

# Gandhi the peace builder

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Most of the Indian communities only know one person as the father of India, Mahatma Gandhi. Every Indian child who has ever been to school has at one time written an essay on Mahatma Gandhi.

Gandhi's legacy is one that is in the hearts of all Indians, and in the hearts of all the people in the world. Gandhi's actions, beliefs, and determination are the source of inspiration to every world leader (Brown et al, 2006). Gandhi's legacy includes his fight for the rights of Indians in South Africa and the fight against racism in the same country. People also remember Gandhi for his fight against British rule in India. However, nations will always remember Gandhi for his application of non-violence to spread peace and bring about social change (Christopher, 2001).

Mahatma Gandhi was born on October 2, 1969 in Porbander, in the state of Gujarat. Born as Mohandas Karamchand (one of the great poets of India, Rabindranath Tagore, called him Mahatma meaning " great soul"), Gandhi was a child from a merchant family. Gandhi's father and grandfather were both politicians and were at one time prime ministers. Gandhi was married early at the age of 13 to Kasturba. After early education he went to London to study law in 1888, leaving behind young and illiterate Kasturba.

Three years later, Gandhi became a lawyer and headed back to India to establish his career in the field (Lelyveld, 2011). Gandhi's law career in India did not succeed, and in 1893 he left for South Africa to act as a legal adviser to an Indian firm. It is the 21 years that he spent in South Africa that shaped his life since Gandhi's contribution to a better world did start there. Indians in South Africa were victims of racial discrimination. This racism turns Gandhi

from a shy, soft-spoken lawyer, into a loud, fearless, and outspoken political activist.

Gandhi was a religious man searching for God. His pursuit of truth through non-violence was based on faith. Gandhi's profession of fourteen vows is probably the best display of his connection to faith and religion. Gandhi was a devout spiritual and religious leader. This man took a lot of time to assess and evaluate his own religion. Gandhi also spent a lot of time to socializing and talking to some of his Christian and Jewish friends about religion (Sofri, 1999).

From these discussions, and from his own opinion about religion, Gandhi was able to establish a unique outlook on life. The first week that he was in South Africa gave him direction towards his purpose in this world. Gandhi was travelling by train towards Pretoria to oversee a legal case. It is in this train that he comes face to face with racism. In South Africa first class compartments were only for the privileged few, the whites. Blacks, Hindus and other races, by consensus, would travel in third class compartments.

Gandhi was taking first against the norm (Lelyveld, 2011). When Gandhi was quietly reading a book, a white conductor ordered him to take his belongings and head to where he belongs, third class, or the conductor would throw him out of the train. Gandhi does not budge, and the white eventually throw him out of the train. In the cold, he weighs his three options. The first option is to return to India, and the second is to join violent revolutionists, who pursue justice through bloodshed.

The third option was pursuing a peaceful and prayerful campaign against racism, in essence, non-violence. In the next week he mobilized fellow Indians to oppose the segregation. In 1896 Gandhi won the case that brought him to South Africa and was to return home. The day of his departure saw the South African government announce that Indians will no longer vote. During his farewell party, Gandhi agrees to help his fellow Indians fight against discrimination. He goes on to hold much non-violent movement against these injustices (Sofri, 1999).

Certain cases highlight the fact that Gandhi was a firm believer in religion. In 1906 the South African government adopts a bold rule that all Indians must fingerprint and register with the government. The Indians also were to carry their registration with them always. This angers Mahatma Gandhi, who goes ahead to use religion and the name of the Almighty to influence the crowds. In front of a crowd of more than 3,000 Indians, he says that he will oppose the injustices, “in the name of God, even if they lead to his death” (Chadha, 1993). Gandhi at this meeting notes that, if everybody in the meeting took a pledge “in the name of God” to fight up to the end, then nobody would stop them.

Even if, somebody was beaten, tortured, or falsely imprisoned, they would suffer silently in the name of the Lord. They wanted the world’s sympathy. This speech was the birth of “Satyagraha movement,” meaning resisting what is untrue by using the truth. Although this speech did lead to the arrest of more than 1500 Indians, it remains as the pillar of his belief in religion and non-violence (Sofri, 1999). February 1908 was the month that Mahatma was first in prison, serving a two-month jail term with hard labor.

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In August of the same year he influences fellow Indians to burn registration certificates. This campaign led him back to jail. It is during this second jail term that he studies Thoreau. Gandhi concludes that real happiness is only from suffering tribulations in jail in the name of religion and country. To oppress the Indians further, the South African government bans other marriages except Christian marriages (Sofri, 1999). This last stroke leads to him organizing marches, demonstrations, and burning of cards.

Later that year Gandhi leads a procession of 5000 mineworkers illegally from Natal to Transvaal. Again, he lands in jail for three months with hard labor. However, the government backs down to constant pressure both domestically and internationally and passes registration recognizing the Indians. The release of Indian political activists follows soon (Bhana et al, 2005). After a visit to a Trappist monastery in Johannesburg, Gandhi draws a lot of inspiration from simplicity, prayer, intentional community, and farming.

Gandhi ends up buying more than 1000 acres of land that forms the headquarters of his Satyagraha movement. Another thing that Gandhi always had a belief that one has to identify with the people he/she is fighting together. The Indians in South Africa were poor. In a bid to remain poor Gandhi always took a walk to all his destinations (Chadha, 1993). The walk to Johannesburg was 42 kilometers, a distance he walked without complaining.

Gandhi also took time to study other writings, among them the New Testament. Jesus' teachings of the " Sermon on the Mount" give him a moral and spiritual guidance that determines the rest of his life. Fight for Independence in India In the year 1915, Gandhi returns to home and spends

the next year crisscrossing the whole of India to identify the problems of poor Indians. Here he sets up an Ashram housing more than 250 people. These people take fourteen oaths of religion, nonviolence, celibacy, fearlessness, poverty, hard labor, and religion tolerance. These people always ate and prayed together.

It is in the Champaran that Gandhi first lands into the prison cells of the British government. Then he was studying the injustices and sufferings of the people living here. Gandhi's release was, however, imminent as the government cows to public pressure to release him (Lelyveld 2011). The year 1919 goes into history as a significant year in India. Although the First World War is over, the British government continues oppressing the Indians by denying them their rights.

It is in line with this that Gandhi calls for a general Hartal. This is a day that all Indians ignore work (Chadha, 1993). On April 6, the country comes to a standstill as workers stay at home. Others took to the streets protesting against the British rule. This leads to the massacre of more than 379 Indians by British soldiers and wounding 1200 at Amritsar.

From 1920 onwards he calls for non-violent non-cooperation with the British. The Indian government officially recognizes Satyagraha. A series of demonstrations follow that lead to the death of 20 soldiers prompting Gandhi to call off the demonstrations. Gandhi's belief in non-violence makes him call off any demonstration at the onset of violence, a situation that angers fellow protestors. Gandhi later calls off the campaigns leading to the release of more than 50, 000 disobedience prisoners.

However, the British arrest him. Gandhi famously challenges the judge to join him in the fight or give him the maximum sentence. According to Rajmohan (2004), this was a display of the fearlessness of Gandhi. He lands in jail for a term of six years. Gandhi spends only two years in prison due to health complications. In prison he reads hundreds of books and embarks on his autobiography.

He encourages prisoners to accept suffering as the only way to achieve freedom, politically and religiously. Gandhi feels that freedom is near and spends the next years preparing Indians for independence (Queen, 2001). His belief in religion makes him take a tiresome 21 day fast, praying for the unity of Hindu and Islam. This encourages Hindus to forgive and accept others doing harm to them. Gandhi encourages the use of the spinning wheel to make clothes, in a bid to reduce the market for British-made clothes.

If he went anywhere and the Crown was unruly and violent, he would keep quiet and depart slowly after the Crown becomes calm. The salt protest is yet another example of the beliefs of Gandhi. He famously influences Indians to stop paying salt tax. He does this by taking a 210-mile walk towards the salt mines, taking the salt and selling it on the street, a feat that other Indians follow. This was a direct disregard on the law of salt tax.

A march by 2000 Satyagrahans to the mines piles international pressure on the Britons. British soldiers viciously beat the harmless and unarmed Satyagrahans, an event that shocks the world. The British government arrests more than 100000 Indians leading to the call by millions of people

worldwide for the independence of India (Brown et al, 2006). In 1932 the Britons arrest Gandhi together with other leaders of the Congress Party. Gandhi was a firm believer and advocate of the abolition of Hindu untouchable caste.

This was notwithstanding the fact that it was a tradition of the Indians and not a practice of the British. The untouchables were a group of Indians, who were subjected to humiliation of washing toilets from birth to death. Gandhi announces a fast to death, until the recognition of the untouchables.

Because of the respect of Gandhi from the Indians, Hindu leaders accept the untouchables to their temples for the first time in thousands of years (Brown et al, 2006). What do you call that, fighting a tradition that is more than 5000 years old, single-handedly? Gandhi's belief was that of doing the right thing all the time and helping the oppressed in the community.

Gandhi woke every morning at 4 a. m. to pray. That is how he had a high regard for religion. The onset of the Second World War saddens Gandhi, who always had a belief that the world will never plunge into violence again. His belief in non-violence makes him leave the Congress party after their declaration of supporting Hitler in the war.

Gandhi rejoins the party after Churchill rejects its help in the war. In 1942, the government arrests him and his wife (Rajmohan et al, 2006). The wife dies in prison while the British release him in 1944 due to poor health. In the year 1947 Churchill finally gives independence to India. Soon, however, violence breaks out between Hindu and Muslims. Gandhi fasts and moans for thousands of Indians who die in the violence.



He moves to violence-hit village of Calcutta and decides to fast till death or until there was a stop to the violence. As he nears death, violence in Calcutta stops. Gandhi visits other regions and does the same. In the end, Muslim and Hindu leaders sign a pact, in his presence, to maintain peace (Lelyveld, 2011). In conclusion, Gandhi was in prison for twelve times. He spends more than six years in prison and does eleven public fasts.

From the discussions and examples above, Gandhi tries to follow the will of God. He realizes that a person has to purify his/her heart and live in order to follow the path of God. Gandhi's life was that of high integrity and a fight of what he believed in. His heart went to the poor and the powerless in the society. Gandhi's drive towards nonviolence remains to this day in the hearts of many Indians. Although many nations independence was attained through violence, India's independence was reached due to non-violence.

Gandhi dies in the 1948 through assassination (Bhana et al, 2005).