CASE: P-XX
DATE: 04/21/26

DRAMATICALLY NON-VIOLENT

In January 1930, Mohandas Gandhi faces one of the most critical decisions of his political career. The Indian National Congress has just agreed to a declaration of *Purna Swaraj*, `complete independence' and to push for democratic rights to self-determination from the British Empire. Gandhi has been tasked with drafting the public declaration, scheduled for January 26, and to launch a new civil disobedience campaign at a time and manner of his choosing.

Gandhi must navigate a series of crucial strategic tensions that beset many political social movements. He must first find a platform that unifies an incredibly diverse subcontinent in favor of democratic self-determination rather than reifies divisions and fears. He must build a movement that navigates the tension between the attractiveness of violence and direct action and the seeming pedestrianism of non-violence, between attracting large numbers to the movement to bring attention and pressure to bear on the Empire versus keeping a focused, disciplined campaign, and between decentralizing authority and thus harnessing the creativity of grassroots campaigns versus keeping a strong hierarchical structure that can keep the movement disciplined, peaceful and on-message. He also must make a series of tactical decisions—specifically where and how to implement his civil disobedience campaign.

The wrong choices could fracture India along religious, caste, class, or regional lines, destroying the freedom movement and potentially triggering religious or caste violence. The right choice could leverage people power into building the foundations of a potentially durable democracy.

A MODERN BUT MEDIEVAL UPBRINGING

Gandhi was born in Porbandar, a small princely state on the coast of Gujarat, a state with both a history of religious conflict, but also storied religious traditions of `*ahimsa'* or non-violence. Porbandar itself was a medieval port city that, like others, had developed distinctive institutions for supporting inter-ethnic business relationships, trust and tolerance. With medieval overseas trade coordinated around Muslim pilgrimages, Hindus and Muslims in the medieval ports of India had enjoyed robust complementarities—incentives to do business with each other that stretched back more than a thousand years. They had developed organizations, norms and institutions to build trust and maintain tolerance. Gandhi's mother, for example, was of the Pranami sect, originating in the medieval port of Jamnagar, known for its syncretic traditions, with a Quran kept within the temple.[i] Porbandar housed numerous Muslim trading communities, including the Daudi Bohras, the word "Bohra" originating from the Gujarati verb "vohrvun", to trade. Gandhi himself had got his first break working for a Muslim Porbandari merchant in South Africa. Other medieval port towns, with similar traditions of inter-religious trust and peaceful coexistence, such as Surat and Ankleshwar, dot Gujarat's coast, and that of much of the rest of India.

Saumitra Jha prepared this case as the basis for class discussion rather than to illustrate either effective or ineffective handling of an administrative situation. This case draws heavily on joint work, particularly the book project "How Nonviolence Works" with Rikhil Bhavnani (Wisconsin).

Copyright © 2026 by the Board of Trustees of the Leland Stanford Junior University.

In South Africa (1893-1914), Gandhi attempted to create similar intergroup cooperation under systematic oppression. Drawing eclectically from Indian traditions of ahimsa, Tolstoyian philosophy and the example of the Suffragette movement, Gandhi's innovations involved developing a new set of techniques of non-violent resistance he called *satyagraha* (or truth force).

PAST PHASES OF THE INDEPENDENCE MOVEMENT

Having enjoyed some success with the satyagraha approach in South Africa, Gandhi returned to India during World War 1. There Gandhi found the Indian freedom movement in disarray. On one hand, there was the Indian National Congress.[ii] This elite group, financed and dominated by affluent English-speaking lawyers and businessmen, pushed for greater Indian consultation on government within the British Empire. In parallel were regional groups of nationalists who sought independence, some countenancing violent acts, such as seeking to assassinate the Viceroy. In doing so, a number of these regional nationalist groups were explicitly following the playbooks of European nationalism.[iii]

One important example was that of the prominent nationalist Bal Gangadhar Tilak. Based in Poona, near Bombay in Western India, Tilak used his newspaper, *Kesari* [Saffron], to propagate nationalism, most notably by adopting Hindu symbolism, and promoting the exemplar of the Maratha ruler Shivaji Bhosle who had fought the Mughal empire. Both of these symbols appear to have been aimed at forging a religious-based "imagined community" and coincided with Hindu-Muslim rioting. However *Kesari*'s circulation remained limited regionally. Even among Hindus, Tilak's attempts to propagate Shivaji, a local ruler, as a symbol of nationalist resistance in Bengal, on the other side of the subcontinent, met with little success. Bengal itself was viewed by the British as a key center for nationalism in this period, mainly focused on an urbanized affluent elite, sometimes known as the *bhadralok*, or "respectable ones." [iv] India's incredible social, religious and ethnic diversity made uniting around commonly agreed-upon historical or religious exemplars a difficult task indeed.

This first phase—combining a small and almost exclusively elite-led Congress agitating mostly peacefully even while low-level violent sedition, bomb-throwing, and other acts of terrorism were perpetrated, mainly by those outside the Congress organization—lasted until around 1919.

In 1919, with Tilak in jail and other leaders indisposed, Gandhi was however given a small window of opportunity to reform the Congress. He introduced techniques of nonviolent civil disobedience to the subcontinent as well as pushing for, and obtaining, a broad reform of the Congress organizational structure.

In a form of organizational *jujitsu*, Gandhi used the British jails to select leaders for the movement who were committed to non-violence. Would-be leaders were required to court arrest, engaging in nonviolent acts of civil disobedience. The sentences often involved hard labor, and the willingness to make such sacrifices became seen as a screen for leaders and thus a credential within the movement. Following Gandhi's reforms in 1920, members of these committees of the Indian National Congress were also required to give up any positions that they enjoyed with the British government, and so the many lawyers, constituting 65% of the leadership, would have to give up the practice of law in British courts if they want to retain their leadership positions. In their place, a grassroots movement of elections from below was put in place. [v] Congress members at all levels had to give up any uniforms or weapons, and had to commit to spinning cotton yarn for an hour every day, the time spent doing so representing a costly prospect for both

rich and poor alike. Rather than doing a come-one come-all membership drive, the movement focused instead on sacrifice, commitment and discipline.

The reorganization of the Congress coincided with Gandhi's first mass satyagraha campaign in India. This campaign had two disparate aims. The first was to challenge the post-World War I Sedition Act that made nationalist protests illegal. The second was to build an organization that spanned religious lines. In particular, a significant number of Indian Muslims feared for the fate of the Ottoman Sultan, the titular Caliph of Sunni Islam, who had been on the losing side during the Great War, forming the *Khilafat* (Caliphate) conference to pressure Britain into maintaining the Caliph's authority. Arguing that national unity required mass mobilization of both Hindus and Muslims on this issue, Gandhi asked "*how can twenty-two crore [ten million] Hindus have peace and happiness if eight crore of their Muslim brethren are torn in anguish?*"

Mobilized as a cross-religious organization, the Khilafat/ Non-Cooperation movement did see significant Hindu-Muslim joint non-violent mobilization, though it was largely limited to urban areas. An important catalyst was a sequence of protests along the 8,000 mile whistle-stop pre-planned tour of the Prince of Wales in 1921-22, who came to India as part of a mission to thank the subcontinent for its support during the War, and brought with him the British and international press as well. This was a valuable opportunity for the protestors seeking to penetrate the domestic censorship bubble the Empire had sought to create within India.

An important test of the movement came on 4 February 1922. A joint *Khilafat*/non-cooperation movement nonviolent protest in the town of Chauri Chawra was fired upon by police, leading to the deaths of three protestors. The demonstrators became a mob, which burned down the police station, killing 22 policemen. Gandhi immediately called a halt to the non-cooperation movement and was effective in implementing this nationwide, but faced lasting criticism for the ensuing loss of momentum.

The government of the new Republic of Turkey, under Kemal Ataturk, further deposed and exiled the Sultan, removing the reason for the *Khilafat* movement to exist. In the aftermath of these twin events, there was a breakdown of cooperation between the *Khilafat* movement and the Congress, even as local political figures sought to take advantage of the new era of mobilization. The result was the first major wave of Hindu-Muslim rioting in South Asian history, including in towns that had never seen such civil violence before.

Ultimately, the non-cooperation movement and the *Khilafat* agitation failed to achieve significant reforms. Since 1923, the Congress has only engaged in isolated small-scale agitations, including a limited campaign in Bardoli, Gujarat to protest increases in land revenue in 1928. However, nation-wide Congress membership has been declining, and many believe that India's pro-democracy movement might soon be defunct.

THE CURRENT CRISIS: ECONOMIC COLLAPSE AND POLITICAL OPPORTUNITY

What the Congress leadership needs is a set of incentives that would make independence more attractive beyond the salons of the elite and the ideologically committed. One problem it faces is that India's abundant factor is agriculture, and thus the majority of Indians employed in the agricultural sector have arguably benefited from the higher relative prices for agricultural goods available abroad under Britain's policy of trade openness as compared to the platform of protectionism promised by the industrialist-supported Congress.

Yet, the Wall Street crash of October 1929 has triggered a global depression that fundamentally alters the strategic landscape. The Great Depression has affected a key advantage of Empire – the gains from trade. Farmers are switching from growing non-food crops for export to growing food for subsistence. Britain's commitment to the gold standard and the fixed exchange rate between pound and rupee is also creating severe economic pressures in India. As global commodity prices collapse, Indian agricultural exports earn fewer pounds, but the rupee remains pegged at 1 shilling 6 pence—the rate established in 1927 when commodity prices were far higher. This overvalued rupee creates a devastating scissors effect for Indian peasants and producers. Prices they receive for agricultural commodities have fallen by 30-50% since 1929. Yet taxes they must pay, denominated in rupees pegged to gold, remain constant—meaning the real tax burden has increased dramatically. A peasant who could pay land revenue by selling 100 kilos of wheat in 1928 now must sell 150-200 kilos for the same revenue payment.

The difficult circumstances are reflected viscerally for many Indian households in gold. Gold, seen as a store of wealth and emergency security, and particularly so for women, has a special status in many Indian traditions. Since Roman times, commentators like Pliny the Elder have commented on how India has been a sink of the world's gold, with many Indians preferring gold to other trade goods. Yet, for one of the first times in history, India has become a net exporter of gold, as Indian families sell off their jewelry to stave off financial ruin.

The currency situation reveals complex imperial politics. British officials in India, witnessing the economic devastation firsthand, have advocated for the devaluation of the rupee, using a strategy similar to what the Dominions of Canada, Australia, and New Zealand, with their autonomous parliaments, have adopted against the pound. However, authorities in London have refused, maintaining the rigid peg despite India's different economic circumstances. This decision—made in London over Indian objections—demonstrates how, in hard times in particular, imperial priorities do not align with pressing Indian economic needs.[vi]

India's profound diversity also creates both opportunities and dangers. Economic stratification divides landlords from peasants, urban from rural. The subcontinent is divided by caste, sect, language, region and religion. And since the failure of the 1920-1922 Khilafat / Non-Cooperation Movement, Hindu-Muslim tensions have increased dramatically.

THREE CORE STRATEGIC TENSIONS

Tension 1: Attracting an Audience—Violence vs. Non-Violence, Dehumanization vs. Humanization

Gandhi confronts a common fundamental dilemma in how to attract attention and mobilize commitment. Younger up-and-coming Congress members like Subhash Chandra Bose, and members of other revolutionary groups disagree on the non-violent approach, arguing that Britain will never yield to peaceful protest. They point to the success of violent uprisings elsewhere and view Gandhi's non-violence as impractical idealism. They see violence as offering certain advantages: it commands immediate attention, demonstrates willingness to sacrifice, and can directly threaten British interests. Revolutionary rhetoric that dehumanizes the British as evil irredeemable oppressors also can serve to mobilize intense commitment and justify extreme sacrifice.

However, violence can also create severe problems. Fundamentally, it justifies British repression and may alienate sympathy by British and international audiences crucial for constraining British responses. It favors those groups with violent organizational capacity and weapons access, creating internal hierarchies

that fragment movements. Violence also risks triggering the communal conflict that has followed previous mobilizations.

Non-violence offers different advantages: it can maintain broader coalitions since anyone can participate regardless of physical strength; it has the potential to create moral pressure on opponents and international audiences; it makes repression costlier for authorities who must justify violence against peaceful protesters. But non-violence faces its own challenges—how to mobilize support and generate sufficient drama and confrontation to command attention without the spectacle that violent us-versus-them conflict often provides.

Related to this is the dehumanization vs. humanization dilemma. Dehumanizing rhetoric portraying British as evil oppressors may help mobilize supporters more intensely but may lead toward violence and makes reaching a negotiated settlement much harder. Gandhi favors humanizing opponents—treating the British people themselves as a key audience who must be partners in any lasting peace. However, some Indians who have suffered repression may reject such appeals to British conscience as naive.

For attracting international media attention despite British censorship, Gandhi needs dramatic actions that capture global attention, are visual enough to translate across cultures, and sustained enough to maintain coverage. But spectacular drama risks the violence that would undermine moral authority. The campaign must demonstrate courage and confrontation (not passive weakness) while remaining fundamentally peaceful. How can Gandhi create sufficient drama to break through censorship and mobilize commitment while maintaining absolute non-violent discipline and keeping open possibilities for a settlement with the British?

Tension 2: Numbers vs. Focus—Scale vs. Discipline

Mass participation creates power through numbers—millions in the streets are hard to ignore and cannot all be jailed. But larger numbers mean less institutional control. In small disciplined groups, Gandhi can ensure intensive training and commitment to non-violence. As movements scale to millions, such control becomes impossible. Some participants will lack proper training, aligned goals, commitment to non-violence, or self-control under provocation. *Agents provocateurs* could also infiltrate to incite violence. And a single incident of violence could discredit the entire movement, justifying massive repression. Yet without massive numbers, the movement may lack the power to pressure Britain and show the limits of the legitimacy of its Empire.

The 1928 Bardoli Satyagraha demonstrated the advantages of focus—limited geographic scope enabled tight organizational control, intensive monitoring of non-violent discipline, and some limited success. But it remained regional, failing to demonstrate national unity or mass support for independence. British could isolate, suppress or simply ignore regional movements. Conversely, the 1920-1922 movement achieved significant scale and cross-ethnic mobilization but ended in a wave of religious violence.

The challenge is achieving scale while maintaining discipline. How can Gandhi mobilize large numbers across India's vast geography and diversity while ensuring non-violent discipline? The economic crisis creates potential for mass mobilization based on material suffering—peasants cannot pay taxes, workers lose jobs, artisans face bankruptcy. But economic issues can divide as much as unite, pitting peasants against landlords, different sectors against each other. Different regions have different land revenue systems. Urban and rural populations have different grievances.

Gandhi must find a focal point issue that affects all Indians regardless of religion, caste, class, or region; is clearly unjust and British-imposed; allows large scale participation; is symbolically powerful; connects to economic suffering; yet avoids dividing Indians along existing cleavages. The issue he chooses should ideally enable both scale (large-scale participation) and focus (clear, simple rules that are easy to monitor).

Tension 3: Hierarchy vs. Decentralized Organization—Control vs. Autonomy

Gandhi must decide how to structure the movement organizationally. Hierarchical, centralized control offers advantages: clear lines of authority, consistent messaging, ability to enforce discipline through sanctions, and coordinated timing of actions. Though other non-violent leaders are emerging through the credentialing process of British jails, Gandhi in 1930 still occupies an unusual position as a bridge between communities and the architect of nonviolence. The Congress organization, with its provincial and local committees, also offers potential infrastructure for hierarchical control.

However, centralized control faces severe limitations in India's context. Communication technology is limited—telephone service is sparse, telegraph is controlled by British authorities who can intercept messages, and transportation is slow. Getting consistent instructions to Congress committees across India and ensuring everyone understands and follows directives is logistically daunting. British authorities can decapitate centralized movements by arresting top leaders, as they certainly will arrest Gandhi immediately upon any major action. If the movement depends entirely on hierarchical control, removing leaders could paralyze the effort.

Decentralized organization offers different advantages: it can continue after leaders are arrested; it allows local adaptation to varying circumstances; it empowers local populations and builds sustainable organizing capacity; and it makes suppression difficult since there is no single point of control to attack. The port city model Gandhi grew up with showed how institutions could enable cooperation without rigid hierarchy—different merchant communities governed themselves but coordinated through shared mechanisms.

However, decentralization creates risks: different regions may act inconsistently or at cross-purposes; monitoring non-violence becomes nearly impossible; the movement may fragment into disconnected local actions that British can suppress piecemeal; without visible central leadership, international media struggle to create coherent narratives. Most critically, given the historical pattern where failed mobilization leads to communal violence, a poorly coordinated decentralized movement that fragments could trigger local conflict as well.

The organizational structure must somehow balance these competing needs. Can Gandhi design organizational structures that leverage both hierarchy (for discipline and coordination) and decentralization (for creativity and scale)?

STRATEGIC AND TACTICAL OPTIONS

As he sits in his Ashram on the shores of the Sabarmati river in Ahmedabad, Gandhi has first to decide on a **platform:** what to put into the *Declaration of Independence*. As in the US, this platform for the movement will need to unite people across India’s remarkable diversity, and inspire them to stand up for freedoms and rights that may seem abstract and unfamiliar to many.

He must also choose a **tactical basis** for his movement. There are four key options on the table.

Option A: Limited Regional Satyagraha (the Bardoli Model) offers focused, disciplined action in a single district. Peasants refuse to pay increased land revenue, maintaining strict non-violence. Limited scope enables tight control (solving hierarchy vs. decentralization by choosing hierarchy and focus over scale). In the current economic context, tax resistance addresses genuine hardship from collapsed commodity prices. However, this fails to demonstrate national unity, can be isolated by British authorities, and creates class divisions between landlords and peasants. It addresses numbers vs. focus by choosing focus, but sacrifices the scale needed for national impact. For attracting audience, it provides a clear narrative but limited drama for international media.

Option B: Mass Demonstration in a Major City or Cities He could try to mobilize hundreds of thousands in the major cities of Calcutta, Bombay, Madras or the almost complete capital city of New Delhi for dramatic confrontation. This addresses scale (massive numbers) and audience (compelling visuals for international media, concentrated media attention). However, urban demonstrations risk violence—large crowds are difficult to control, provocations are easy, communal violence is potentially more likely when diverse communities gather in confined spaces. The hierarchy vs. decentralization tension is acute: tight control is needed but difficult in massive crowds; one violent incident, potentially instigated by *agents provocateurs*, could discredit everything. British can arrest leaders preemptively, ban gatherings, or use any violence to justify brutal suppression. The urban focus excludes 90% of rural Indians. Without sustained action, the pressure could dissipate after one day. Ultimately, like with the other options, the British could also decide to simply ignore the demonstrations.

Option C: A Long March from Sabarmati Ashram to a symbolically significant final destination is a novel, but as yet untested, approach. It addresses numbers vs. focus through iterative scaling—beginning with Gandhi and trained disciples (tight discipline), adding participants gradually along the route (building scale), if the route can be chosen so that fellow-travellers can indeed by found along its path. The journey creates a sustained media narrative and the potential for confrontation which media outlets may find attractive. The British authorities will have to decide each day whether to violently stop a peaceful march that has not broken any reasonable law, or to allow it to gain momentum and achieve its end- objective.

However, critical questions remain: What route and destination? Toward the coast is manageable distance (240 miles, three weeks) but why march along the coast to the sea? What is the best itinerary? What happens at the destination? The march needs a dramatic, participatory conclusion—some specific act of civil disobedience that is clearly illegal, allows mass participation, is symbolic of broader grievances, and is non-violent by design. Most critically, what issue justifies the march? What focal point connects economic suffering to concrete action while uniting rather than dividing?

Option D: Coordinated Nationwide Civil Disobedience calls for simultaneous breaking of unjust laws across India, creating maximum pressure since British cannot suppress resistance everywhere at once. This addresses scale powerfully and demonstrates national scope. Different regions could violate laws relevant to their contexts. The economic crisis enables tax non-payment or boycotts addressing genuine grievances. However, coordination across vast distances with limited communication is difficult. And trying to do everything at the same may mean prioritizing nothing. Without central control, violence becomes likely somewhere. Which laws to violate exposes divisions—for example, tax non-payment may divide landlords from peasants. Without visible central action, the movement may fragment, and given

the historical pattern, poorly coordinated nationwide action that fragments could trigger communal violence.

THE DECISION

Whatever Gandhi chooses must build an organizational structure that persists beyond the campaign, uniting groups and preventing the post-mobilization communal violence that has followed previous movements. The medieval port cities of his childhood showed how diverse groups can cooperate through institutional design, but Gandhi must manufacture this across a subcontinent in months under repression.

If he chooses poorly, the movement could fracture along religious lines, violence could justify repression, economic issues could divide supporters, limited action would appear weak, or failed mobilization could demoralize freedom efforts while triggering communal violence. If he chooses wisely, mass participation could demonstrate genuine popular support, sustained discipline could prove non-violence effective, international and British attention could constrain British repression, economic suffering could channel into organized resistance, and India may yet win the right to decide its own destiny.

What should Gandhi do? What platform balances the three core tensions—attracting audience through dramatic non-violent action that humanizes opponents, achieving numbers while maintaining focus and discipline, and balancing hierarchical control with decentralized sustainability? Which tactical option addresses these challenges? The decisions Gandhi makes in January 1930 will determine the fate of the Indian subcontinent and, ultimately, the British Empire itself.

PREPARATION QUESTIONS

1. Craft the first paragraph of a *Declaration of Independence* for India in January 1930. What do you put in your platform? What case can you make for why the people of India should risk mobilizing for Independence and democratic rights?
2. Put yourself in the sandals of Mohandas Gandhi in January 1930. How do you navigate the three tensions? Which of the four tactical options do you favor and why? Which locations will you focus your attention and resources on?

ENDNOTES

[i] Traditions developed to support inter-ethnic complementarity still persisted, including that of *Kaala-paani*- that Hindus who went overseas, across the "black water", would lose their caste and require costly purification to be readmitted to the community. Returning from London having trained as a lawyer, Gandhi too would have to go through this process.

[ii] Parts of this draw heavily from the following works by Rikhil Bhavnani and Saumitra Jha "Gandhi's Gift: Lessons for Peaceful Reform from India's Struggle for Democracy*", Economics of Peace and Security Journal,* 2014 *How Nonviolence Works,* "Forging a Non-Violent Mass Movement: Economic Shocks and Organizational Innovations in India's Struggle for Democracy" and "Peace Derailed: The Effects of India's First Non-Violent Struggle on Mass Religious Violence".

[iii] For example, Ganesh Savarkar, one of the founders of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangha (the RSS), which would emerge as an influential religious nationalist organisation, had commissioned a translation of Giuseppe Mazzini's autobiography into Marathi.

[iv] In fact, between 1893 and 1918, of the 276 seditious incidents recorded in the Sedition Committee report of 1918, 71 percent occurred within a single province, Bengal, with the provinces of Punjab (12 percent) and Bombay (4 percent) the nearest rivals. More than 90 percent of the events involved attempted or actual violence, including armed theft, murder, and bombings, while other acts included seditious speeches and the dissemination of articles.

[v] . The Congress leadership went from one that was dominated by elites, particularly lawyers (65 percent) in 1919, to one that by 1923 was representatively elected from district Congress committees that had emerged to span British India. The organization extended down to the sub-district (taluk) and village level, where each village with more than five Congress members was entitled to a committee and to send delegates to the level above.

[vi] Rothermund, Dietmar, *India in the Great Depression, 1929-1939* (New Delhi: Manohar, 1992), 35-58