On 12 March 1930, a feeble middle-aged man left his home in a small village in north west India to walk more than 240 miles down the subcontinent’s western coast to a fishing town called Dandi. Dressed in a shawl of simple white cloth, he began with a party of seventy-eight men and women, intending to pause daily at villages and rural centres along his route to spread a message of social solidarity and collective action. His twenty-four day pilgrimage was destined to conclude at Dandi’s seaside coast, where he planned to illegally distil salt from the seawater. This article is about salt. The man was Mahatma Gandhi, an Indian nationalist leader, who in the autumn of 1930 used salt as a weapon of anti-colonial defiance, transforming this basic household condiment into a symbol of national unity.

National symbols are referential objects that hold complex ideas about identity and history. The role of any national symbol is to promote and bind a sense of collectivity and solidarity within a pre-existing or nascent nation-state. National symbols can be sites of nostalgia, tools of protest, icons associated with celebration or instigators of violence. The common characteristic amongst the symbols of different nations is this potential to represent a number of different ideas at any one time. The discussion of symbolism in this article focuses on the Indian Nationalist Movement, particularly analysing the 1930 Salt March to Dandi. The Salt March is a significant event within the longer history of the Indian Nationalist Movement(s) because it exemplifies the intricate nature of anti-colonial nationalist symbols. During 1930 Gandhi used salt as both a tool

1 The author would like to thank her anonymous reviewers for their comments on earlier versions of this article and offer her uttermost gratitude to Dr. Hsu-Ming Teo for her constant intellectual guidance.
of protest and also an object for encouraging indigenous social cohesion. Salt's status as a common preservative, along with its use as a general household condiment, implicated it in both local and international histories of economic trade. By producing contraband salt, Gandhi and his followers fashioned this mineral as an economic symbol of India's separateness from British trading monopolies. Furthermore, salt's symbolic significance resonated beyond its economic dimension. Gandhi crafted salt as a symbol that transcended social divisions. The March called for the participation of individuals from across religious and socio-economic communities and both women and men were encouraged to be involved in the Salt March in an equal capacity. It is through examining the Gandhian rhetoric around salt during the march and by contextualising this commodity within a wider history of imperial oppression that salt's status as a significant anti-imperial, nationalist symbol is elucidated.

The study of symbolism is a burgeoning field within the scholarship on nationalism. In 1983 Benedict Anderson famously expounded the idea that nations were ‘imagined communities’. For Anderson this imagination is facilitated by the growth of industrialisation, print capitalism, and literacy that equipped people with the ability to conceive of themselves as part of a national political structure that extended beyond their immediate surrounds. While Anderson's work deals primarily with the European experience of national creation, his scholarship is also pertinent to studies of symbolism. Anderson's text draws attention to the explicitly constructed nature of national identity. His argument highlights how nationalism was not solely a stage of elite political transition but could also be classified as a process of popular identity reconstruction. Eric Hobsbawm also discussed the constructed nature of identity within the national setting. He claims that ‘traditions’ are often produced in transformative climates to legitimise the introduction of new social and political structures. A ‘tradition’ is invented and formalised with reference to the past but created in response to contemporary circumstances. More recently the work of historians Anthony Smith and Zdzislaw Mach explain how these theories of invented tradition and identity are directly linked to the discussion of national symbols. Smith's work examines what he terms the ‘myth-symbol complex’ whereby selected cultural practices and traits of an ethnic (pre-national) community are drawn upon in the

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3 Ibid., 114.
creation of a national image. Furthermore, Mach problematises nationalism as an area of historical research. While acknowledging the state as a ‘political organisation’, he asserts that the ‘nation is a cultural entity’. Mach links the expression of nationhood with socially adopted symbols and rituals rather than with changing systems of government. What becomes evident from this brief and selective sketch of theoretical nationalist scholarship is how, in the last two decades within the field of nationalist studies, ideas of inventiveness and purposeful construction have become foundational to discussions of symbolic use and creation.

This article moves from a broad discussion of the treatment of symbols as part of national histories, to specifically evaluate how salt was created into a symbol of the Indian nation. There are many biographies and scholarly articles that deal with the personality and extensive political career of Gandhi. On occasion these pieces have drawn attention to the problematic nature of Gandhi’s popularly venerated image, critiquing his shifting political agenda, observing his unconventional approach to testing his own chastity, and questioning the relative success of all his non-cooperation campaigns. This article does not refute these claims or deny the contestable nature of Gandhi’s saintly image. However, the aim of this article is not to present a revised biography of Gandhi but rather to dissect the way he transformed salt into a national symbol. With reference to scholarship on French, Irish, and Indian nationalism, I will show how the current literature on national symbols acknowledges the multifaceted nature of these tools and their ability to be refashioned across historical contexts. From this point, the article will then focus on the history of salt as a mineral of international trade. Probing its use by imperial powers in both the ancient and modern eras, I then investigate how salt has been linked to imperial wealth and expansion. Specific to this discussion will be the taxation, regulation, and sale

7 Ibid., 115.
of salt under British occupation from 1600. Framed by both a theoretical and thematic contextualisation of national symbols and also salt’s history, the body of this essay will deconstruct Gandhi’s discussion and use of salt. How was ‘India’ imagined and described through Gandhi’s speeches and writings on salt? How did this image simultaneously address internal fractions within the Indian population and weaken the legitimacy of Britain’s claim to imperial power?

National symbols are the tools through which the concept of nationhood is created and comprehended. Yet, these symbols are not necessarily static items with a singular history. Nationalisms mould unique histories for symbols in response to changing economic and political circumstances. Maurice Agulhon’s 1979 publication Marianne Into Battle was a seminal work within the genre of national symbolism studies. Agulhon’s text discusses the nuances within the image of the mythic French heroine, Marianne. He claims that Marianne’s image comprised of a number of distinct symbolic elements that were drawn on discriminantly in different French political contexts. During the Revolutionary period it was Marianne’s femininity that was used to explain ideas of democracy and political rebirth. However, during the Paris Commune, the focal point of this image shifted and it was Marianne’s red Phrygian cap that became a central symbol for representing the concept of liberty.9 Agulhon’s discussion of Marianne highlights that while the physical appearance of a symbol may remain unchanged, emphasis on different aspects of its appearance can alter the function of the symbol and the message it projects. Similarly, in his work on Irish national symbolism, Seán Farrell Moran states that symbols ‘draw on a mystic understanding of the Irish past, serving to recapitulate and codify that past’.10 Due to this connection with the past, symbols themselves often come under siege as sites for debating different interpretations of national history. The Celtic harp has been a contested symbol used to represent both Ireland’s political connection and separation from Britain. At the turn of the twentieth century Unionists placed the harp next to images of the crown in their campaigns against Home Rule, reinforcing Ireland’s bond with Britain and Westminster.11 However, from 1922 the same image of the harp was re-contextualised to

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connote ideas of a distinctly Irish heritage, being used as the official state seal on bank notes and stamps by the Irish republic. Of the harp, there was one aspect of its image that was exploited by both Loyalists and Nationals: the wings. Both political groups constructed histories for the symbol that supported each other’s politics. The examples of the Irish and French nationalist movements show how symbols are constantly in flux, being created and re-created to serve the purposes of different nationalist agendas.

National symbols have the potential to function simultaneously as aids to hostile protest and sites of collective identity. What was significant about salt was its ability to simultaneously undercut imperial authority and promote national solidarity. However, salt was not the only secular nationalist symbol. There were other symbols, similar to salt, that served the dual purpose of trying to create national unity while also expressing hostility to imperialism. Scholars of Indian nationalism have discussed the role of indigenous hand-woven cotton cloth, khadi, in the anti-colonial nationalist project. Recent works by Chakrabarty, Tarlo, and Trivedi draw attention to the socially mobilising nature of khadi during its production in the 1920s. Khadi is also documented in these texts as being an item of direct and purposeful economic protest. Additionally, Roy and Virmani have cast the Indian flag as a national symbol, the design and meaning of which was constantly being transformed, paralleling the evolution of this region from a colony into a modern state. The flag was a symbol of India’s quest for political autonomy while its changing composition represented the altering attitudes toward the construction of the national community. Salt has not received the scholarly attention and symbolic acknowledgement that has been attributed to either the khadi or the Indian national flag.

12 Ibid., 73.
15 It is important to note here that salt has also been marginalised in the popular memorialisation of the nationalist movement. This might very well be because the Salt Non-Cooperation campaign achieved its legislative aims in the immediate aftermath of the protest. National monuments that allude to the Salt March, such as the New Delhi Independence Memorial, use the image of Gandhi’s march for salt to represent the entire Anti-Colonial Nationalist period. However, the mineral, salt is not included in this memorial. See Kelly D. Alley, “Gandhi on the Central Vista: A Postcolonial Refiguring,” Modern Asian Studies 31 (1997): 991.
The Salt March has predominantly been incorporated into nationalist histories with very little discussion, mentioned merely as a fleeting protest.\textsuperscript{16} The only detailed text on the Salt March period is Thomas Weber’s work that follows Gandhi’s movements over the 24-day period of the protest.\textsuperscript{17} However, a substantial part of Weber’s text is an account of Gandhi’s travels and does not provide an analysis of salt’s symbolic construction. Salt held a tremendous symbolic significance at the time of its deployment in 1930. This mineral was crafted as an intricate national symbol that worked to address both imperial and indigenous obstacles that impeded India’s transition to a nation state.

It is impossible to understand the creation of salt as an anti-imperial national symbol without appreciating how this commodity was implicated in the general history of imperial projects. For example, salt played a central role in the expansion of the Roman Empire. The Roman administration used this mineral both as a preservative for its army food and as the preferred method of payment for its soldiers. Roman conquest in Gaul and North Africa was not only aimed at the acquisition of new territory, but also at maintaining the State’s salt supplies.\textsuperscript{18} The modern-day word ‘salary’ is derived from the term ‘salt’ and its association with this Roman fiscal heritage.\textsuperscript{19} The medieval Venetian state also evolved around salt. The progression of Venice from a land-based to a maritime power correlates with the rising importance of the salt industry and development of a specific wing of government to administer salt revenue.\textsuperscript{20} This department, the Provveditori, formed a network that extended across Venetian territory and was responsible for the inspection of salt works and the auditing of their accounts. The state worked in conjunction with merchants who accessed salt from these works, taxing a percentage of the commodity’s sale price.\textsuperscript{21} Salt has also been integral to the trading patterns of modern empires. The Spanish Crown’s traversing of the Atlantic and establishment of colonial territory on both the Northern and Southern American continents was partly propelled by its search for salt. The Mississippi region attracted the Spanish because of its

\textsuperscript{16} For an example see D.A Low, \textit{Britain and Indian Nationalism: The Imprint of Ambiguity} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).
\textsuperscript{18} Mark Kurlansky, \textit{Salt: A World History} (New York: Penguin (Non-classics), 2002), 64.
\textsuperscript{19} Ibid., 63.
\textsuperscript{21} Ibid., 184.
salt deposits, and was later invaded in 1699 by the French, who were also keen to acquire its resources. The prosperity of the French in the Atlantic was assisted by their ability to horde salt. The pattern evident from these ancient and modern examples of imperial expansion is one of salt’s centrality in generating wealth. Maritime trade has depended upon salt to preserve commodities of exchange. Consequently, economic power was, in part, generated through the control of salt deposits and salt tariffs. States that had access to salt could easily partake in the trade of perishable goods without incurring the costs associated with importing or purchasing salt. It is within this history of global interaction that salt becomes implicated in conquest and colonisation, and emerges as a necessary tool for the consolidation of extensive networks of political power.

Salt was a potent symbol of colonial dissent because it epitomised Britain’s conquest and colonisation of the subcontinent. In January 1930 Gandhi presented the viceroy, Lord Irwin, with an eleven-point ultimatum that he felt needed urgent implementation to dissuade anti-imperial protest and promote negotiation over the issue of decolonisation. This document was met with apathy by the imperial bureaucracy and Gandhi and his nationalist supporters chose the issue of salt as the only point, from among the eleven, to make the central concern of the second civil disobedience phase. The March made salt a symbol of indigenous economic, political, and legal reclamation because its treatment by the British epitomised the broader history of colonisation from the seventeenth century. Rather than an initial move to manage Indian salt repositories, the British had attempted to generate profit through flooding indigenous markets with the sale of its own Liverpool salt. However, British salt could not compete in price or quality with the salt produced on the central eastern and western coasts of the Indian subcontinent. Realising the inferiority of its own product in 1772, the British East India Company shifted its focus to controlling local salt refinement.

Starting in the northern Indian province of Rajputana, the Company moved down the subcontinent over the next seventy years, seizing indigenous salt

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23 Kurlansky, *Salt*, 121.
works and then re-letting them to the highest bidder. Consequently, the price of salt throughout British occupied territory became fixed and artificially inflated. Smaller local salt manufacturing centres were forcibly closed down and in 1885 the Salt Act formally outlawed the independent production of salt. It was punishable with incarceration for an individual to even collect the naturally occurring salt that formed along India’s coastlines and/or around inland basins.

In early March Gandhi stated that ‘the salt tax must be repealed now...If we climb even one step, we shall readily be able to climb the other steps leading to the palace of Independence’. Indian economic independence relied upon a more extensive plan for imperial withdrawal than simply revision of the salt taxes. However, the significance of salt in the Dandi March, chosen because of its tight regulation by the British, symbolised an initial indigenous attempt to recapture control of the subcontinent’s resources.

Salt was an anti-colonial nationalist symbol that exposed Britain’s excessive pillage of Indian resources. Salt had progressed from being a significant source of revenue for the British East India Company to being a smaller, yet cost effective way for the Raj to attain wealth. By 1930 salt contributed only twenty-five million pounds of the eight hundred million pounds gathered per year by the Raj in the form of taxation. Despite its position as a declining source of wealth, the British refused to compromise on the salt laws and reasserted their stranglehold on the commodity by increasing the rate of taxation in 1923. Gandhi labelled the British regulation of salt a ‘nefarious monopoly’ that had ‘the necessary consequence of [indigenous] destruction’. The Raj reaped a seven hundred percent profit from a mineral that was naturally occurring and easily accessible.

Gandhi structured the Salt March in such a way as to generate maximum local and international attention, while emphasising the indigenous deprivation of this

28 Ibid.
30 Ibid.
32 Metcalf and Metcalf, 189.
34 Ibid.
basic culinary product. In commencing the protest from Sabramati, and walking for twenty-four days until the distillation of salt took place, Gandhi had the time and the audiences to produce a sophisticated discourse around salt that informed its symbolic status. He claimed that the government ‘stole the people’s salt and made them pay heavily for this stolen article’,\(^{37}\) A selection of American newspapers reporting on the March, made an effort to explain its context. *The Chicago Daily Tribune, The Christian Science Monitor,* and the *Washington Post* all discussed the history and British policy of salt taxation.\(^{38}\) Gandhi organised the Salt March as a dramatic protest. The act of producing salt was framed by a broader campaigning period that facilitated salt’s transformation from being one of many imperially taxed commodities to being an imperially regulated item that represented British monopolisation of Indian resources.

Gandhi constructed salt as a nationally resonant symbol that worked to bridge social divisions between classes and castes. Besides aiding the trade of commodities salt was also an essential domestic cooking ingredient. Its status as a household item meant its tax affected a large cross-section of British occupied India. The impact of this tax was felt differently across the various socio-economic strata of Indian society. Taxation was not proportional to income but rather standardised according to item. This resulted in the peasants and urban poor paying the same tax on salt as the wealthy elite. Gandhi commented with reference to the peasant that, ‘[e]ven the salt he must use to live on is so taxed as to make the burden fall heaviest upon him’.\(^{39}\) Salt costs accounted for two days of the average annual salary per head and, notably, for the lower class individuals this proportion was much greater.\(^{40}\) In rallying against salt taxation, Gandhi was opposing the Raj’s system of revenue acquisition. On a second level though, his rhetoric also worked at creating a social consciousness by choosing a commodity whose taxation had greatest impact on the poor. He claimed, ‘voluntary fellowship and arranging terms of mutual help and commerce (were) equally suited to all interests’.\(^{41}\) This is not to suggest, idealistically, that the Salt March received the same support from the upper echelons of Indian society


\(^{40}\) Weber, *On the Salt March*, 82.

as it did from the lower classes. The transcribed versions of Gandhi’s speeches and his publications in local newspapers show how this anti-colonial nationalist protest promoted a sense of cross-class solidarity and cooperation. In a South Asian context where nationalism was a foreign concept, social symbols commonly had class and caste specific messages as these were well recognised categories of collective identity. Gandhi discussed salt in a way that focused both on class solidarity and collective anti-imperial action. In the atmosphere of Independence negotiations (that involved the educated elite) and the rise in religiously affiliated anti-imperial protests, Gandhi offered an alternative, more socially representative platform by using salt to construct a national image.

Salt functioned as a national symbol during 1930 because it did not accentuate religious identities. Historically, religious identity has been foundational to how south Asian societies were organised both hierarchically and geographically. Prior to colonisation, wars over territory and political power pitted Muslims and Hindus against one another, and against minor religious communities. Separatist and aggressive attitudes toward religious identity were further generated by British imperial occupation. Gandhi openly criticised the Raj in a renowned letter to Lord Irwin, claiming that British occupation had ‘unnecessarily laid stress on communal problems’. The British policy of ‘divide and rule’ aligned the Raj with particular religious denominations, allowing for the establishment of a more solid support-base through which the imperial power could exploit the labour and resources of the remainder of the colonised population. In the late 1920s anti-colonial movements were comprised of a number of different factions, predominantly organised around religious affiliation reflecting both this pre-colonial and colonial history of religious separatism. Obstacles to the formation of a national consciousness were articulated both through outward violence between Muslim and Hindu communities and through more subtle organisational strategies of religious affiliated movements. The rioting of 1924

46 This attitude toward imperial governance is particularly evident in the aftermath of the 1857 ‘India Mutiny’ where the Sikh community was recruited to assist in the suppression of Hindu and Muslim rioters. See Subho Basu and Suranjan Das, “Knowledge for Politics: Partisan Histories and Communal Mobilization in India and Pakistan” in *Partisan Histories: The Past in Contemporary Global Politics* ed. Max Paul Friedman and Padraic Kenny (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 113; and, Metcalf and Metcalf, 104-105.
and 1926, with its associated religiously motivated killings, had driven a fresh rift between the subcontinent’s two largest religious communities. This rift can be seen as ideologically reinforced by the methods of representation which the nationalist groups used; their symbols. Gloud discusses how Hindu nationalists were inclined to draw symbols for the Indian ‘nation’ from sacred texts such as the Bhagavad Gita. The obvious problem eventuating from communal symbolic language was that its applicability was confined to a particular spiritual community. It was against this backdrop of both promoted and existing religious division and also unrepresentative nationalist programs that Gandhi formulated the Salt March to address the urgent need for a secular national symbol. As a symbol, salt acknowledged the oppressive nature of imperial policy, but did not highlight the subcontinent’s history of cross-religious hostility.

The structure of the Salt March was designed to promote religious inclusion. Yogesh Chadha explains that the seventy-eight followers who left Sabaramati alongside Gandhi were thoughtfully chosen to symbolise the nascent nation’s religious diversity. Gandhi included individuals of Hindu, dalit (‘untouchable’ lower caste Hindus), Christian, and Islamic background to make this point. Supporters were drawn into the marching party throughout the duration of the March, regardless of spiritual belief. It is not accurate to assume that Gandhi incited unprecedented levels of involvement from the Islamic community or unanimous support from either the ‘untouchable’ castes or other minor religious communities. However, after a half a decade of violent religious clashes the Salt March represents an initiative of religious dialogue. The fifty thousand people who distilled salt at Dandi on 5 April 1930 included representatives from across India’s spiritual communities. Gandhi claimed that his method of non-violent protest was not founded on the teachings of a specific faith nor was salt aligned with the iconography of a particular spiritual tradition. In speaking out against his narrow categorisation as a Hindu nationalist Gandhi acknowledged his own Hindu faith but claimed that he ‘personally [had] never had any difficulty

47 Sarkar, Modern India 1885-1947, 233-234.
in reading the message of non-violence in the Koran...[and that] Mussalmans are actually enlisting for the March, as they too, have no difficulty subscribing to the creed of non-violence for the purpose of Swaraj [Indian independence].

By bringing together members from varying spiritual communities in the Salt March, Gandhi unwittingly made salt a symbol of the potential for India’s religious communities to cooperate with each other.

Gandhi’s use of salt as a powerful anti-colonial symbol was informed by the participation of Indian women in the protest march. Women’s distillation of contraband salt at Dandi worked to undercut the imperially-propagated image. There was a widespread image in Western culture of the colonial woman in domestic incarceration. Only three years before the March, the American journalist Katherine Mayo had released a damning ‘first-hand’ account of South Asian society entitled Mother India. In the form of a collection of essays, Mayo’s argument centred on the supposedly corrosive cross-gender relationship that marked Indian social interaction. Mother India over-exaggerated the prevalence of child marriage, concocted a mentally and physically malformed identity for the Indian male population and misrepresented the domestically confined predicament of all Indian women. The book was an international bestseller, undergoing three reprints in the first year. Between 1927-30 alone, more than sixteen Indian critiques were written and published in response to Mayo’s sensationalised text. Gandhi’s Salt March was also a most efficacious response to Mother India and the enduring imperial discourse of female oppression and in a public way the published critiques of Mayo’s work could never be.

The incorporation of both men and women in the Salt March worked at symbolising a collective Indian humanity. Salt was a visual symbol that communicated

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56 Sinha, Mother India, 37-38.

57 For a list of titles and publication dates, see Ibid., 34.

without recourse to literary skills. This is significant because female literacy was essentially confined to the middle and upper classes.\textsuperscript{59} Thus, Gandhi’s discussion of salt had the potential to reach women across India’s socio-economic strata. Historians have described different facets of Gandhi’s awareness of women’s position in the nationalist movement. Geraldine Forbes argues that Gandhi emphasised the traditional feminine attributes of passivity and self-suffering to position the female subject as central, rather than peripheral, to the non-violent, nationalist program in 1930.\textsuperscript{60} Furthermore, Sujata Patel argues that Gandhi’s position on feminism was constantly in transition. As a consequence, Patel claims that Gandhi’s ideas about female inclusion only functioned to meet contemporary protestation needs and did not forge lasting change to the socio-political position of women.\textsuperscript{61} While recognising the diversity of scholarly opinion and indeed the complexity of gender relations at the time of the Salt March, one of the focuses of this article is how women were included directly in salt’s symbolic construction, as both a nationalist and anti-imperial tool. The Salt March was void of any indication of corrosive gender relationships that had been used by authors such as Mayo to legitimise the continued British occupation in India. Gandhi spoke directly to women, saying, ‘I regard you as the trustees and guardians of the precious national wealth locked in your fists’.\textsuperscript{62} This quote, along with Gandhi’s prolific writings and speeches directed towards women, highlights his awareness of the necessity to include women in anti-imperial protest.\textsuperscript{63} Salt, and the act of distilling, was utilised in 1930 to symbolise a new national identity that embodied ideas of cross-gender respect and cooperation. This new conception of national identity challenged the prevailing image of severe female oppression that was propagated by pro-imperial rhetoric and texts.

Salt was nationally symbolic as it addressed aspects of feminine inequality that were present in India. \textit{Mother India} had presented a highly negative view of Indian society’s treatment of women, distorting the general predicament of the


\textsuperscript{62} Mahatma Gandhi, “Speech at Umber”, 262.

\textsuperscript{63} For a collection of Gandhi’s writings and speeches to specifically to women see Mahatma Gandhi, \textit{To The Women}, ed. Anand T. Hingorani. (Karachi: Hingorani, 1941).
female population. It is pertinent to recognise, however, that elements of inequality did exist between the genders within Indian society. For example, in the context of the Nationalist Movement, female campaigning up until 1930 was confined to domestic issues and undertaken separately from male-oriented action.\(^{64}\) The Salt March was the first theatre of protest to endorse female involvement alongside male contributions to public displays of non-violent action. Historical debate exists over Gandhi’s opinion of women and their place in his nationalist movement. His exclusion of women from the initial group of marchers leaving Sabaramati has been referenced as proof of his conservative attitudes toward gender politics.\(^{65}\) However, this decision was based on Gandhi’s fears a violent reception, rather than a conservative view on gender.\(^{66}\) In 1930 Gandhi recognised the largely domestic and peripheral nature of female participation in nationalism. He addressed women in a speech in Umber after his time in Dandi asserting:

> It is not your fault but that of us men who have hitherto been satisfied with your being and remaining as house-keepers, cooks, scavengers and drawers of water but you will now no longer remain in that position.\(^{67}\)

The Salt March was a period in which the nation was imagined as both a masculine and feminine construction. Salt acted as a symbol that united the interests of both genders. Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay, one of the earliest female Indian National Congress delegates was among the first to break the salt ban.\(^{68}\) Chatopadhyay is quoted as stating that ‘[h]undreds of women strode down to the sea like proud warriors…[breaking] their age old shell of social seclusion’.\(^{69}\) This march did not revolutionise the perception and treatment of women throughout India, nor did it drastically change the gender demographics of the education system. The Salt March was, however, the first mass-rally that

\(^{64}\) Chandha, 293.


\(^{67}\) Mahatma Gandhi, “Speech at Umber,” 262.


recruited Indian women to publicly demonstrate in the same capacity as Indian men.70 Gandhi may not have had a feminist agenda, but in promoting women’s inclusion he began to corrode a socio-cultural tradition that had placed females as secondary citizens. In 1930 salt acted as a symbol of gender cooperation and solidarity, united in a protest against imperialism and an effort to forge a genderless national identity.

Gandhi led a dramatically orchestrated protest movement that encouraged tremendous indigenous participation in 1930. His speeches and newspaper columns, which have been referred to throughout this article, were his method of gathering the crowds that participated in the march from Sabaramati to Dandi. Those who broke the salt laws at different locations around the subcontinent in the days following 5 April 1930 were mimicking Gandhi’s much-publicised example. In choosing salt as the focal commodity of the march, Gandhi simultaneously cast the Raj as an oppressive governing body, while promoting a sense of unity among India’s fragmented population. In a letter published in The Hindu in the aftermath of the Salt March he wrote, ‘great has been the sufferings of all the people among all the grades and classes representing different creeds’.71 The rhetoric of Gandhi’s march centred on the theme of inclusion. It would be historically blinkered to suggest that this message of religious, social and gender cooperation had a totalising effect uniting the communities and castes across India in the unanimous condemnation of imperial occupation. What this article has presented is the interpretation that Gandhi created a nationalist agenda that operated outside the specificity of one of the subcontinent’s religious communities, linguistic groups, or around an exclusively masculine or feminist focus. The Salt March was a unique campaign within the history of Indian nationalism because its protest structure was one that aimed at being demographically representative.

In the early months of 1931 Gandhi met with the British viceroy in India, Lord Irwin, to discuss the continuing indigenous evasion of the salt laws and the staunch reluctance from the British to revise their taxation policy. In a teatime meeting with the imperial head of state, Gandhi took a parcel of contraband salt from his pocket and placed a pinch in his cup of tea. With this subtle reference to the event that arguably sparked the American Revolution, he turned to

70 Brown, Gandhi: Prisoner of Hope, 223.
the viceroy and said that his gesture was ‘to remind us of the famous Boston Tea Party’.  

On March 5 1931, Lord Irwin, signed the Gandhi-Irwin Pact, ending the Raj’s monopoly over the manufacture, tax, and sale of salt. While other sections of this Pact, including a ban on jailing peaceful protesters, were made void, a year later the dissolution of the Salt Laws was maintained. The Salt March represents one of the first instances in which the Raj compromised in favour of the Nationalists’ demands. The end of salt restrictions marked the dissolution of a system of taxation that had been intimately connected to not only British imperial policy but also a longer global history of imperial rule. Salt’s status as a humble domestic commodity positioned it as a practical item of demonstration; one that promoted a sense of unity, rather than highlighting difference amongst the communities of the Indian subcontinent.

Erikson, Gandhi’s Truth, 448.
Kurlansky, Salt, 352.