ABSTRACT

The city of Kanpur has a glorious and heroic tale to tell in this epoch-making period of Indian history (i.e. 1919-47) which marks the most stupendous and influential period of Indian independence struggle. The first chapter is a study of the evolution of Kanpur city, covering its geography also but more emphasis has been laid on its growth as a major cantonment town and heightened political activity which acquired considerable pace during the closing years of the nineteenth century. The revolt of 1857 constitutes an important landmark as Kanpur was one of the major centres of the rebellion and had two of the most notable people associated with that seminal event- Dhondu Pant alias Nana Saheb and Azeemullah, Nana Saheb’s chief adviser. This period also marks the genesis of Indian National Movement (INM) and Kanpur had an enlightened and resourceful pantheon of leaders like Pt. Prithvinath Chak, Maulana Hasrat Mohani, Narayan Prasad Arora, Jawaharlal Rohatgi, Ganesh Shankar Vidhyarthi, Hamid Khan etc. The activities carried out in the city during the first decade of the twentieth century were to act as a catalyst for the upcoming struggle which is mainly identified with Gandhian era.

The second chapter marks the period of my thesis and it covers the nationalist activities that went on in the city from 1919-
25. From the beginning of anti Rowlatt satyagraha which marks the entry of Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi as the undisputed leader of the Indian National Congress, the paramount force of the freedom struggle. Leaders like N.P.Arora, G.S.Vidhyarthi, Hasrat Mohani and Rohatgi Brothers (Murarilal and Jawaharlal) made great efforts to mobilize the masses in the city and with the launching of the Non-Cooperation and Khilafat movements in 1920, Kanpur had fully landed itself in the cause of freedom. Muslim participation was immense as the city had a substantial Muslim population (mainly in tannery industry) and the issue of Khilafat ignited their passions as the case of Machchli Bazaar Mosque incident of the city in 1913. Seva Samitis played a notable role in keeping discipline and order plus seeing that the arrangements are up to the mark. With the abrupt ending of the movement on 5 February 1922, Kanpur too lapsed into political oblivion but Gandhi’s stress on carrying out the constructive programme kept the Congress organization fine tuned and three years later formation of the Communist Party of India took place here only due to the efforts of a man named Satyabhakta and Congress also held its 40th session in the city, presided over for the first time by an Indian woman, Sarojini Naidu. It became memorable in many respects and the local daily Vartman brilliantly covered the proceedings. Shyamlal Gupta ‘Parshad’ wrote the famous Jhanda Geet
in 1924 which continues to have a magical spell on people to this day. It was sung for the first time on 13 April in a public meeting in Phoolbagh and Jawaharlal Nehru was the chief guest and speaker.

The third chapter entitled ‘Turbulent Years’ covers a small but crucial period of four years (1926-29) which saw a spurt in the growth of krantikrari or revolutionary movement in the city as there was a substantial strata of young men who were disenchanted with Gandhian techniques and believed in some sort of militant nationalism. Kanpur was already a hotbed of this ideology as during the early years of the twentieth century revolutionaries like Lala Hardayal had visited the city and distribution and popularizing of revolutionary literature had taken a spurt in the city. The appearance of Chandra Shekhar Azad and he carried most of the activity to strengthen the revolutionary movement from Kanpur only, and that the idea of the formation of Hindustan Socialist Republican Association (HSRA) was conceived here only were to make Kanpur an ‘all encompassing’ city during the freedom struggle where both the streams of patriotism- nationalist and revolutionary were strong. Bhagat Singh had also worked for a short period in the Pratap press (newspaper founded by Ganesh Shankar Vidhyarthi) and had sharpened his revolutionary credentials here only.
The Indian National Congress during this period vigorously carried out the programme of boycott, specially of foreign cloth and picketing also got a spurt and it went on unabated in the city. The passion showed by students of Agricultural College against the boycott of the Simon commission when it visited the city was exemplary.

The fourth chapter covering a span of nine years (1930-39) marks a new phase and a very important one from nationalist perspective i.e. beginning of the Civil Disobedience movement and Gandhi’s fanciful yet superb method of boycotting of salt tax and its subsequent indigenous manufacture (which later became famous by the name of ‘Salt Satyagraha’) captured the imagination of the country as never before. In Kanpur, this work (of breaking the salt law) was first performed by Pyarelal Agarwal and Gangadhar Ganesh Jog in city’s Shraddhanand Park on 5 April 1930. The programme of boycott also got a fillip from this and Madan Mohan Malviya’s visit and his lighting of a pile of foreign cloth galvanized the people of Kanpur. Even two famous mill owners of the city Lala Bal Krishna Maheshwari and Lala Manohar Lal Agarwal supported the movement by giving away a large stock of saris and other foreign clothes. Firebrand poet Chhail Bihari Dixit who wrote under the pseudonym of ‘Kantak’ was one of the most visible faces of the cause of
freedom and along with Hamid Khan was perhaps the most zealous of freedom fighters from Kanpur.

Yet a sad note during this period is the horrendous communal riot which broke out in March 1931 after the executions of Bhagat Singh, Sukhdev and Rajguru as a hartal was organized by Congress workers and had asked for closure of all shops which Muslims resented. It saw some of the most bizarre killing and looting on part of both Hindus and Muslims and immense loss of life and property took place. Ganesh Shankar Vidhyarthi lost his life while trying to pacify a riotous mob in city’s Bangali Mohaal area. His death was one to be envied by us all wrote Gandhi in *Young India*. Communal madness also tends to slow down quickly and a visit to the city by national leaders like Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel, Maulana Azad and Jamnalal Bajaj provided a soothing touch to the people and normalcy started getting restored. The thaw achieved in Gandhi-Irwin Pact (1931) was short lived and by December stage had been set for a second Civil Disobedience campaign. Once again Kanpur displayed great courage and fortitude. Picketing of foreign cloth and liquor shops, closing of markets, symbolic hoisting of Congress’ flags, salt satyagraha and non-payment of taxes were resorted to in full manner. *Achhuttodhar* or Harijan welfare programme had been very dear to Gandhi and in May 1933, he took up this work after his release
from jail. This work was vigorously taken up in Kanpur and a lot was done for ameliorating their living conditions especially among city’s sweepers. Jawaharlal Rohatgi and Pyarelal Agarwal showed immense zeal in carrying on this programme smoothly.

Golden Jubilee celebrations of Congress fell in 1935 and many mosques and temples in the city were illuminated. The enactment of Govt. Of India Act (1935) and formation of Congress ministries in 1937 showed party’s governing ability as a promise for future but it had its limitations also. In any case the ministries were to function in a rigid and a very unbalanced structure where colonial government called the shots. After 27 months when British Government made India a belligerent participant in the Second World War, the ministries resigned and stage was set for a final and decisive showdown.

The fifth chapter marks the most critical years of modern Indian history (1940-47), for it saw both the confrontation and negotiations between the forces of nationalism and the British Government. The Congress had asked for a responsible government at centre when the war was in progress and also rightly believed that unless the Government doesn’t do the same the Japanese, most dreaded of the Fascist powers would be furnished with an excuse to attack India. But the Government was in no mood to relent. At the
Ramgarh Congress session, the CWC (Congress Working Committee) decided to observe a ‘National Week’ (from 7 April-13 April) in remembrance of Jallianwala Bagh martyrs. It gave a boost to Congress organization in Kanpur as by 29 April, about 5400 people had been enlisted as Congress volunteers and 65 per cent of Congressmen registered themselves as satyagrahis.

Individual satyagraha started and poet-nationalist Balkrishna Sharma ‘Naveen’ delivered a fiery speech in Tilak Hall (which was inaugurated by Gandhi on 24 July 1934), the hub of Congress activities in the city and said that the British Government doesn’t wish to amicably solve the problems of the country and also of not respecting national aspirations. He further said that by resorting to wanton terror it is provoking the people of India to gear up for a violent struggle. Quit India Movement was started in August 1942 and violent clashes with the police were a noticeable future of this movement. Kantak wrote some of his most patriotic poetry during this period only and had been a jail monger for six continuous years from 1939 to 1945. His son Ramesh and wife Kishori Devi were also active. Burning of post offices and uprooting of railway tracks and open attacks on police stations acquired great pace in the city. Revolutionaries too were active and carried out two bomb explosions (at Kanpur Central Railway Station and Nishat Talkies) which had a
long lasting effect on the memory of both the government and people.

Students came to their fullest potential during these years only. Often they took out processions against the government and frequent clashes with the police were regular outcomes. Students of DAV (Dayanand Anglo Vedic) College, Christ Church College, BNSD (Bishambhar Nath Sanatan Dharam) College and Marwari College were particularly very active. Girl students too showed their patriotic fervor and Tara Agarwal (wife of Pyarelal Agarwal) used to oversee their training and they were given special instructions in physical fitness. She used to run a gymnasium for girls in her house. The trial of INA (Indian National Soldiers) got a sympathetic response in Kanpur and funds were collected for their defense. Nationalist newspapers like Pratap, Vartman and National Herald were regularly covering the activities. In fact in the 1920s, 30s and in early 40s heightened political tension and agitation created special problems in political communication and special tasks for the press. This was reflected in tremendous spurt in press propaganda and in their tone and content. The facts of arrests of leaders, lathicharges and injuries meted to satyagrahis and processions carried out by students and their confrontations with the police were greatly highlighted so as to keep the spirit of resistance alive. Vartman was this kind of a newspaper.
Kanpur was one of the few cities where both the nationalists and revolutionaries carried on their struggle against the colonial government side by side and revolutionary movement slackened only by 1943 when talks of India being granted independence were making news. In any case after four years the country became free and Kanpur had cultivated a great and heroic saga to tell posterity of its role in making the struggle for freedom a glorious and worth remembering one.