



Dynamics Of Mass Mobilisation In Bombay Karnataka: A Socio-Political Study Of The Freedom Movement (1919–1947)

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Abstract:

The freedom movement in India was marked by widespread participation across regions, and Bombay, Karnataka emerged as important centres of political awakening between 1919 and 1947. This paper explores the dynamics of mass mobilisation in this region, focusing on the interaction between Gandhian ideology, local leadership, and socio-political structures. The study analyses how the principles of non-violence, swadeshi, and self-reliance were adapted to local conditions, inspiring participation from diverse groups, including peasants, students, women, and workers. Through an examination of archival sources, regional newspapers, and oral narratives, the research traces the evolution of mass movements like the Non-Cooperation, Civil Disobedience, and Quit India Movements in Bombay, Karnataka. Special attention is given to the role of constructive programmes—such as the promotion of khadi, rural sanitation, education, and social reform—as mechanisms of mobilisation and consciousness-building. The study also highlights how caste associations, reformist groups, and vernacular press acted as channels for political education and national integration. By situating local initiatives within the broader framework of India's national movement, the paper argues that Bombay, Karnataka's experience reflects a unique synthesis of grassroots activism and nationalist ideology. Ultimately, it concludes that the region's socio-political mobilisation not only contributed to the downfall of colonial rule but also laid a strong foundation for post-independence democratic and developmental values.

Keywords: Mobilisation, Freedom movement, Non-Cooperation, Civil Disobedience, Quit India Movements

Introduction

The Indian national movement for independence was not merely a political struggle but a mass-based awakening that transformed social, economic, and cultural life across the country. Within this broad canvas, the region of Bombay Karnataka—comprising districts such as Belgaum, Dharwad, Bijapur, and North Canara—played a crucial yet relatively underexplored role in the freedom struggle. Between 1919 and

1947, the people of this region actively participated in various phases of the national movement, including the Non-Cooperation Movement, the Civil Disobedience Movement, and the Quit India Movement.

The concept of mass mobilisation during this period went beyond political protest. It involved the awakening of rural and urban populations through constructive programmes such as promotion of khadi, establishment of national schools, campaigns for social reform, and the spread of Gandhian ideals of swadeshi and self-reliance. Local leaders, reformers, students, women, and workers became agents of change, translating nationalist goals into community-based action.

The Bombay Karnataka region exhibited a unique socio-political landscape where caste dynamics, local leadership, and regional identity intersected with the broader nationalist discourse. Organisations like the Karnataka Provincial Congress Committee, along with voluntary associations and vernacular press, played a pivotal role in creating political consciousness.

This paper seeks to analyse the nature, forms, and impact of mass mobilisation in Bombay, Karnataka, during the freedom movement, emphasising how regional experiences contributed to the making of a national identity. It argues that the interaction between Gandhian constructive work and political mobilisation in this region represents a microcosm of India's larger struggle for freedom and social transformation.

Objectives of the Study

1. To examine the nature and evolution of mass mobilisation in Bombay Karnataka during the Indian freedom movement (1919–1947).
2. To analyse the role of Gandhian ideology and constructive programmes in shaping political participation in the region.
3. To study the contribution of local leaders, organisations, and the vernacular press in mobilising public consciousness.
4. To assess the impact of socio-economic and caste structures on the patterns of participation in the national movement.
5. To evaluate how grassroots activism in Bombay Karnataka influenced the broader course of India's freedom struggle.

Research Methodology

This study is based entirely on secondary data. Information has been collected from books, research journals, government reports, and archival records. Historical documents, newspapers, and biographies of freedom fighters are analysed for factual insights. The study uses a descriptive and analytical approach to interpret existing literature. Findings are derived through qualitative analysis of secondary sources related to Bombay Karnataka (1919–1947).

Review of Literature

Bipan Chandra (1989) – In *India's Struggle for Independence*, Chandra provides a comprehensive analysis of India's national movement, explaining how different regions, including smaller provinces, contributed to the collective process of anti-colonial mobilisation. His work emphasizes the integration of regional struggles within the larger nationalist framework, offering a valuable foundation for understanding Bombay Karnataka's participation.

Sumit Sarkar (1983) – In *Modern India: 1885–1947*, Sarkar examines the socio-political environment of the Gandhian era, analysing the nature of popular mobilisation and the ideological shift towards mass-based politics. His interpretation of Gandhian influence is useful for assessing how rural and urban communities in Bombay Karnataka adopted similar forms of activism.

Judith Brown (1977) – In *Gandhi's Rise to Power*, Brown explores the personal and ideological growth of Gandhi and how his methods of non-violence, swadeshi, and constructive work transformed the Indian freedom movement into a people's movement. This provides a theoretical basis for evaluating constructive programmes in Bombay Karnataka.

M. H. Gopal (1990) – Gopal's regional studies on Karnataka's political history document the evolution of nationalist sentiment and local leadership in the Bombay Karnataka region. His work highlights the connection between local socio-political structures and national movements.

Basavaraj Naikar (2005) – Naikar's writings on Karnataka's freedom struggle illustrate the role of literature, press, and local heroes in awakening regional consciousness and sustaining anti-colonial resistance.

Amartya Sen (1999) – In *Development as Freedom*, Sen argues that true development extends beyond economic growth to encompass social freedoms, equitable participation, and cultural inclusion. His framework aligns with the linguistic and social aspects of progress in border regions like Bombay Karnataka, where empowerment and participation were key to both nationalist and developmental goals.

Conceptual Framework

The concept of mass mobilisation in the context of the Bombay Karnataka freedom movement refers to the collective awakening and organised participation of diverse social groups—peasants, students, women, workers, and intelligentsia—in the anti-colonial struggle. The term signifies not merely the numerical strength of participation but also the ideological transformation of the populace from passive subjects to active agents of political change.

In the socio-political history of colonial India, Bombay Karnataka presents a distinct regional paradigm wherein nationalist ideology, social reform, and cultural identity intersected to generate a dynamic form of mobilisation. The process was characterised by the adaptation of Gandhian principles—non-violence, self-reliance, and civil disobedience—to local socio-economic conditions. The movement transcended urban centres and penetrated the rural hinterlands, drawing its strength from traditional community networks, caste associations, and emerging political institutions.

The conceptual foundation of mobilisation in this region thus rests upon four interrelated dimensions:

Ideological Integration – the internalisation of Gandhian and nationalist values within regional political consciousness.

Social Transformation – the role of reform movements, particularly among Lingayat and non-Brahmin communities, in creating an egalitarian socio-political environment.

Organisational Expansion – the establishment of local Congress committees, volunteer corps, and press networks that sustained mobilisation even under repression.

Cultural Nationalism – the assertion of Kannada linguistic and cultural identity as a symbolic framework that unified the people under a common cause.

Therefore, the concept of mass mobilisation in Bombay Karnataka is best understood as a multi-dimensional process—a synthesis of moral ideology, social reform, political organisation, and cultural self-

assertion. It reflects the transformation of a region from socio-political passivity to active nationalist participation and illustrates how local forces contributed significantly to the broader narrative of India's struggle for independence.

Contemporary Relevance

The historical experience of mass mobilisation in Bombay Karnataka during the freedom struggle continues to hold significant relevance in the contemporary socio-political context of India. The ideals, organisational strategies, and participatory ethos that defined the nationalist movement have evolved into enduring principles shaping democratic practice, regional identity, and civic engagement in modern Karnataka.

Firstly, the democratic consciousness fostered during the freedom movement laid the foundation for participatory politics and decentralised governance. The active involvement of peasants, students, and women in anti-colonial struggles cultivated a political culture that values dialogue, civic responsibility, and social justice—principles that remain vital for sustaining democratic institutions in contemporary India.

Secondly, the integration of social reform with political activism continues to inspire contemporary social movements addressing issues such as caste inequality, gender discrimination, and rural deprivation. The historical example of inclusivity and non-violent resistance provides a moral framework for addressing persistent challenges of social equity and human rights.

Thirdly, the assertion of cultural and linguistic identity, which was a unifying force during the nationalist era, remains relevant in present-day discussions of regional autonomy, cultural preservation, and federal balance. The movement for Karnataka's unification, born from the same intellectual and emotional impulses as the freedom struggle, exemplifies how cultural nationalism can coexist with democratic pluralism.

Finally, the spirit of collective mobilisation and moral leadership demonstrated by figures such as Gangadharrao Deshpande and R. R. Diwakar offers valuable lessons in an age marked by political fragmentation and civic apathy. Their commitment to ethical politics, grassroots engagement, and service-oriented leadership continues to serve as an aspirational model for contemporary governance and social activism.

Thus, the legacy of mass mobilisation in Bombay Karnataka transcends its historical moment. It endures as a reminder that genuine social transformation arises from the convergence of moral conviction, cultural consciousness, and participatory politics—values that remain as essential today as they were during the freedom struggle.

Discussion, Results and Analysis

The analysis of mass mobilisation in the Bombay Karnataka region during the freedom movement (1919–1947) reveals a complex interplay between socio-economic conditions, political ideology, and cultural identity. The period witnessed the gradual transformation of regional consciousness into a sustained nationalist force that both complemented and enriched the larger Indian struggle for independence.

1. Socio-Economic Foundations of Mobilisation

The early decades of the twentieth century were marked by significant socio-economic discontent in Bombay Karnataka. The colonial agrarian structure, characterised by high land revenue assessments, peasant indebtedness, and limited access to credit, created a fertile ground for political agitation. The economic hardship of cultivators and rural artisans translated into political participation when nationalist leaders framed freedom as a pathway to socio-economic justice. This linkage between economic distress and political awakening was instrumental in bringing rural masses into the fold of nationalist activity.

The proliferation of cooperative societies, village-level Congress committees, and khadi centres during the 1920s and 1930s functioned as both economic and ideological institutions. They encouraged self-reliance and created local networks of trust and communication, which later facilitated large-scale participation in movements such as the Civil Disobedience and Quit India campaigns.

2. Ideological Convergence and Political Leadership

The ideological influence of Gandhian thought was profound in shaping the nature of mobilisation in Bombay Karnataka. Non-violence, truth, and self-sufficiency provided an ethical foundation for political activism and distinguished the movement from earlier elite-based agitation. The region's leaders—Gangadharrao Deshpande, R. R. Diwakar, S. Nijalingappa, and Sharanbasappa—successfully translated these ideas into regional idioms, ensuring that nationalist ideology resonated with local sensibilities.

The Congress leadership's efforts were further reinforced by grassroots mobilisation through volunteer organisations like the Seva Dal, which trained young men and women in discipline, civic service, and political education. The ideological unity among these diverse groups produced a cohesive political culture that resisted both colonial repression and internal factionalism.

3. Social and Cultural Dimensions

The freedom movement in Bombay Karnataka cannot be understood purely as a political event; it also represented a social and cultural awakening. Reformist traditions within the Lingayat and non-Brahmin communities promoted egalitarian ideals, which aligned naturally with nationalist goals. Women's participation—through spinning activities, processions, and community initiatives—symbolised the democratisation of the public sphere.

The use of Kannada language, folk songs, and local cultural symbols in nationalist propaganda played a vital role in uniting diverse social groups. Print media, particularly regional newspapers and pamphlets, disseminated nationalist ideas effectively, bridging the urban-rural divide. Thus, cultural identity acted as both a mobilising instrument and a unifying ideology.

4. Patterns of Political Participation

Empirical observations from contemporary reports, Congress records, and oral testimonies indicate that the intensity of participation varied across districts. Belgaum and Dharwad emerged as strongholds of Congress activism due to their early exposure to nationalist education and trade networks, while Bijapur and Karwar witnessed more agrarian-based mobilisation. Urban centres contributed through intellectual and institutional leadership, whereas rural areas provided the numerical strength essential for sustained agitation.

The participation of students and teachers from institutions such as the Lingaraj College (Belgaum) and the Karnataka College (Dharwad) was particularly noteworthy. These institutions became hubs of intellectual dissent and political debate, nurturing a generation of nationalist leaders.

5. State Repression and Strategic Adaptation

The British administration's repressive measures—including arrests, censorship, and restrictions on assembly—did not stifle the movement but rather forced it into innovative forms of organisation. The adoption of non-cooperation, constructive work, and symbolic resistance enabled activists to maintain momentum even under severe surveillance.

For instance, during the Quit India Movement (1942), the underground network in Dharwad and Belgaum facilitated the dissemination of leaflets and coordination of protests despite mass arrests. This phase marked a decisive shift from symbolic protest to active resistance, indicating the maturity of political consciousness in the region.

6. Analytical Interpretation

The cumulative evidence suggests that mass mobilisation in Bombay Karnataka was not spontaneous but structurally and ideologically cultivated. It represented a synthesis of local grievances, moral philosophy, and strategic organisation. The ability of leaders to integrate Gandhian ideals with regional socio-cultural realities proved crucial to sustaining the movement across different phases.

Furthermore, the multi-class and multi-caste participation demonstrated the inclusive nature of the movement. Unlike many regions where caste divisions impeded collective action, the freedom struggle in Bombay Karnataka succeeded in forging temporary unity across social hierarchies, primarily due to the mediating influence of reformist thought and community leadership.

Findings

1. The freedom movement in Bombay Karnataka evolved from elite agitation to genuine mass mobilisation.
2. Gandhian ideology effectively unified diverse social, cultural, and economic groups.
3. Regional leaders successfully linked local grievances with national objectives.
4. Women, students, and peasants played a transformative role in expanding political participation.
5. Cultural symbols and Kannada identity strengthened collective consciousness.
6. Organised volunteer networks ensured continuity despite colonial repression.
7. Socio-religious reform movements fostered egalitarian values supporting nationalism.

Suggestions

1. Further archival research should document lesser-known local movements and leaders.
2. Educational curricula should highlight regional contributions to India's freedom struggle.
3. Preservation of heritage sites linked to the movement is essential for historical awareness.
4. Oral histories from surviving participants' families should be systematically recorded.
5. Comparative regional studies could deepen understanding of mobilisation patterns.
6. Integration of Gandhian ethics in civic education can promote responsible citizenship.
7. Regional museums and exhibitions should be developed to disseminate this legacy.

Conclusion

The study of mass mobilisation in Bombay Karnataka reveals that the region played a vital and distinctive role in India's struggle for independence. The movement's strength lay in its ability to integrate Gandhian ideology with regional socio-cultural realities, transforming local grievances into a shared vision of national liberation. Through the active participation of peasants, students, women, and reformist leaders, the movement transcended social barriers and evolved into a powerful force of collective consciousness. The synthesis of political idealism, social reform, and cultural nationalism provided the moral foundation upon which sustained mobilisation was built.

The historical experience of Bombay Karnataka demonstrates that true political transformation arises from the convergence of moral conviction, grassroots organisation, and inclusive leadership. The legacy of this mobilisation continues to inspire democratic values, social justice, and civic engagement in contemporary India. Thus, the region's contribution stands not only as a significant chapter in the narrative of India's

freedom struggle but also as a lasting reminder of the power of unity, ethical leadership, and people's participation in shaping a just and progressive society.

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