

Civil Disobedience Movement

[UPSC Notes]

What is the Civil Disobedience Movement?

The Civil Disobedience Movement began under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi's Dandi March. Gandhi in March 1930 left the Sabarmati Ashram in Ahmadabad on foot with 78 other Ashram members for Dandi, a village on India's western seacoast in Gujarat. They reached Dandi on April 6, 1930, where Gandhi broke the Salt Law. It was considered illegal to make salt in India as it was solely a British Government monopoly. The Salt Satyagraha led to the widespread acceptance of the Civil Disobedience Movement and the Salt March became symbolic of people's defiance of the British government policies.

Civil Disobedience Movement: Background

After the Chauri Chaura incident of February 1922, there was an abrupt withdrawal of the Non-Cooperation Movement by Gandhi. As a result, there was a demoralising effect on many Congress leaders and led to a sharp decline in the national movement. The 'No Changer' group, remained scattered and kept themselves aloof from the political developments. The No Changer group emphasised Gandhian Constructive Work in villages. On top of this, there were widespread communal riots in the mid-1920s, due to the dissolution of Hindu-Muslim unity during the Non-Cooperation Khilafat days. Even though the Hindu-Muslim Unity was never regained, there were many signs of growth of the anti-imperialist movement from 1928 onwards. The negotiations with Jinnah over the Nehru Report plan for an alternative constitution broke down in 1927-28 largely because of Hindu Mahasabha opposition and Jinnah's obstinacy in relation to it.

The Lahore Congress of 1929 authorized the Congress Working Committee (CWC) to launch a programme of civil disobedience including non-payment of taxes. And in 1930, Gandhi was invested with full powers to launch the Civil Disobedience Movement at a time and place of his choice by the CWC, at Sabarmati Ashram.

These were some of the main reasons that paved the way for the Civil Disobedience Movement.

What is Dandi March

Dandi March or the Salt March was an act of nonviolent civil disobedience led by Gandhi. It is also known by the name of Dandi Satyagraha. Gandhi started the movement on 12 March 1930 from his Sabarmati Ashram to Dandi beach, a coastal town of Dandi on the Arabian Sea. He was accompanied by his 78 selected followers. There Gandhi and his followers broke the law by manufacturing salt from the sea. The historic Dandi March, marked the beginning of the Civil Disobedience Movement in India. It began on March 12, 1930, and Gandhi broke the salt law by picking up a lump of salt at Dandi on April 6, 1930.

Salt Satyagraha Movement

The Congress Session of Lahore, 1929 elected Jawaharlal Nehru as the President of Congress. A resolution announcing that full independence was India's goal was passed at this session of the Congress. India demanded full independence. Indians were excited and were looking upto Gandhi to be the torch bearer. Gandhi launched the Salt Satyagraha Movement.

The Civil Disobedience Movement began by breaking the salt law. The Government had put an excise tax on salt which brought an enormous amount of money to the treasury. The government had a monopoly on manufacturing salt. The India Salt Act of 1882 gave the government monopoly over the collection and manufacture of salt. The salt tax was to be attacked and salt laws were to be broken. The Salt Satyagraha ended on April 5 at Dandi village, where Gandhi gave a signal to all Indians to manufacture salt illegally. He wanted the people to break the salt law openly and to prepare themselves for non-violent resistance to police action.

Through the Salt Satyagraha Movement, the programme of the movement was:

- Salt law should be violated everywhere.
- Foreign clothes should be burnt.
- No taxes should be paid to the government.
- Students should leave colleges and government servants should resign from service.
- Women should stage a Dharna at liquor shops, etc.

Importance of Salt during the Freedom Struggle

Before launching the Salt Satyagraha Movement, or the Civil Disobedience Movement Gandhi, for the last time tried to compromise. He placed his 'eleven points' of administrative reform and stated that if Lord Irwin accepted them there would be no need for agitation. The important demands were:

- The rupee-Sterling ratio should be reduced
- The salt tax should be abolished and also the government salt monopoly
- Salaries of the highest grade services should be reduced by half
- Military expenditure should be reduced by 50% to begin with
- Protection for Indian textiles and coastal shipping
- Land revenue should be reduced by half and made a subject of legislative control
- All Political prisoners should be discharged

The Indian National Congress would have preferred to fight against other laws like the land revenue laws, for example. But Gandhiji chose salt. Salt was a common item of consumption in every household, taxing salt would amount to taxing every section of the society. The salt was manufactured from saline seawater hence the imposition of heavy-duty was not only immoral but unfair to the poor. Thus salt was chosen, to symbolise a common man's defiance against the British rule that was increasingly becoming unethical and repressive in nature.

Gandhi followed a simple truth. Turn the mirror to the people and show them how they're being treated. And they will rise up along with you.

Effects of Civil Disobedience Movement on different Provinces

After Gandhi's symbolic breaking of the salt laws at Dandi, defiance of the laws spread throughout the country. Salt laws were defied in various provinces as well, under the leadership of various leaders.

- The Salt Satyagraha was led by C Rajagopalachari in Tamil Nadu. He organised a march from Thiruchirapalli to Vedaranniyam on the Tanjore (or Thanjavur) coast to break the salt law.
- K Kelappan, famed for the Vaikom Satyagraha, organised salt marches in Malabar.
- Midnapur, Arambagh and several rural pockets witnessed powerful movements developed around salt satyagraha and chowkidar tax.
- Sarojini Naidu, Imam Sahib and Manilal (Gandhi's son) raided the Dharasana Salt Works.
- District salt marches were organized in East and West Godavari, Krishna and Guntur. A number of sibirams (military-style camps) were set up to serve as the headquarters of the Salt Satyagraha.
- In Peshawar, Khan Abdul Gaffar Khan, also called Badshah Khan and Frontier Gandhi, had started the first Pushto political monthly Pukhtoon and had organised a volunteer brigade 'Khudai Khidmatgars', popularly known as the 'Red-Shirts', who were pledged to the freedom struggle and non-violence.

Civil Disobedience Movement: How Different Sections Responded to the Movement.

A novel and remarkable feature of the Civil Disobedience Movement was the widespread participation of women and the youth. Traders' associations and commercial bodies were active in implementing the boycott, especially in Tamil Nadu and Punjab. Middle-class Muslim participation was quite significant in Senhatta, Tripura, Gaibandha, Bagura and Noakhali. The weakest point of Nationalism during this point was Muslim participation, which remained low.

Features of the Civil Disobedience Movement

The most striking features of the Civil Disobedience Movement were:

- Foreign clothes were boycotted and there were protests against the liquor shops.
- There was a large involvement of women and the youth during the movement. Kasturba Gandhi, Kamladevi Chattopadhyay, Avantikabai Gokhale, Lilavati Munshi, and Hansaben Mehta were some of the prominent female leaders who led the satyagraha movement.
- Peasants said no to the paying of revenue and chowkidari taxes, and village officials resigned from their posts.
- people not only disapproved of cooperating but also asked to break the colonial laws.
- In many places, forest people violated forest laws, going into Reserved Forests to collect wood and graze cattle.

Drawbacks of the Civil Disobedience Movement

Though the Civil Disobedience Movement was a huge success and paved a way for the future independence movements in India, it had some drawbacks. These were:

- Dalits' participation in the Civil Disobedience movement was very limited, except in Maharashtra.
- Muslim political organizations in India were also Lukewarm in their response to the Civil Disobedience Movement.
- Congress was very close to Hindu Mahasabha. Hindus Mahasabha strongly opposed the efforts of compromise between Congress and the Muslim League.
- United struggle was not there. There was a contrast between the demands of industrialists and the working class and the rich peasants and poor peasants.

