws. This is a recipe for revolution.

## CONCLUSION

Returning to Benedict Anderson's components of nationalism — imagined, sovereign, and community — how do these apply to India?

**Imagined:** The features of an imagined independent India are really defined by Gandhi's philosophy of satyagraha and the strategies that he developed with other leaders of the independence movement in India to carry out revolution. In other words, there needs to be a guiding philosophy that produces the imagined nation state.

**Sovereign:** The Amritsar Massacre, I think, helped to solidify that Indians truly needed, and wanted, sovereignty. Under British rule, they would remain unfree and afraid, as Nehru states so eloquently in the source above. This key event married the idea of sovereignty to the idea of freedom. While there were many events leading up to this one, a single event is the turning point toward commitment to sovereignty.

**Community:** Community was necessary for the success of the independence movement. Indians had to trust that if they boycotted English cloth, for example, in the northern city of Delhi, that their countrymen in the southern city of Bangalore would do the same. Successful protest, boycott, and nonviolent responses to unjust laws

were dependent on the fact that Indians would be unified in their commitment to the revolutionary strategies outlined by Gandhi. In other words, shared commitment to a set of protest strategies is a key feature of successful revolution.

This short journal entry is an example of how historians go about exploring important questions and looking at new information. They use a mixture of historical documents and the writings of other historians to inform their thinking. All sources are listed in the working bibliography.

### Working Bibliography & Notes

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Cover image: Gandhi and Nehru in discussion when the "Quit India" resolution was adopted, 1942. Courtesy of Bettmann/Corbis.

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