

# India: Mahatma Gandhi refused to support general strikes in Bombay. A British newspaper editor took him on

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**Benjamin Horniman, the founding editor of 'The Bombay Chronicle', supported workers' demands.**

The First World War raised costs of living and depressed wages all at once, thus reducing the buying power of Bombay's inhabitants, who then numbered over 1.5 million. This catapulted labour movements throughout Bombay, although collective action had been evident in previous decades. Booms in cotton and grain prices made millowners and landlords even wealthier, so land and property prices went up along with booming rents.

This instigated strikes among bus and tram workers, postmen, service men and women, and industrial workers of all kinds. The 1919 textile strike had a major impact, showing the labor movement how much power it had to stop capital in its tracks.

**Each of these strikes had the support of the founding editor of the *Bombay Chronicle*, Benjamin Horniman (1873-1948).**

Under his editorship, the newspaper connected disparate episodes of agitation across the city to a common narrative and structure of exploitation by capital and the colonial state. Horniman himself even spoke at rallies and meetings, making him a more popular figure in wartime Bombay than even Mohandas Gandhi, who was still perfecting his strategies.

A decline in support for the war effort put the government of India into crisis. So the government of Bombay and the Municipal Corporation enacted mitigating legislation to quell disaffection among Bombay's inhabitants, albeit belatedly. They installed price controls for grains to be sold in municipality-owned grain shops and passed the Rent Act of 1918, ultimately criticised by the *Bombay Chronicle* for being ineffective in practice.

Along with a crisis of labour control, there were demands for increased participation in municipal affairs, including women wanting the franchise, and redirection of municipal funds toward public works. Some advocated for state housing rather than enlist private interests to build housing. The Social Service League, along with town planner Patrick Geddes, now considered one of the fathers of urban planning, raised the question of "civic progress." By 1925, there were protests against rent increases. Overall, the power of capital in colonial Bombay was severely challenged.

But there was a growing consensus that "the village" was the real home of India's poverty. Radhakamal Mukerjee was a professor of economics and sociology at the University of Lucknow and was friends with Geddes. Their influences on each other reveal how the notion that "India" was truly in its villages played out, a belief that had consequences for how the role of the city was imagined in planning for the future.

Geddes worked at the University of Bombay as a lecturer and wrote the introduction to Mukerjee's book *The Foundations of Indian Economics*, published in 1916. Geddes critiqued the way private interests were placed in charge of provisioning housing and believed that good housing was fundamental to civic inclusion. In turn, Geddes influenced Mukerjee's ideas, but Mukerjee was also very Gandhian. His concern was that India's unique historical conditions were not adjusted for in understandings of poverty and inequality. He wrote,

"In India more than in any other country the great intellectual, social, and religious movements have originated in villages, and, nurtured by their thoughts and aspirations, at last reached the cities. The soul of India is to be found in the village, not in the city. In modern Europe, on the other hand, the discoveries in intellectual or social life are made in the city and are then communicated to the village, which receive them as gospel truths. The city sets the example. The village imitates...[In India] the village is still almost self-sufficing, and is in itself an economic unit."

**This prioritisation of village life as the originator of all that could be a part of a unique Indian modernity was a nationalist extension of an old orientalist conceit, one that conceptualised India as a place of self-sufficient village communities.**

For those influenced by such orientalists and mainly Gandhi, the village was *the* site of a potential national consciousness, "the soul of India." Mukerjee thus thought that migrants to the city were a temporary sort and said that migration "does not involve a permanent change in residence... The Indian factory hand is primarily an agriculturalist. His real home is in his native village, not in the city where he works."

This notion of the migrants' "real home" justified a constant shifting of a critical gaze from the city to the country in early twentieth-century India. Whenever problems in the city were found, they were thought to have "real" origins in the villages. Likewise, villagers needed to be protected from the extractions of city life. Thus, the predominant view about the city and its inhabitants was that the city was a warped and temporary expression of India's villages, the true and fundamental unit of Indian society.

Cities were not the "soul" of India, and as a result ambitious national leaders struggled to see cities as even potential spaces of anti-colonialism. For them, the city was the site of a European history and even history in Europe, while the village was the site of Indian history and thus history in India. Gandhi said upon arriving in Bombay in 1915, "I don't like Bombay. ... It looks as if it were the scum of London." Gandhi had an aversion to all of India's industrial cities, blaming modern infrastructure such as the railways for disease, famine, and poverty, each of which spread from the cities outward:

"It must be manifest to you that, but for the railways, the English could not have such a hold on India as they have. The railways, too, have spread the bubonic plague. Without them, masses could not move from place to place. They are the carriers of plague germs. Formerly we had natural segregation. Railways have also increased the frequency of famines, because, owing to facility of means of locomotion, people sell out their grain, and it is sent to the dearest markets. People become careless, and so the pressure of famine increases. They accentuate the evil nature of man."

Gandhi romanticised the past, as if before the railways there were no trade routes or illnesses. He was criticised for such ideas even by his contemporaries. However, his concerns pointed to the increasing view that cities were nothing more than the locales of extractive markets, outward from which radiated railways to spread disease and produce hunger.

**Such views brought Gandhi into direct conflict with those fighting for equity and redress in the city of Bombay, such as Horniman of the *Bombay Chronicle*.**

Throughout World War I, the newspaper came out defending ongoing labour strikes in Bombay that extended beyond factory floors. The *Chronicle* reported that relations between labor and capital were premised “on injustice and inhumanity...a modern but more sinister form of human slavery.”<sup>8</sup>For the *Chronicle*, the city could be the space in which labor confronted capital, the space in which anticolonialism and anticapitalism merged.

Instead of supporting the general strikes, a “legitimate weapon of organised Labour against organised Capital,” Gandhi foiled the possibility of increased workers’ compensation and representation in Bombay’s affairs. Gandhi’s concessions to capital are well documented elsewhere, but historian Sandip Hazareesingh’s account of the precise ways in which Gandhi redirected the productive anger of labor is quite revealing for how it shows that politics in the space of the city is potentially most dangerous and therefore especially necessary to contain.

Precisely how the power of capital circumvents direct confrontation includes aid from nationalists like Gandhi who champion village India as the nation’s “soul.” Exemplary of far too many such instances like this, capitalists, colonialists, and nationalists too often work in concert to contain worker agitation and maintain the flow of capital.

**In 1919, the Rowlatt Act was passed, providing the colonial state the power of indefinitely detaining those engaged in activities against the state. By this point, the conflict between Horniman and Gandhi had heightened.**

A mass strike was envisioned to protest the Rowlatt Act, to start on April 6, 1919. Horniman thought that previous strikes in Bombay had proved that the city could be a stage for civil disobedience and direct action. Thinking that the mass strike could function as a more collective and materialist satyagraha (the Gandhian strategy of anticolonial resistance that prescribed self-rule through abstinence from modern ameliorations), Horniman brought in Gandhi to address workers before the strike. However, Gandhi doubled down on defining satyagraha as a tactic of “self-purification and penance.”

On the day of the strike, as historian Hazareesingh shows, Gandhi led followers to a bath in the sea at Chowpatty for ritual purification, rather than directly supporting the mass strike. While Horniman wanted to use the strike to address material conditions, Gandhi wanted the day of the strike to be solemn, self-reflective, and not directly confrontational. In the end, events such as the Jallianwala Bagh massacre in the Punjab led Gandhi to call off the strikes, believing that the Indian population was not quite ready for self-rule and satyagraha. Gandhi’s strict understanding of swaraj (self-rule) and replacement of tactics of labor with the tactics of the satyagrahi meant that a particular brand of nation building displaced the labor question.

Eventually, the demand for the nation even displaced demands for substantive citizenship. Many of the issues raised since World War I including the wage, housing, taxation with representation, and control over municipal affairs and over public works were sidelined. In the interwar period, the *Bombay Chronicle* was put under “pre-censorship” because “the *Chronicle* had used ‘words’ which were [likely] ‘directly or indirectly...to bring into hatred and contempt the Government established by law in British India.’”

Horniman was forcibly deported to England by a “military style operation” because of fear that he was a “private agitator” coming between capital and laborers and championing home rule. The newspaper’s offices were then raided and materials were confiscated. Under Horniman’s leadership,

a political possibility had opened up, which was foreclosed only by Gandhi's actions.

Subsequent demands for a "material basis" for citizenship and inclusion were similarly sidelined. As Hazareesingh notes, "Henceforth, rival Congress factions, embroiled in all-India struggles and driven by class compromises, would not perceive the city as a promising theatre for an experiment in democratic municipal government, capable of ushering in a new era of social and material advance. Rather, Bombay became a glittering political prize to be won within the rules of authoritarian colonial governance, an influential arena for the exercise of a new hegemony."

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