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UNIT 6 STRUGGLE FOR INDEPENDENCE IN INDIA

Structure

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6.0 OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit you should be able to:

- explain the circumstances leading to the revolt of 1857;
- identify various factors contributing to the growth of nationalism;
- describe the different phases of India's struggle for independence; and
- discuss the sacrifices made by people for the cause of Independence.

6.1 INTRODUCTION

The British ruled India for about two hundred years. India could make itself free from the domination of the British Raj on 15th August 1947. Exploitation of Indian people and Indian economy by the British made the Indians realize the need for united efforts to drive the British out of India. In this unit we are going to understand how Indians raised their voices against the British and the sacrifices that the countrymen made to set India free from foreign rule.

6.2 THE REVOLT OF 1857

Indian people never accepted foreign domination without resistance. Since the late 18" century there had been a number of popular protests in different parts of India by peasants, workers, tribals and others against the exploitation by the British government and its agents. These protests were no doubt localized and isolated but they significantly contributed in strengthening the voices against the foreign rule. The first major blow to the British rule in India was in 1857 when the Indian sepoys of the British East India Company's army raised the banner of revolt. Indian sepoys were poorly paid and were treated with contempt. Even much before 1857 on number of occasions the

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Indian sepoys revolted against the discriminatory attitude of the British East India Company. Just before the Revolt of 1857 in the same year Mangal Pandey, an Indian sepoy posted at Barrackpore in Bengal, had to sacrifice his life because he raised his voice against discrimination by the British. In the prevailing feeling of discontent among the Indian sepoys the news of use of beef and pig fat to cover the cartridges of the new Enfield rifle angered the sepoys. The simmering discontent that the sepoys had for injustice and racial discrimination added with this rumour led to the outbreak of revolt of the sepoys on May 1857 in Meerut (Uttar Pradesh). After attacking the jail and releasing the prisoners the sepoys marched towards Delhi. They proclaimed Bahadur Shah II, the successor of the Mughal empire, as Emperor of India. Following the example of the Meerut regiment the Bengal army soon rose in revolt.

The revolt spread to other parts of the country like Awadh, Rohilkhand, Bundelkhand, Central India, Bihar, Punjab, etc. Common people in many places joined the sepoys in challenging the ruling authority by using traditional arms like axes, spears, arrows and wooden sticks. British revenue offices, police stations, law courts were attacked. In spite of divisive policy of the British government people cutting across the barriers of religion, region, caste, and language spontaneously joined the movement. Important leaders of the movement were Khan Bahadur Khan, Tantia Tope, Nana Saheb, Rani Lakshmibai, Begum of Awadh, General Bakt Khan, Azimullah, Kunwar Singh, Maulavi Ahmadullah, etc.

The British were initially shaken by this sudden large-scale Revolt. However, soon the government adopted a retaliatory policy of crushing the Revolt. Villages were burnt; public executions were done to create a sense of terror among the Indians. Emperor Bahadur Shah was put in exile in Rangoon. Repressive measures of the British government succeeded in crushing the Revolt. The Revolt also failed because there was no centralized command to lead the movement, and also compared to the British army Indians were not properly armed and organized. In spite of its failure the way the great Revolt aroused consciousness among people against the British misrule led the historians to consider this as the First War of Indian Independence.

6.3 EMERGENCE OF INDIAN NATIONALISM

After the Revolt of 1857, British Parliament passed an Act in 1858 declaring Queen Victoria as the sovereign of British India. The e rule of the East India Company over India thus came to an end. The change in nature of governance no doubt brought many changes in the character of British rule in India but there was no relief to Indians from various forms of exploitation. Peasants and workers' protests took violent forms in different parts of India, Commercial exploitation of forests resulted in displacements of tribals from their homelands and quite naturally this enraged the tribals against the ruling authority.

Though the popular revolts that took place in different parts of India during the post-1857 period were mostly localized movements but it definitely helped in creating public awareness against the exploitative character of the British rule. Apart from the peasants, workers and tribals the middle class intelligentsia were also very much critical of the British reform initiatives in the sphere of economy, society and administration. To give expression to their discontents the middle class Indians realized the necessity of forming associations and thus the first major voluntary organization in India, British Indian Association, was founded in 1851 in Calcutta. This was followed by the Madras Native Association and the Bombay Association. 'Just before the formation of the

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Indian National Congress another major political association founded by the Indians was the Indian Association by Surendranath Banerjea in 1876 to represent the voices of the people. The primary aim of such associations was to mobilize public opinion against the foreign rule. The educated Indians had enough reasons to be critical of the British rule. Increased taxation, outbreak of famines, limited job opportunities, lowering of maximum age for appearing in the Indian Civil Service examination, racial discrimination, the Vernacular Press Act and the Arms Act, etc. were against the interest of the Indians. More provocative was the protest of the white people against the Ilbert Bill that proposed to give Indian judges the power to try Europeans.

Being faced by oppressive measures and growing exploitation by the British rule, public opinion was steadily developing among Indians to unite themselves for the cause of the motherland. In this endeavour many great Indians through their writings and reformative initiatives tried to highlight the past glory of India and the common cultural thread that binds the Indians. All these efforts culminated in the formation of the Indian National Congress at a convention held in Bombay in December 1885, under the presidentship of W.C. Bonnerji.

6.4 PHASES OF NATIONALIST MOVEMENT

The nationalist movement may be divided into three phases. We will now discuss each phase in detail.

6.4.1 Petition and Protest (1885-1916)

In the initial years the major thrust of the Congress policy was to develop and consolidate the sentiments of national unity by breaking the barriers of regional differences. At the beginning, the Indian National Congress was a body of lawyers, merchants, landowners, journalists and other middle and upper class gentry. The Congress movement started with a very limited objective of drawing the attention of the British government to the woes of Indians and of limited reforms. The Congress leaders were conscious of the exploitative character of the British rule, but their demand was for reform not expulsion of the British. Leaders of the formative phase of Indian National Congress believed that political freedom would come gradually. They were critical of economic policy of the British government. Their immediate demand was for limited self-government within the imperial government and Indian participation in central and provincial legislatures as well as in local bodies. Their other demands were extension of trial by jury, repeal of the arms act, racial equality, etc. They did not believe in agitation politics to achieve their demands.

A group within the Congress soon emerged who were very critical of programmes, ideas and actions of the moderate Congress leaders. They advocated self-government and called for direct action against the government to achieve their goals. Differences within the Congress members led to a formal split of the Congress in its Surat session in 1907 and the two groups came to be called 'moderates' and 'extremists'. The main reason behind the rise of extremist politics was the failure of moderate politics. The extremist leaders wanted immediate *swaraj* or self-rule by driving the British out from India. Partition of Bengal in 1905 by Lord Curzon in order to check the rising tide of nationalist movement in India provided immediate context to give the call for direct action against the British. The prominent extremist leaders were Bal Gangadhar Tilak in Maharasthra, Lala Lajpat Rai in Punjab and Bepin Chandra Pal in Bengal.

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Partition of Bengal instead of weakening Indian nationalist movement brought leaders of different ideologies together and gave the call for anti-partition agitation. This movement is known as the Swadeshi movement. Along with constructive programme of national education, self-reliance, usage of indigenous goods and village level organization there were leaders who gave the call for political extremism through mass mobilization. This was also the time when we find the growth of revolutionary terrorism in Bengal.

Different secret societies relying on terrorist activities had come up with the purpose of forcing the British to leave India. One significant example of such terrorist activities in those days was the attempt made by Khudiram Bose and Prafullo Chaki on the life of the Presidency Magistrate, Kingsford, in 1908 at Muzaffarpur. No doubt great sacrifices were made by the leaders who had opted for terrorist activities. It was, however soon realized that without mass mobilization it was not possible to overthrow the mighty British empire. However non-violent Swadeshi movement as well as violent terrorist movement made it amply clear that the decision of Bengal partition was not acceptable to the people. Seeing this massive popular discontent, the Partition of Bengal was annulled in 1911.

In spite of participation of large sections of Muslims in the Congress- led nationalist movement, some among the Muslim community considered the Congress movement not in the interest of the Muslims. Hindu revivalism and identification of Hinduism with nationalism further helped in consolidation of communal ideology among the Muslims. Sir Sayyid Ahmed Khan and his Aligarh movement provided a platform to organize the Muslims who were opposed to the Congress –led nationalism. Later on in 1906 the All India Muslim League was formed to protect political rights and interests of the Muslims. The pro-British policy adopted by the Muslim League prompted the British to ensure reserved seats for the Muslims in imperial as well as provincial legislatures through constitutional reform Act of 1909. This development created a breach between the Congress and the Muslim League and weakened the nationalist movement. However the signing of Lucknow Pact in 1916 between the Congress and the Muslim League helped in bridging the gap. We will see in the next section how the Khilafat issue in 1919 further provided opportunity for joint movement by the Hindus and the Muslims against the British.

6.4.2 Beginnings of Mass Participation (1917-1936)

This period of Indian freedom struggle is marked by the emergence of Mahatma Gandhi in Indian politics and under his able leadership the Indian National Congress organized two important mass movements, non-cooperation and civil disobedience. After studying law in Britain, Gandhiji went to South Africa to practice law. But seeing the shocking social and political inequalities faced by the Indians and other Asians at the hands of the British, Gandhiji decided to fight against racial discrimination through Satyagraha. The philosophy of Satyagraha is based on the principles of truth and non-violence. Through Satyagraha Gandhiji wanted to appeal to the conscience of the wrongdoers. He was successful in his campaign for social justice and equality in South Africa. His successful campaign in South Africa against British imperialism made Gandhiji a firm believer in Satyagraha and mass movement for the cause of the people. After corning back to India he founded the Sabarmati Ashram in Ahmedabad in 1916.

On the request of peasants and workers of Bihar and Gujarat to support their struggles against exploitation, Gandhiji provided leadership in support of their demands. Three significant struggles in this context were Champaran satyagraha for local peasants in Bihar, workers strike in Ahmedabad and peasants strike in Kheda in Gujarat.

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Gandhiji's simple lifestyle and his concern for the problem of the common people made great appeal among masses and drew the attention of the entire country. Then in 1919 when the government passed the Rowlatt Aci by allowing the government to an-est any person without any trial, aiming to curb the nationalist movement, Gandhiji gave the call for satyagraha. This was followed by massive demonstrations and *hartlas* or strikes all over the country and the government tried to stop the movement by using force. Most tragic incident took place in Jallianwala Bagh at Amritsar. On 13th April 1919 large crowd gathered at Jallianwala Bagh for a public meeting, but General Dyer, an official of the British government, ordered his troops to open gunfire on the unarmed people. This massacre shocked the nation and in protest Rabindranath Tagore gave up his knighthood.

During the same time there was another development that hurt the sentiments of the Muslims in India. The defeat of Turkey in the First World War and the treatment by the British to the Sultan of Turkey who was considered as the religious head of the Muslims angered the Indian Muslims. In India a Khilafat Committee was formed under the leadership of Mohammad Ali and Shaukat Ali to pressurize the government to set right the wrongs done to the Muslims. Gandhiji and other Congress leaders considered this as an opportunity to strengthen the Hindu-Muslim unity by supporting the Muslim demands and jointly launched movement against the British. The Congress in its annual session held in December 1920 at Nagpur adopted Gandhiji's plan for non-cooperation movement against the govemment till justice is made to the Punjab and Khilafat wrongs and Swaraj is established.

The Congress gave the call for surrender of titles and honours, resignation from local bodies and government services, boycott of government courts, schools and foreign cloth, etc. Appeal was made to use swadeshi cloth, to maintain Hindu-Muslim unity and to observe strict non-violence. There was massive response to Gandhiji's call for non-cooperation movement from different parts of India. Charkhas and Khadi became very popular among people. When the non-cooperation movement aroused tremendous public response there was sudden outbreak of violence at Chaurichaura in Uttar Pradesh. Clue to the violence that Gandhiji was very much opposed to, he immediately gave the ciill for withdrawal of the movement in 1922. Common people, even many leaders, were surprised by this sudden decision of Gandhiji. Gandhiji was arrested and on the charge of spreading sedition, he was sentenced to six years' imprisonment. Though the movement did not last long, yet it had been very successful in bringing different sections of the people in one platform. Commenting on the non-cooperation movement Gandhiji wrote, "It is high time that the British people were made to realize that the fight that was commenced in 1920 is a fight to the finish, whether it lasts one month or one year or many months or many years..."

Withdrawal of non-cooperation movement and the arrest of Gandhiji had a demoralizing effect among the Congress workers. Congress leaders like C.R.Das and Motilal Nehru argued for end of the boycott of the Legislative Councils and participation in the next Council elections. Many Congress leaders did not accept their views. This resulted in the formation of Swaraj Party by C.R.Das and Motilal Nehru. The programme of the Swarajists was not much different from the Congress except that the Swarajists believed in opposing the government by entering the Councils. Due to the untimely death of C.R.Das, poor performance in the 1926 Council elections and growing communal tension, the Swarajists could not continue their movement further.

Another outcome of the withdrawal of the non-cooperation movement was the revival of revolutionary activities. Successful Bolshevik revolution in Russia in 1917 had

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influenced people towards Marxist and socialist ideas. Being influenced by the sacrifices of the earlier revolutionaries, the Hindustan Republican Association (HRA) was formed in Kanpur with the objective to overthrow the colonial rule through armed struggle. Later on under the leadership of Chandra Shekhar Azad the HRA changed its name to Hindustan Socialist Republican Association. Through revolutionary activities they wanted to force the British to leave India. In their battle against the British, many revolutionaries were arrested, sentenced to death or hanged. Important revolutionaries in this context were Bhagat Singh, Chandra Shekhar Azad, Rajguru, Surya Sen, Sukhdev, Pritilata Waddedar, Kalpana Dutta, and many others.

Being pressurized by growing nationalist movement the British government decided to appoint a commission under the chairmanship of Sir John Simon to explore further possibilities for making constitutional changes. There was no representative of Indians in the commission. The Congress decided to give reply to this humiliation of the Indians through mobilizing people against the commission. In number of places there was lathi charge (i.e., beating up with wooden sticks) by the police on the protesters. In Punjab, Lala Lajpat Rai, one of the most prominent nationalist leaders, died in 1928 due to the police lathi charge. Then in 1929 at its Lahore session the Congress declared Purna Swaraj or complete independence as its goal. This was followed by hoisting of the tricolour flag of India and on 26'' January 1930 pledge was taken for Purna Swaraj. To achieve the goal of complete independence Gandhiji launched the civil disobedience movement in 1930 by marching from Sabarmati Ashram to Dandi. This march was in protest of the Salt Law and salt was a necessity for the poor as well as the rich. The movement was planned to send the message to the British that Indians were not prepared to accept the British laws. Main objective of the movement was to paralyze the British government.

In response to Gandhiji's call for civil disobedience there was mass mobilization in different parts of India to defy the British rule. In many places peasants refused to pay land revenue. Students, youth and large number of women joined the movement and protested before shops selling foreign cloth and liquor. Government used force to suppress the movement. Gandhiji and other Congress leaders were arrested. At the same time government wanted to negotiate with the congress for solving the problem. The congress refused to take part in the first Round Table Conference held in London in May 1930 to discuss the Simon Commission Report. But later on after agreement with Lord Irwin in 1931 Gandhiji agreed to attend the Second Round Table Conference in London and suspended the civil disobedience movement temporarily. Main agenda of the conference was to discuss the scheme of constitutional reforms for India. But the congress was not happy with the outcome of the meeting and resolved to renew the civil disobedience movement.

The movement continued till 1934 but it lost its vigour. Government adopted coercive measures to suppress the movement. At the same time to divide the Indian nation the British government announced the Communal Award in 1932 ensuring separate electorate for ''Depressed classes'' (Scheduled castes) and Muslims, Sikhs, Christians and others. Nationalist leaders opposed this and to mark his protest Gandhiji went on fast in jail: Intervention by nationalist leaders and Dr. B.R. Ambedkar as representative of the Scheduled Castes led to the signing of the Poona Pact to protect the interests of the Scheduled Castes by providing reserved electorate for them. Thus the British failed in their attempt to break Indian unity. Then the Government of India Act, 1935 was passed by the British with provision for a federal form of government and provincial autonomy.

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Check Your Progress 1

1) Which were the two mass movements organized by the Indian National Congress under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi?

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2) What was the main agenda of the second Round Table Conference in London attended by Gandhiji?

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6.4.3 Towards Freedom (1937-1947)

After the withdrawal of the civil disobedience movement Gandhiji decided to keep himself away from active politics for a while and devoted himself to the upliftment of the Scheduled Caste and the Scheduled Tribe. He coined new names for them as Harijan and Girijan respectively and gave the call for abolition of 'untouchability'. This was the time when Congress leaders like Jayaprakash Narayan, Narendra Dev, Rammonohar Lohia and others formed the Congress Socialist Party. Leaders of the socialist group wanted to work remaining within the congress and wanted to influence Congress policy towards socialist programme. Then following the Government of India Act, 1935 the Government announced general election in 1937. The Congress won the provincial elections except in the Punjab and Bengal. Peasant movement also gathered momentum with the formation of the All India Kishan Sabha and Swami Sahajanand Saraswati became its first president. Outbreak of the Second World War in 1939 added new dimension to the British as well as the Congress policy and strategy. On condition of support to the British war efforts the Congress demanded some concessions that the government was not ready to accept. As a result, in 1939 the Congress ministries in different provinces resigned. Meanwhile the Japanese intervention in the war against the British brought the war close to the British Indian territory.

The British government sent a mission under the leadership of Stafford Cripps to India to have dialogue with the Indian leaders. The mission was not successful in providing any acceptable solution to the demands of the nationalists. Failure of the Cripps Mission on one hand and the impact of the war on social and economic life of the Indians on the other created a ground for showdown against the British. Subhas Chandra Bose Bose left India and formed the Indian National Army abroad. He joined hands with the Japanese against the British. His call for liberating India by force had great influence upon Indian minds.

Gandhiji could read the militant mood of the Indians and realized the need for giving a call for direct action. All India Congress Committee in its Bombay session in August 1942 adopted the resolution for mass civil disobedience and Gandhiji delivered his famous "Do or Die" speech. This is known as the Quit India Movement and Gandhiji's call for fight to finish had great impact upon various sections in the society. Gandhiji, along with other front-ranking leaders of the Congress, was arrested and the movement went out of the hands of the Congress. Responding to Gandhiji's call for driving the Bn tish out if they do not leave India on their own, in many provinces people formed

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their own government defying the govemment order. The government reacted by using brutal force to crush the movement. The Quit India movement by giving the call for immediate freedom from the British oppression caught the imagination of various sections of Indian population. Though the British succeeded in suppressing the movement it felt the necessity to have a dialogue with the Congress in order to arrive at a peaceful solution of the problem.

This was also the time as we have already said that the Indian National Army (INA) under Subhas Chandra Bose's leadership with the support of the Japanese army made organized effort to enter India through Burma. But due to Japan's defeat in the Second World War, the INA could not move beyond Kohima in the North-East India. Many INA soldiers were arrested by the British and three senior officers of the INA- Shah Nawaz Khan, Gurdial Singh Dhillon and Prem Kumar Sehgal were convicted as traitors. But in the face of strong resistance from various sections of Indian society against the trial of INA soldiers by the British, the British govemment decided to set free the INA prisoners. Anti-British sentiment was so dominant that in 1946 the Naval ratings of the Royal Indian Navy went on strike in Bombay. Growing outrage of the Indians against the British became very much evident in different parts of the country. Sensing the mood of the Indians the British govemment again chose the path of a negotiated settlement and in 1946 a Cabinet Mission was sent to India.

The Cabinet Mission proposed a federal type of govemment and also recommended the establishment of an Interim National govemment with leaders from different parties. Differences between the Congress and the Muslim League on the plan for an interim government led to conflict between the two communities. Tensions continued even when in February 1947 the Prime Minister Clement Atlee declared Britain's intention to quit India by June 1948. Lord Mountbatten was appointed as the Viceroy of India to arrange the final transfer of power to Indian hands. Then, following the Mountbatten Plan, India was made free, but by partitioning India the new state of Pakistan was created. Seeing the kind of communal tension created in the name of religion, the Congress leaders thought it beneficial for the larger interest of humanity to accept the decision of partition. On 15th August 1947, India attained freedom.

Check Your Progress 2

1) Name two leaders of the Congress Socialist Party.

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2) Who was appointed as the Viceroy of India to arrange the final transfer of power to Indian hands?

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6.5 LET US SUM UP

In this unit we have tried to understand how we became a free nation after a struggle for more than 100 years. First major movement of the people that shook the British empire was the Revolt of 1857. The Indian soldiers in the British army initiated this movement but later on large number of people joined this movement to express their anger against the British Raj. In spite of failure of this movement the post-1857 saw the emergence of new political consciousness in India which culminated in the establishment of the Indian National Congress in 1885 to carry forward the people's movement against the foreign rule. Socio-religious movements in 19'' century by reformers like Raja Rammohun Roy, Dayanand Saraswati, Swami Vivekananda and others initiated a new awakening among Indians. To check the growing nationalist sentiment the British government partitioned Bengal in 1905 and in protest Swadeshi movement was started. Then emergence of Gandhiji in Indian politics and his successful leadership to organize non-cooperation and civil disobedience movements posed a major challenge before the British government. Those who did not believe in Gandhian politics like the revolutionaries wanted to drive the British out of India through direct action against the British. Gandhiji gave the call for 'Quit India' in 1942 which was followed by formation of peoples' governments in some parts of India. Under the leadership of Subhas Chandra Bose, the Indian National Army made attempts to compel the British Government to leave India. In spite of its failure the Indian National Army aroused much support among the Indians. Thus by 1947 peoples movements in different forms against the British rule compelled the British to leave India. On 15th August 1947, India attained Independence. On 26th January 1950 its own Constitition came into force. Thus, at the cost of sacrifices made by many and through long heroic struggle India became a free nation.

6.6 KEY WORDS

Bolshevik Revolution : Bolsheviks were the members of the Marxist Russian Social Democratic Labour formed by Lenin. They led an insurgency of armed workers. soldiers and sailors. They succeeded in establishing the first soviet government. Prior to this, power was shared between a provisional government and the Petrograd Soviet.

Civil Disobedience : This was a political strategy adopted by Gandhiji and his followers.

The purpose was to oppose the rule of the British through mass protest. Civil disobedience was the refusal of the masses to obey government demands, and orders. This would often lead to arrest and punishment of the violators.

It was used as a non-violent means of impressing collective will of the people.

Nationalism : In simple terms nationalism refers to loyalty to one's country. Before the emergence of nation states, people owed allegiance to their local groups. This allegiance was weakened with the rise of large centralised states. There is no denying that shared religion, common ethnicity, political heritage and history drew people together in nationalist movements.

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Satyagraha : Literally, satyagraha means assertion or persuasion of truth. In effect, satyagraha was the philosophy of non-violent protest and passive resistance. It involves firm refusal to cooperate with anything that is known to be incorrect or wrong.

Swadeshi : In operational sense, swadeshi calls for self-governance, self-reliance and self-employment of people. In fact, swadeshi is a philosophy of life stressing the use of homegrown and home-crafted products.

6.7 HINTS/ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS EXERCISES

Check Your Progress 1

1) Non-cooperation and civil disobedience.

2) The main agenda of the second Round Table Conference in London was to discuss the scheme of constitutional reforms for India.

Check Your Progress 2

1) Jayaprakash Narayan and Narendra Dev.

2) Lord Mountbatten.