



Mahatma Gandhi and Nonviolent Resistance

(1) When Mohandas Gandhi was born in 1869, India was a colony of the British Empire. The Gandhi family lived in a region of India that had not been greatly influenced by Western Culture. People of that region followed the same customs and traditions as their ancestors had for generations. The life of young Mohandas centered on his mother, who taught him about the Hindu doctrine of *ahimsa*, the refusal to do harm and the duty to do good. This belief was foundation for the bold and courageous acts that led to Gandhi's fame as a proponent of nonviolence resistance.

(2) Gandhi's first significant encounter with the discrimination based on color occurred, not in his native India but in South Africa. In 1893 Gandhi, a young attorney accepted an offer to work for one year for an Indian firm as a legal adviser to Indians living and working in South Africa. On the night of his arrival in that country, he had to travel by train to Pretoria, where he was to work. He bought a ticket to travel first class, as was the custom for lawyers. His pleasant journey was interrupted because a white passenger objected to his presence in the first-class compartment.

(3) When a conductor asked Gandhi to move to the luggage compartment, Gandhi refused, stating that he had a first-class ticket. The conductor called a policeman, who pulled him out of the first-class compartment and ordered him to go to the rear compartment. Gandhi again refused and was dumped off the train along with his luggage; he was forced to sit all night in a cold waiting room. This incident painfully introduced Gandhi to the indignities that Indians in South Africa endured.

(4) Generally, Indians quietly accepted discrimination because of skin color, a system that subjected them to insults and injustices. Gandhi believed that laws enacting discrimination should be challenged. Therefore, he became actively involved in organized opposition to the movement took on momentum. The leadership of Gandhi was so important to the Indian people in South Africa that they prevailed on him to stay.

(5) For 13 years the Indians' only weapons were petitions and propaganda. During 1903-04 Gandhi established a weekly magazine, *Indian Opinion*, in which he explained the Indians' fight for freedom.

(6) The government continued to discriminate against the Indians with a proposed ordinance requiring them to carry identification cards at all times. In response to the proposed law, members of the Indian community held a mass meeting to decide what action to take. They agreed to wage a campaign of deliberate disobedience. Gandhi was concerned about whether the crowd was prepared to accept the consequences of such action. He warned the members about the violent response they could expect; however, his warning did not change their mind. They vowed unanimously to resist the proposed law.

(7) Gandhi decided to name the protest *satyagraha*, which means the "force contained in truth and love," or "nonviolent resistance." The philosophy of *satyagraha* required that a person who decided to break a law considered unjust must accept the consequences of that decision. As expected, the movement met with resistance from the government;

eventually, however, the Indians gained a partial victory. During the long struggle Gandhi was jailed, an experience that helped to prepare him for the challenges he would face when he returned to India.

(8) British repression of Indian civil rights increased in India after World War I, giving rise to a nonviolent resistance campaign that stopped activity in cities and villages throughout the country. The initial success of the resistance movement startled the British; however, that success was followed by a long struggle marked by violence and setbacks.

In 1920 a determined Gandhi launched a campaign of deliberate non-cooperation to free India from British rule. During that campaign thousands of Indians were jailed. Despite the violence and beatings, Gandhi insisted that the correct response was love for the opposition. His ability to maintain the loyalty of followers from the diverse segments of Indian society won him deep respect. When he spoke, they listened with reverence, especially the poor, who sensed that he understood their poverty. Over his objections his followers gave him the name "Mahatma", which means "Great Soul".

(9) In 1920 Gandhi was brought to trial and found guilty of inciting disobedience to British laws. The evidence used against him were three articles published in his newspaper, *Young India*. He accepted his jail sentence calmly in the belief that he should go to jail for breaking an unjust law.

(10) During Gandhi's imprisonment the nonviolent resistance movement was halted; still, a demand was growing for unconditional self-rule. The return to civil disobedience resulted from the levying a salt tax. The British government held a monopoly on the manufacture of salt and imposed a heavy tax on the commodity. The tax was especially burdensome for the Indian peasants; for them salt was a necessity, not a luxury.

(11) At the age of sixty-one, Gandhi led a 200-mile march that lasted 24 days and gained worldwide attention; the march ended at the seacoast village of Dandi. There Gandhi and his followers waded into the water and picked up some of the salt that had washed ashore. In this statement to the press, he urged Indians to begin manufacturing their own salt; a practice that he knew would be illegal. In addition, he urged them to prepare themselves for non-violent resistance to harassment from the police.

(12) The Indians began their illegal manufacture of salt, inciting mass arrests and police brutality. Generally, the protests were restrained and nonviolent. Gandhi made plans to lead a raid on government salt mine. Not

long before the scheduled raid, he was arrested; but his followers carried out his plans. The raid, which resulted in much violence and bloodshed, proved to be a turning point in the movement. The British government realized that no amount of force was going to wipe out completely the acts of civil disobedience.

(13) World opinion brought pressure on the government to release Gandhi from jail. A series of meetings between him and the British Viceroy led to a treaty that required compromises on both sides. All Indian political prisoners would be released, and Indians would be permitted to manufacture salt. Gandhi, in turn, agreed to suspend civil disobedience. The treaty was a significant first step toward the ultimate goal of complete independence for India.

(14) For over a decade Gandhi and his followers waged an unrelenting struggle for independence, often in the face of violent opposition from the British government. Failing health and numerous jail terms did not deter the courageous efforts of Mahatma Gandhi. India's long struggle for freedom ended in 1947, when independence was granted. The achievement of independence was hailed as a victory for nonviolent resistance.

(15) On January 30, 1948, Gandhi was assassinated by Nathuram Godse, who fired three shots point blank at Gandhi. Godse, a young Brahmin extremist, believed that Gandhi had weakened India by befriending Muslims.

From California Department of Education

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