

## **THE UNITED STATES AND THE FREEDOM MOVEMENT IN INDIA**

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### **Abstract**

*In this paper, the topic covering US and India during Indian freedom struggle is presented in a way that unveils that contribution was a sum total of geopolitical strategies, political ideology and some individual policies that were mutually formed than by direct inputs. The American government, however, did not take sides but Indian leaders residing in the United States and other people of Indian origin participated actively to support Indian freedom struggle. Owing to visitors like Ulysses S. Grant, Mark Twain, William Jennings Bryan from America and freedom fighters like Swami ji Vivekanand and Rabindranath Tagore of India and India's struggle towards independence, slow but the American public was brought more into realization about India. While India independence was fast approaching, citizens in the United States and leaders, religious individuals like Reverend John Haynes Holmes among them, called for freedom in India despite some scholars and missionaries supporting India. The World War II was also responsible for the continuation of the relationship between India and the USA as India was of significant use in terms of strategic warfare. This led to the ministerial involvement, which in turn forced the United States to put pressure on Britain to grant more autonomy to India. Students would though learn that the interactions the US had with the Indian nationalists and partly with the influence of president Roosevelt who supported the India's right to Self rule; the United States had an indirect involvement in the liberation of India. Finally during the post World War period diplomatic relations were recognized and Indian envoy started going to America even before the official independence of India. The shed slowly surface the political diplomacy between the two countries that is being witnessed today.*

**Keywords:** Indo-U.S. Relations, Indian Independence, Mahatma Gandhi, Geopolitical Interests American Influence, Atlantic Charter, Indian Nationalists, World War II Diplomacy

### **Introduction**

The occurrence of the Second World War was also a landmark in India's interaction with the US, placing the country in the practices and visions of America for the first time at a high relevant level and for the first time in a long-term basis. The increasing expansion of the Japanese imperialism was rather worrisome; it contributed to the further expansion of its military power in Southeast Asia. Moreover, there is indication that in 1944, with the help of Subhas Chandra Bose a leader of Indian National congress, desiring for freedom of India the Japan forces marched forward toward Indian territories. Shanghai in China and Bose created the Indian National Army (INA) to support the Axis powers in his mind as the latter's victory with the goal of attaining freedom from British colonialism in India. The Japanese having taken most of the SE Asia advanced towards eastern India right up to the frontier of India. Finally, in June 1941, they were driven back near to Imphal in the area belonging to Manipur, but the menace was not far off.

Moreover, India has also supported another front of war, which was China Burma India theater of World War Two. This region thus joined the list of strategic areas for the Allies in their battle against Japan. Thousands of American soldiers were deployed or transited through the India

theatre, and this, therefore cemented the importance of the country in the war effort. The involvement in the war therefore shifted the geopolitics of the country, hence the importance in the eyes of America and Britain.

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Therefore, More so, American influence before the independence of India was restricted and indirectly. The Federal government of America as a whole provided an indifferent policy towards Indian affairs seeking instead neutrality. Yet it was predisposed to side with Britain so far as information reporting on developments was done by British channels. This EntpretenShis was due to the fact that the writing of these accounts was informed by British approach, reflecting the geopolitical and diplomatic ideologies of such type of writings which in the American context of the time was of pivotal support to the British Empire. However, there were few voices in the American society that supported India's independence, but the direct governmental intervention was not observed.

For all the ignorance of and indifference to the nationalist struggle in India on the part of the most Americans, at least one image came through strongly, if not always clearly. That was the image of Mahatma Gandhi. It was a confused image, ranging all the way from admiration for the little man in the loin cloth who defied the might of Britain the Indian David facing the mighty British Goliath-rallied the Indian people in support of the independence struggle and taught them the methods of civil disobedience (which they often departed from, much to Gandhi's distress), to distrust of the "naked fakir, to use Churchill's words, who spoke in parables about "Truth" (with a capital 'T) and ahimsa and satyagraha and created pro-blems for Britain and its vast empire at a time when, in American eyes, far greater threats than those posed by a dying colonilism were appearing on the international scene. But on the whole, Gandhiji's image was a favourable one among those Americans who were at all concerned with world events.

As George V. Allen, a former American ambassador to India, wrote in 1968, "Various forces combined to form the American attitude toward Indian independence, including the press, Congress, missionaries, scholars, Indian nationalists living in the U. S., and a variety of officials."<sup>2</sup> Among the groups actively interested in promoting the cause of Indian freedom were returned missionaries and other clergymen and Indians residing in the United States.

One of the most alert and authoritative personalities among all the religious leaders who spread awareness about the Indian freedom struggle was the Reverend John Haynes Holmes, who was the pastor of the community church in New York. In 1921 he preached a famous sermon on Gandhi, whom he called "the greatest man in the world today". From his pulpit and on many public rostrums, he praised Gandhi and other Indian leaders. A number of other clergymen and lay leaders joined in the same cause. It is difficult to ascertain whether they had much influence on American attitudes or policies. A. Guy Hope, who has made a careful study entitled 'America and Swaraj, thinks that they did. He states that "... in combination with the pressure of other elements of American interest, these articulated opinions contributed to an atmosphere which helped to move the government in the direction of policies encouraging the nationalists to seek, and Great Britain to grant, a greater measure of self-rule."<sup>3</sup>

Undoubtedly, Indians living in the United States were "the most ardent, persistent, and perhaps, the most effective element pleading the Indian cause in America"<sup>4</sup> Some of them became involved in revolutionary activities in ways that created embarrassment for the U.S. government and difficulties for them in the United States. In February 1914, the first conference of Indian revolutionaries abroad was held in Stockton, California. California was an appropriate venue for their meeting, for more of them lived in that State than in any other part of the United States. The best known of the revolutionary movements, Ghadar Party, mainly a Sikh Party, had its headquarters in California. It attracted considerable attention in the second and third decades of the present century, and its activities have been the subject of a number of publications, from propagandistic tracts to scholarly studies. A more moderate and far more influential Indian association was the famous India League of America, which by the late 1930s, under its second president and dominant figure in the decade preceding independence, J.J. Singh, became the spearhead for the efforts of the Indian community in America to stir up interest in and sympathy and support for the nationalist struggle in India.

The relationship between the United States and India began in the period of World War II, which was a beginning of a more important period in history of both states, and India was in the last phase of its freedom movement under British rule. The first massive contact of Indians with Americans occurred during this period, about 100000 American soldiers arrived in different parts of the sub continent for long or short periods depending on the nature of stop over or enduring the entire CBI, had transit via India of having to transfer from the Atlantic to the Pacific theatre. Furthermore, about 150 000 American soldiers came through India thus producing a significant meeting point between the two countries. This period formed a better relationship of socio-political nature between India and the U.S. but also important and indicative of the process that led up to India's independence. The experience of the American GIs was a mixed one, as were the reactions of the Indians to them. Wartime encounters do not provide ideal conditions for balanced

relationships between the inhabitants of a country and foreign forces, especially if the forces are cooperating with an external ruling power.

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Roosevelt for example from the very beginning, intended that the charter should be applicable to all but this was not Churchill's view. Churchill said that the Charter does not concern India which led to criticism in India itself, in the United States and in the British Parliament. In December 1941, Roosevelt attempted to broach the issue to Churchill, where he later recommended to Britain to come up with 'concessions' to the struggling Indian nationalists. Thus Roosevelt's inquiry, just like many of the inquiries made by other American presidents, was distinctly "along the usual American lines," in this case pushing for the secretary of state's recognition of self-determination of India. However, this Churchillily believed this as an intrusion in Britain's imperial business. He became irate as a result of Roosevelt questioning him and hence, Roosevelt did not take up the issue with him again in subsequent meetings with the British Prime Minister.<sup>5</sup> However, Roosevelt did not give up in the other ways. The Johnson and Phillips missions, which were rather unorthodox in terms of conventional diplomacy, attracted a great deal of attention to India. They were subsequently the subjects of numerous accounts, including the personal reminiscences of Phillips.<sup>6</sup> The British did not object officially to the missions, but it was obvious that they viewed them with some apprehension and disapproval. Phillips, in

particular, fell into disfavour with Churchill and the British Viceroy in India, Lord Linlithgow, because of his efforts-which were unavailing because of British refusal to meet with Gandhi, who was then in jail, along with most of the other top leaders of the Indian nationalist movement.<sup>7</sup>

Roosevelt was known to be a supporter of greater concessions to India, leading to independence. This position was appreciated in India and was often referred to by Nehru and other leaders of independent India. He was openly sympathetic with the Indian aspirations for greater autonomy, but he was hesitant to press their cause. "Cordell Bull in his memoirs recorded that it was because of the fear of offending British sensibilities that the United States had to take a rather un-helpful attitude not only on independence but on food aid.<sup>8</sup> The American failure to respond to India's request for food aid during the terrible famine of 1943 was mainly in deference to the desires of the British. But certainly Roosevelt's position and policies regarding India's struggle for independence were not "unhelpful". As an Indian scholar wrote 15 years after the end of World War II, "in the long run, Roosevelt's concern with the Indian question was bound to accelerate the march towards independence, especially since the concern was shared by non-official opinion."<sup>9</sup>

The contacts that were created by USA and India during the Second World War were carried forward after the war and had impact on some of the diplomatic dynamic related to the Indian independence in 1947. In the period of the war, the United States made lots of commitments to India and many development assists that helped in the shaping of the bond between the two nations. Nevertheless, the goodwill created in the early period by the agents of India contributed towards the formation of the formal diplomatic relations at the time when India was on the brink of its independence.

During the same year 1946, when India was still under the colonizer's rule, an interim government was formed with the Indian political icon Jawaharlal Nehru at the helm. This government aimed at reaching out to the US and other superpowers of the world as India geared towards independence. The first political act of the interim government was to appoint Asaf Ali as the first Indian ambassador to USA. His appointment was soon to create a formal diplomatic relationship between India and United States as the country got closer to its independence. Moreover on the 5th of July 1947, that is one month before Indian attainment of independence, the United States also moved to cement the long-standing relationship that was between Britain and the soon to be independent Indian subcontinent. Regarding the external affairs, a post-war commercial mission to India led by Henry Grady was nominated as the first ambassador of United States of India. His appointment reflected the enhancement of the relation of both countries and the commitment towards increasing the diplomatic as well as economic relationship with each other. This was the dawn of diplomatic relations between United States and India that have continued up to this time based on mutual regard. Each of these sides realized that it was crucial to open and develop diplomatic and economic relations with such a partner in the conditions of the coming post-war world. These features are not less effective in today sustaining the friendly relation building process that is going on between United States and India. Ironically, Nehru once said, "We extend our greetings to the people of the United States of America who have been endowed with a great responsibility in the world affairs". This acknowledgment affirms that the United States had an influence in the world and proves that the relations between two countries

are developing. These early beginnings helped in establishing relations between India and the US that later on further cemented a closer diplomatic and strategic partnership in fields such as trade, security and even cultural exchange.

In summary, the U.S. stance was one of restraint tempered by indirect support. Its actions reflected a balancing act between maintaining ties with Britain, promoting its anti-colonial ideals, and responding to global expectations, making its role in India's freedom movement significant yet understated.

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3. *Hope, America and Swaraj*, p. 17.
4. *Ibid*.
5. Churchill, *The Hinge of Fate*, pp. 209, 220-31.
6. See *Hope, America and Swaraj*, Chap 4, "British-American Interaction", M.S. Venkataraman and B.K. Shrivastava, *Quit India: The American Response to the 1942 Struggle* (New Delhi Vikas Publishing House, 1979), William Phillips, *Ventures in Diplomacy* (Portland, Maine: The Antheonson Press, 1952).
7. When Phillips met Churchill in the British Embassy in Washington in May 1943, following his recall to present his views on the situation in India and to press the case for British concessions, Churchill exploded. "My answer to you," he exclaimed, "i, Take India if that is what you want. Take it by all means. But I warn you that if you open the door a crack there will be the greatest bloodshed in all history" Quoted in *Hope, America and Swaraj*, p. 81.
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