



Why Did Individual Satyagraha Begin?

Description

The declaration of India as a belligerent in World War II by the British government, without any consultation with Indian political leaders, created a significant crisis in the Indian nationalist movement. This unilateral decision deeply offended the Congress, which viewed it as a blatant disregard for India's aspirations for self-rule. Despite this, the Indian National Congress expressed its willingness to support the Allied war effort, but only under certain conditions.

The Congress demanded the immediate establishment of a provisional national government at the Centre and a clear commitment from the British government regarding India's complete independence after the war. However, the British response, particularly the August Offer of 1940 presented by Viceroy [Lord Linlithgow](#), proved to be thoroughly inadequate. It offered dominion status in the distant future and expanded the Viceroy's Executive Council, but crucially failed to address the core demand for a national government or a definite timeline for independence. This impasse led to a period of intense deliberation within the Congress leadership, as the question of how to respond to British intransigence became paramount.

Reasons for the Satyagraha

The primary reason for the initiation of the Individual Satyagraha was the profound dissatisfaction of the Indian National Congress with Britain's handling of India's role in World War II. When Britain declared India a belligerent without consulting Indian leaders, it highlighted the colonial power structure that denied Indians any agency in matters concerning their own future. The Congress was keen to demonstrate that India's participation was not voluntary and that its people did not endorse the war without a firm promise of independence.

Following the outbreak of the war, the Congress offered conditional support. Their condition was clear: Britain must promise full independence after the war and form a genuinely representative national government immediately. This was seen as a chance to secure India's future while aiding the fight against fascism. However, the British government, preoccupied with the war, was unwilling to concede substantial power. Lord Linlithgow's August Offer of 1940 epitomised this reluctance. The offer

promised an expanded Executive Council with more Indians and the establishment of a War Advisory Council, alongside a promise to frame a new constitution after the war, but it completely sidestepped the demand for an immediate national government and a clear declaration of independence.

The rejection of the August Offer left the Congress in a precarious position. A full-scale mass movement during wartime was deemed impractical and potentially counterproductive by Mahatma Gandhi. He believed it could lead to excessive repression and might be seen as aiding the Axis powers, which was against the moral principles of the freedom struggle. Therefore, a new form of protest was needed that would register India's protest without actively hindering the British war effort in a major way. The Individual Satyagraha was conceived as this strategic middle path, a way to articulate India's political demands and moral stance against forced participation in the war.

Inception of Individual Civil Disobedience

Faced with the deadlock after the August Offer, Mahatma Gandhi proposed the concept of Individual Civil Disobedience. This was not intended to be a mass movement that would paralyse the government, but rather a symbolic, limited, and non-violent protest. The decision to launch this satyagraha was formally endorsed by the Congress Working Committee. The aim was to unequivocally state India's stance against the war and its underlying colonial exploitation, without creating an impression that India was exploiting Britain's wartime difficulties for selfish gain.

Gandhi's strategy was nuanced. He understood the British predicament during the war but was equally firm on India's right to freedom and non-participation in a war that was not its own. The Individual Satyagraha was designed to allow chosen individuals to publicly voice their opposition to the war, specifically highlighting the lack of consent from the Indian people. They would deliver anti-war speeches, advocating for the freedom to express their views against the war and to urge non-participation. The focus was on the individual's conscience and the moral assertion of rights, rather than overwhelming the administration through sheer numbers.

The nature of the protest was carefully planned. Selected satyagrahis would publicly declare that participation in the war was morally wrong and would call upon people not to support it. This was a direct challenge to the British government's war policies and a demand for freedom of speech, especially regarding opposition to the war. The movement represented a shift in tactics, moving away from large-scale, potentially disruptive movements towards a more controlled, ethical form of resistance that nonetheless carried significant symbolic weight.

Key Participants and Early Phase

The Individual Satyagraha commenced in October 1940, under the meticulous guidance of Mahatma Gandhi. Gandhi carefully selected individuals who embodied the principles of non-violence and commitment to the cause. The choice of the first satyagrahi was deeply symbolic and reflected Gandhi's emphasis on moral leadership and grassroots connection.

Acharya Vinoba Bhave, a devout Gandhian and an ardent advocate of non-violence, was chosen as the first person to offer Individual Satyagraha. He began his protest on October 17, 1940, by delivering an anti-war speech in the village of Pavnar, near Wardha in Maharashtra. His speech articulated the

Indian people's opposition to the war and called for non-cooperation with the British war efforts. As expected, he was arrested by the authorities, marking the official beginning of the movement. His selection underscored the spiritual and ethical dimensions that Gandhi sought to embed in the protest.

Following Vinoba Bhave, Jawaharlal Nehru, a prominent leader and future Prime Minister of India, was designated as the second satyagrahi. His participation brought the movement national prominence and demonstrated the unified front of the Congress leadership behind Gandhi's strategy. Nehru, too, made public declarations against the war and was subsequently arrested. The early phase of the satyagraha involved a careful selection process, where Gandhi personally approved the individuals who would offer satyagraha. These chosen leaders, after informing the district authorities of their intentions, would deliver an anti-war speech to a chosen audience, after which they expected to be arrested. This structured approach ensured that the protest remained non-violent and symbolic, adhering strictly to the ethical framework set by Gandhi.

The Delhi Chalo Movement

An important facet of the Individual Satyagraha was the 'Delhi Chalo' (March to Delhi) movement. This was not a separate movement but an integral part of the individual satyagraha strategy, designed to further amplify the message of protest. The plan was that if a satyagrahi, after offering an anti-war speech and expressing their opposition, was not immediately arrested by the authorities, they were then to embark on a march towards Delhi.

The directive to march towards the capital, Delhi, carried significant symbolic weight. Delhi was the seat of British power in India, and a march towards it represented a direct, albeit non-violent, challenge to that authority. It was a way for the satyagrahis to escalate their individual act of protest into a more visible public demonstration of discontent, while still maintaining the non-violent and individual nature of the movement. The march itself was intended to draw public attention and generate further awareness regarding the Congress's stance against the war and the British government's refusal to grant India self-rule.

The 'Delhi Chalo' movement underscored the non-violent discipline of the satyagrahis. It was a carefully controlled progression of protest, moving from localized individual acts to a more unified, directional expression of dissent. The intent was not to create chaos or engage in mass confrontation in Delhi, but to reach the capital to register the protest at the highest level of government if they were allowed to proceed. This approach ensured that the movement remained true to its character as a symbolic and ethical protest, avoiding any perception of being a widespread revolt aimed at disrupting the war effort.

Campaign Expansion and Trials

While designed as a limited and symbolic protest, the Individual Satyagraha gained momentum and expanded throughout various parts of India. What began with prominent leaders soon included a wider array of Congress workers and committed individuals. The campaign intensified considerably in 1941. As more individuals came forward to offer satyagraha, the British administration, despite facing the pressures of World War II, responded with arrests and convictions.

The expansion of the campaign demonstrated the widespread discontent among nationalist circles and the capacity of the Congress to mobilise moral and political resistance even under restrictive wartime conditions. Although the scale was nowhere near that of a mass civil disobedience movement, the continuous stream of individuals willing to defy the British orders served as a persistent reminder of India's unresolved political question. The British government, unwilling to be perceived as lenient during wartime, systematically arrested the satyagrahis.

During the course of the campaign, an approximate number of 20,000 participants were convicted and imprisoned. This figure, though not indicative of a mass uprising, clearly showed the extent to which the protest resonated and how determined the individuals were to express their dissent. The trials and imprisonments of these satyagrahis, many of whom were respected public figures or local leaders, generated further public sympathy for the nationalist cause and put continued pressure on the British administration to address India's demands. This point needs attention: the number of convictions highlights the government's response to what was fundamentally a symbolic and individual act, proving that even limited dissent was met with significant state power.

Analyzing the Satyagraha's Objectives

Understanding the objectives of the Individual Satyagraha is crucial to comprehending why it was initiated. It was not a typical mass movement aimed at overthrowing British rule immediately, but a strategically conceived protest with a clear dual purpose, reflecting Mahatma Gandhi's nuanced approach to political struggle during a global war.

The first, and perhaps most immediate, objective was to unequivocally express India's dissatisfaction with Britain's policy of unilaterally drawing India into World War II. The Congress wanted to make it clear that the Indian people did not consider themselves party to the war unless their demands for self-government were met. This was a moral statement, asserting India's right to self-determination and protesting against the colonial imposition of war obligations without consent. It allowed Indian political sentiment to be registered on an international platform without being accused of exploiting Britain's vulnerabilities.

The second objective was to offer the British government a chance to accept India's demands peacefully. By demonstrating a controlled, non-violent form of protest, Gandhi was, in a way, extending an olive branch. It was a symbolic gesture indicating that while India was firm in its demands, it preferred a negotiated settlement over a confrontational one during the war. This approach aimed to put moral pressure on Britain, challenging its democratic credentials while it was fighting for democracy against fascist regimes globally. This also served to keep the nationalist spirit alive and reminded the British that the demand for independence was not forgotten, even amidst the global conflict. The movement maintained a sustained, yet limited, pressure on the British, preventing the issue of Indian independence from being relegated to the background.

UPSC Perspective

From the perspective of the UPSC examinations, the Individual Satyagraha is a topic that requires both factual recall for Prelims and analytical depth for Mains.

For the **Prelims** examination, the focus is on specific details and key identifiers of the movement:

- **Key dates:** The movement officially started in October 1940.
- **Names of leaders:** Mahatma Gandhi initiated and guided it. Acharya Vinoba Bhave was the First Satyagrahi, and Jawaharlal Nehru was the Second Satyagrahi.
- **The 'Delhi Chalo' movement:** Candidates must know this was an integral part of the Individual Satyagraha, where unarrested satyagrahis were to march towards Delhi.
- **Approximate number of participants convicted:** Around 20,000 individuals were arrested and convicted during the campaign.

For the **Mains** examination, a deeper, analytical understanding is expected, focusing on the broader context and strategic implications:

- **Underlying causes of the protest:** This involves understanding the British unilateral declaration of India as a belligerent in WWII, the Congress's conditional offer of support, and the inadequacy and rejection of the August Offer of 1940. It also includes the impasse faced by Congress and the need for a form of protest that was neither full support nor full rebellion.
- **The strategic thinking behind a limited individual satyagraha:** Analysis should cover why Gandhi opted for individual rather than mass civil disobedience during wartime, considering factors like avoiding large-scale repression, not embarrassing Britain too much during the war, and maintaining the moral high ground.
- **Its dual purpose:** Explaining that the movement aimed to express India's political feeling against the war and Britain's policies, while simultaneously offering the British a chance for a peaceful resolution of India's demands.
- **Its significance in the broader nationalist movement:** This involves understanding how it kept the nationalist spirit alive, sustained pressure on the British, reaffirmed non-violence, and served as a moral protest, paving the way for future movements like the Quit India Movement.

Common Student Confusion

A common misunderstanding among students studying the Individual Satyagraha is to perceive it as a large-scale mass movement, similar in scope to previous Civil Disobedience movements or the later Quit India Movement. This view often leads to an inaccurate assessment of its objectives and impact.

The correction here is to clearly understand that the Individual Satyagraha was explicitly designed by Mahatma Gandhi as a symbolic protest with very specific individual actions and a clear dual purpose, rather than an attempt at widespread mass mobilisation. It was a controlled, non-violent protest where selected individuals offered civil disobedience, making anti-war speeches and, if not arrested, marching towards Delhi. The aim was not to paralyse the administration or create a widespread revolt, but to register India's moral and political opposition to being dragged into the war without consent, and to press for self-rule. It allowed the Congress to maintain its principled stand without actively disrupting the British war effort at a critical juncture, which Gandhi believed was a more ethical approach. Its limited nature was a conscious strategic choice, reflecting the unique circumstances of wartime.

Short Revision Points

- Started October 1940 by Congress under Mahatma Gandhi.
- Protested Britain's policy towards India, specifically forced participation in World War II.
- First Satyagrahi: Acharya Vinoba Bhave.
- Second Satyagrahi: Jawaharlal Nehru.
- Included 'Delhi Chalo' movement: trek to Delhi if not arrested.
- Campaign intensified in 1941; approximately 20,000 convicted.
- Dual purpose: expressed Indian political feeling against forced war participation, offered British a chance to accept demands peacefully.

FAQs

1. When and why was the Individual Satyagraha started?

The Individual Satyagraha was started in October 1940. It was initiated by the Indian National Congress, under Mahatma Gandhi's leadership, to protest Britain's unilateral decision to involve India in World War II without consultation and the subsequent rejection of Congress's demands for immediate self-government and a post-war independence commitment.

2. Who were the first two individuals to offer satyagraha?

Acharya Vinoba Bhave was the first individual to offer satyagraha, followed by Jawaharlal Nehru as the second.

3. What was the two-fold purpose of the Individual Satyagraha movement?

The two-fold purpose was, firstly, to express India's deep dissatisfaction with Britain's war policy and its refusal to grant self-rule, thereby making a moral statement. Secondly, it aimed to offer the British government an opportunity to accept India's demands peacefully, acting as a form of moral pressure during a global conflict.

The Individual Satyagraha marked a critical phase in India's freedom struggle, showcasing Mahatma Gandhi's strategic brilliance in navigating complex political landscapes during wartime. It powerfully communicated India's resolve for self-rule without escalating into a mass confrontation, ensuring that the question of Indian independence remained at the forefront of political discourse. For those preparing for the [Civil Services Examination](#), a deep understanding of such movements is vital. Comprehensive guidance for these intricate historical events can be found at institutions like [SHRI RAM IAS](#), which is widely regarded as the best [ias coaching in delhi](#) for its focused approach and expert faculty.