

Gandhi - Biography of Mahatma Gandhi

October 2, 1869 - January 30, 1948

By [Jennifer Rosenberg](#), About.com Guide

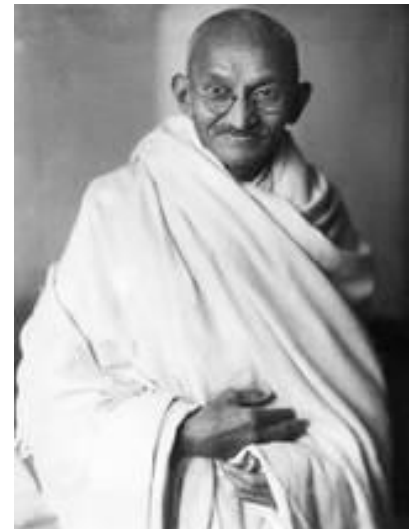
<http://history1900s.about.com/od/people/a/gandhi.htm>

Also Known As:

Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, Mahatma ("Great Soul"), Father of the Nation, Bapu ("Father"), Gandhiji

Historical Importance:

Mohandas Gandhi is considered the father of the Indian independence movement. Gandhi spent twenty years in South Africa working to fight discrimination. It was there that he created his concept of satyagraha, a non-violent way of protesting against injustices. While in India, Gandhi's obvious virtue, simplistic lifestyle, and minimal dress endeared him to the people. He spent his remaining years working diligently to both remove British rule from India as well as to better the lives of India's poorest classes. Many civil rights leaders, including Martin Luther King Jr., used Gandhi's concept of non-violent protest as a model for their own struggles.



Overview of Gandhi:

Mohandas Gandhi was the last child of his father (Karamchand Gandhi) and his father's fourth wife (Putlibai). During his youth, Mohandas Gandhi was shy, soft-spoken, and only a mediocre student at school. Although generally an obedient child, at one point Gandhi experimented with eating meat, smoking, and a small amount of stealing -- all of which he later regretted. At age 13, Gandhi married Kasturba (also spelled Kasturbai) in an arranged marriage. Kasturba bore Gandhi four sons and supported Gandhi's endeavors until her death in 1944.

QUICK FACTS

- NAME: Mahatma Gandhi
- OCCUPATION: [Anti-War Activist](#)
- BIRTH DATE: [October 02, 1869](#)
- DEATH DATE: [January 03, 1948](#)
- EDUCATION: Samaldas College at Bhavnagar, Gujarat, University College London

Off to London

In September 1888, at age 18, Gandhi left India, without his wife and newborn son, in order to study to become a barrister (lawyer) in London. Attempting to fit into English society, Gandhi spent his first three months in London attempting to make himself into an English gentleman by buying new suits, fine-tuning his English accent, learning French, and taking violin and dance lessons. After three months of these expensive endeavors, Gandhi decided they were a waste of time and money. He then cancelled all of these classes and spent the

remainder of his three-year stay in London being a serious student and living a very simple lifestyle.

In addition to learning to live a very simple and frugal lifestyle, Gandhi discovered his life-long passion for vegetarianism while in England. Although most of the other Indian students ate meat while they were in England, Gandhi was determined not to do so, in part because he had vowed to his mother that he would stay a vegetarian. In his search for vegetarian restaurants, Gandhi found and joined the London Vegetarian Society. The Society consisted of an intellectual crowd who introduced Gandhi to different authors, such as Henry David Thoreau and Leo Tolstoy. It was also through members of the Society that Gandhi began to really read the *Bhagavad Gita*, an epic poem which is considered a sacred text to Hindus. The new ideas and concepts that he learned from these books set the foundation for his later beliefs.

Gandhi successfully passed the bar on June 10, 1891 and sailed back to India two days later. For the next two years, Gandhi attempted to practice law in India. Unfortunately, Gandhi found that he lacked both knowledge of Indian law and self-confidence at trial. When he was offered a year-long position to take a case in South Africa, he was thankful for the opportunity.

Arriving in South Africa

At age 23, Gandhi once again left his family behind and set off for South Africa, arriving in British-governed Natal in May 1893. Although Gandhi was hoping to earn a little bit of money and to learn more about law, it was in South Africa that Gandhi transformed from a very quiet and shy man to a resilient and potent leader against discrimination. The beginning of this transformation occurred during a business trip taken shortly after his arrival in South Africa.

Gandhi had only been in South Africa for about a week when he was asked to take the long trip from Natal to the capital of the Dutch-governed Transvaal province of South Africa for his case. It was to be a several day trip, including transportation by train and by stagecoach. When Gandhi boarded the first train of his journey at the Pietermaritzburg station, railroad officials told Gandhi that he needed to transfer to the third-class passenger car. When Gandhi, who was holding first-class passenger tickets, refused to move, a policeman came and threw him off the train.

That was not the last of the injustices Gandhi suffered on this trip. As Gandhi talked to other Indians in South Africa (derogatorily called "coolies"), he found that his experiences were most definitely not isolated incidents but rather, these types of situations were common. During that first night of his trip, sitting in the cold of the railroad station after being thrown off the train, Gandhi contemplated whether he should go back home to India or to fight the discrimination. After much thought, Gandhi decided that he could not let these injustices continue and that he was going to fight to change these discriminatory practices.

BEST KNOWN FOR

Mahatma Gandhi was the political and ideological leader of India. He pioneered mass civil disobedience firmly founded in total nonviolence.

The Reformer

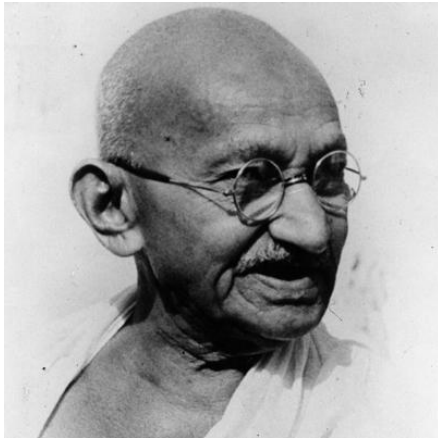
Gandhi spent the next twenty years working to better Indians' rights in South Africa. During the first three years, Gandhi learned more about Indian grievances, studied the law, wrote letters to officials, and organized petitions. On May 22, 1894, Gandhi established the Natal Indian Congress (NIC). Although the NIC began as an organization for wealthy Indians, Gandhi worked diligently to expand its membership to all classes and castes. Gandhi became well-known for his activism and his acts were even covered by newspapers in England and India. In a few short years, Gandhi had become a leader of the Indian community in South Africa.

In 1896, after living three years in South Africa, Gandhi sailed to India with the intention of bringing his wife and two sons back with him. While in India, there was a bubonic plague outbreak. Since it was then believed that poor sanitation was the cause of the spread of the plague, Gandhi offered to help inspect latrines and offer suggestions for better sanitation. Although others were willing to inspect the latrines of the wealthy, Gandhi personally inspected the latrines of the untouchables as well as the rich. He found that it was the wealthy that had the worst sanitation problems.

On November 30, 1896, Gandhi and his family headed for South Africa. Gandhi did not realize that while he had been away from South Africa, his pamphlet of Indian grievances, known as the *Green Pamphlet*, had been exaggerated and distorted. When Gandhi's ship reached the Durban harbor, it was detained for 23 days for quarantine. The real reason for the delay was that there was a large, angry mob of whites at the dock who believed that Gandhi was returning with two shiploads of Indian passengers to overrun South Africa. When allowed to disembark, Gandhi successfully sent his family off to safety, but he himself was assaulted with bricks, rotten eggs, and fists. Police arrived in time to save Gandhi from the mob and then escort him to safety. Once Gandhi had refuted the claims against him and refused to prosecute those who had assailed him, the violence against him stopped. However, the entire incident strengthened Gandhi's prestige in South Africa.

When the Boer War in South Africa began in 1899, Gandhi organized the Indian Ambulance Corp in which 1,100 Indians heroically helped injured British soldiers. The goodwill created by this support of South African Indians to the British lasted just long enough for Gandhi to return to India for a year, beginning at the end of 1901. After traveling through India and successfully drawing public attention to some of the inequalities suffered by the lower classes of Indians, Gandhi returned to South Africa to continue his work there.

A Simplified Life



Influenced by the *Gita*, Gandhi wanted to purify his life by following the concepts of *aparigraha* (non-possession) and *samabhava* (equability). Then, when a friend gave him the book, *Unto This Last* by John Ruskin, Gandhi became excited about the ideals proffered by Ruskin. The book inspired Gandhi to establish a communal living community called Phoenix Settlement just outside of Durban in June 1904. The Settlement was an experiment in communal living, a way to eliminate one's needless possessions and to live in a society with full equality. Gandhi moved his newspaper, the *Indian Opinion*, and its workers to the Phoenix Settlement as well as his own family a bit later. Besides a building for the press, each community member was allotted three acres of land on which to build a dwelling made of corrugated iron. In addition to farming, all members of the community were to be trained and expected to help with the newspaper.

In 1906, believing that family life was taking away from his full potential as a public advocate, Gandhi took the vow of *brahmacharya* (a vow of abstinence against sexual relations, even with one's own wife). This was not an easy vow for him to follow, but one that he worked diligently to keep for the rest of his life. Thinking that one passion fed others, Gandhi decided to restrict his diet in order to remove passion from his palette. To aid him in this endeavor, Gandhi simplified his diet from strict vegetarianism to foods that were unspiced and usually uncooked, with fruits and nuts being a large portion of his food choices. Fasting, he believed, would also help still the urges of the flesh.

Satyagraha

Gandhi believed that his taking the vow of *brahmacharya* had allowed him the focus to come up with the concept of *satyagraha* in late 1906. In the very simplest sense, *satyagraha* is passive resistance. However, Gandhi believed the English phrase of "passive resistance" did not represent the true spirit of Indian resistance since passive resistance was often thought to be used by the weak and was a tactic that could potentially be conducted in anger.

Needing a new term for the Indian resistance, Gandhi chose the term "satyagraha," which literally means "truth force." Since Gandhi believed that exploitation was only possible if both the exploited and the exploiter accepted it, if one could see above the current situation and see the universal truth, then one had the power to make change. (Truth, in this manner, could mean "natural right," a right granted by nature and the universe that should not be impeded on by man.)

In practice, *satyagraha* was a focused and forceful nonviolent resistance to a particular injustice. A *satyagrahi* (a person using *satyagraha*) would resist the injustice by refusing to follow an unjust law. In doing so, he would not be angry, would put up freely with physical assaults to his person and the confiscation of his property, and would not use foul language to smear his opponent. A practitioner of *satyagraha* also would never take advantage of an opponent's problems. The goal was not for there to be a winner and loser of the battle, but rather, that all would eventually see and understand the "truth" and agree to rescind the unjust law.

The first time Gandhi officially used *satyagraha* was in South Africa beginning in 1907 when he organized opposition to the Asiatic Registration Law (known as the Black Act). In March 1907, the Black Act was passed, requiring all Indians - young and old, men and women - to get fingerprinted and to keep registration documents on them at all times. While using *satyagraha*, Indians refused to get fingerprinted and picketed the documentation offices. Mass protests were organized, miners went on strike, and masses of Indians illegally traveled from Natal to the Transvaal in opposition to the Black Act. Many of the protesters were beaten and arrested, including Gandhi. (This was the first of Gandhi's many jail sentences.) It took seven years of protest, but in June 1914, the Black Act was repealed. Gandhi had proved that nonviolent protest could be immensely successful.

Back to India

Having spent twenty years in South Africa helping fight discrimination, Gandhi decided it was time to head back to India in July 1914. On his way home, Gandhi was scheduled to make a short stop in England. However, when World War I broke out during his journey, Gandhi decided to stay in England and form another ambulance corps of Indians to help the British. When the British air caused Gandhi to take ill, he sailed to India in January 1915.

Gandhi's struggles and triumphs in South Africa had been reported in the worldwide press, so by the time he reached home he was a national hero. Although he was eager to begin reforms in India, a friend advised him to wait a year and spend the time traveling around India to acquaint himself with the people and their tribulations.

QUOTES

"An eye for an eye only ends up making the whole world blind."
– Mahatma Gandhi

Yet Gandhi soon found his fame getting in the way of accurately seeing the conditions that the poorer people lived in day to day. In an attempt to travel more anonymously, Gandhi began wearing a loincloth (*dhoti*) and sandals (the average dress of the masses) during this journey. If it was cold out, he would add a shawl. This became his wardrobe for the rest of his life.

Also during this year of observation, Gandhi founded another communal settlement, this time in Ahmadabad and called the Sabarmati Ashram. Gandhi lived on the Ashram for the next sixteen years, along with his family and several members who had once been part of the Phoenix Settlement.

Mahatma

It was during his first year back in India that Gandhi was given the honorary title of Mahatma ("Great Soul"). Many credit Indian poet Rabindranath Tagore, winner of the 1913 Nobel Prize for Literature, for both awarding Gandhi of this name and of publicizing it. The title represented the feelings of the millions of Indian peasants who viewed Gandhi as a holy man. However, Gandhi never liked the title because it seemed to mean he was special while he viewed himself as ordinary.

After Gandhi's year of travel and observance was over, he was still stifled in his actions because of the World War. As part of *satyagraha*, Gandhi had vowed to never take advantage of an opponent's troubles. With the British fighting a huge war, Gandhi could not fight for Indian freedom from British rule. This did not mean that Gandhi sat idle.

Instead of fighting the British, Gandhi used his influence and *satyagraha* to change inequities between Indians. For example, Gandhi persuaded landlords to stop forcing their tenant farmers to pay increased rent and mill owners to peacefully settle a strike. Gandhi used his fame and determination to appeal to the landlords' morals and used fasting as a means to convince the mill owners to settle. Gandhi's reputation and prestige had reached such a high level that people did not want to be responsible for his death (fasting made Gandhi physically weak and in ill-health, with the potential for death).

Turning Against the British

As the First World War reached its end, it was time for Gandhi to focus on the fight for Indian self-rule (*swaraj*). In 1919, the British gave Gandhi something specific to fight against - the Rowlatt Act. This Act gave the British in India nearly free-reign to root out "revolutionary" elements and to detain them indefinitely without trial. In response to this Act, Gandhi organized a mass *hartal* (general strike), which began on March 30, 1919. Unfortunately, such a large scale protest quickly got out of hand and in many places it turned violent.

Even though Gandhi called off the *hartal* once he heard about the violence, over 300 Indians had died and over 1,100 were injured from British reprisal in the city of Amritsar. Although *satyagraha* had not been realized during this protest, the Amritsar Massacre heated Indian opinion against the British.

The violence that erupted from the *hartal* showed Gandhi that the Indian people did not yet fully believe in the power of *satyagraha*. Thus, Gandhi spent much of the 1920s advocating for *satyagraha* and struggling to learn how to control nationwide protests to keep them from becoming violent.

In March 1922, Gandhi was jailed for sedition and after a trial was sentenced to six years in prison. After two years, Gandhi was released due to ill-health following surgery to treat his appendicitis. Upon his release, Gandhi found his country embroiled in violent attacks between Muslims and Hindus. As penance for the violence, Gandhi began a 21-day fast, known as the Great Fast of 1924. Still ill from his recent surgery, many thought he would die on day twelve, but he rallied. The fast created a temporary peace.



Also during this decade, Gandhi began advocating self-reliance as a way to gain freedom from the British. For example, from the time that the British had established India as a colony, the Indians were supplying Britain with raw materials and then importing expensive, woven cloth from England. Thus, Gandhi advocated that Indians spin their own cloth to free themselves from this reliance on the British. Gandhi popularized this idea by traveling with his own spinning wheel, often spinning yarn even while giving a speech. In this way, the image of the spinning wheel (*charkha*) became a symbol for Indian independence.

The Salt March

In December 1928, Gandhi and the Indian National Congress (INC) announced a new challenge to the British government. If India was not granted the status of a Commonwealth by December 31, 1929, then they would organize a nation-wide protest against British taxes. The deadline came and passed with no change in British policy.

There were many British taxes to choose from, but Gandhi wanted to choose one that symbolized British exploitation of India's poor. The answer was the salt tax. Salt was a spice that was used in everyday cooking, even for the poorest in India. Yet, the British had made it illegal to own salt not sold or produced by the British government, in order to make a profit on all salt sold in India.

The Salt March was the beginning of a nationwide campaign to boycott the salt tax. It began on March 12, 1930 when Gandhi and 78 followers marched out from the Sabarmati Ashram and headed to the sea, about 200 miles away. The group of marchers grew larger as the days wore on, building up to approximately two or three thousand. The group marched about 12 miles per day in the scorching sun. When they reached Dandi, a town along the coast, on April 5, the group prayed all night. In the morning, Gandhi made a presentation of picking up a piece of sea salt that lay on the beach. Technically, he had broken the law.

This began a momentous, national endeavor for Indians to make their own salt. Thousands of people went to the beaches to pick up loose salt while others began to evaporate salt water. Indian-made salt was soon sold across the country. The energy created by this protest was contagious and felt all around India. Peaceful picketing and marches were also conducted. The British responded with mass arrests.

When Gandhi announced that he planned a march on the government-owned Dharasana Saltworks, the British arrested Gandhi and imprisoned him without trial. Although the British had hoped that Gandhi's arrest would stop the march, they had underestimated his followers. The poet Mrs. Sarojini Naidu took over and led the 2,500 marchers. As the group reached the 400 policemen and 6 British officers who were waiting for them, the marchers approached in a column of 25 at a time. The marchers were beaten with clubs, often being hit on their heads and shoulders. The international press watched as the marchers did not even raise their hands to defend themselves. After the first 25 marchers were beaten to the ground, another column of 25 would approach and be beaten, until all 2,500 had marched forward and been pummeled. The news of the brutal beating by the British of peaceful protesters shocked the world.

Realizing he had to do something to stop the protests, the British viceroy, Lord Irwin, met with Gandhi. The two men agreed on the Delhi Pact, which granted limited salt production and the freeing of all the peaceful protesters from jail as long as Gandhi called off the protests. While many Indians felt that Gandhi had not been granted enough during these negotiations, Gandhi himself viewed it as a sure step on the road to independence.

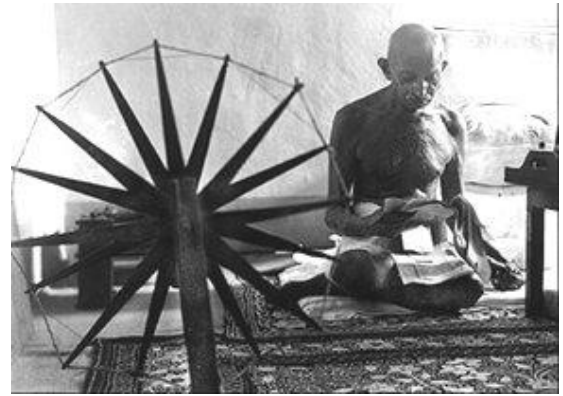
Indian Independence

Indian independence did not come quickly. After the success of the Salt March, Gandhi conducted another fast which only enhanced his image as a holy man or prophet. Concerned and dismayed at such adulation, Gandhi retired from politics in 1934 at age 64. However, Gandhi came out of retirement five years later when the British viceroy brazenly announced that India would side with England during World War II, without having consulted any Indian leaders. The Indian independence movement had been revitalized by this British arrogance.

Many in the British Parliament realized that they were once again facing mass protests in India and began discussing possible ways to create an independent India. Although Prime Minister Winston Churchill steadfastly opposed the idea of losing India as a British colony, the British announced in March 1941 that it would free India at the end of World War II. This was just not enough for Gandhi.

Wanting independence sooner, Gandhi organized a "Quit India" campaign in 1942. In response, the British once again jailed Gandhi.

When Gandhi was released from prison in 1944, Indian independence seemed in sight. Unfortunately, however, huge disagreements between Hindus and Muslims had arisen. Since the majority of Indians were Hindu, the Muslims feared not having any political power if there was an independent India. Thus, the Muslims wanted the six provinces in northwest India, which had a majority population of Muslims, to become an independent country. Gandhi heatedly opposed the idea of a partition of India and did his best to bring all sides together.



The differences between Hindus and Muslims proved too great for even the Mahatma to fix. Massive violence erupted, including raping, slaughter, and the burning of entire towns. Gandhi toured India, hoping his mere presence could curb the violence. Although violence did stop where Gandhi visited, he could not be everywhere.

The British, witnessing what seemed sure to become a violent civil war, decided to leave India in August 1947. Before leaving, the British were able to get the Hindus, against Gandhi's wishes, to agree to a partition plan. On August 15, 1947, Great Britain granted independence to India and to the newly formed Muslim country of Pakistan.

The violence between the Hindus and Muslims continued as millions of Muslim refugees marched out of India on the long trek to Pakistan and millions of Hindus who found themselves in Pakistan packed up their belongings and walked to India. At no other time have so many people become refugees. The lines of refugees stretched for miles and many died along the way from illness, exposure, and dehydration. As 15 million Indians became uprooted from their homes, Hindus and Muslims attacked each other with vengeance.

To stop this wide-spread violence, Gandhi once again went on a fast. He would only eat again, he stated, once he saw clear plans to stop the violence. The fast began on January 13, 1948. Realizing that the frail and aged Gandhi could not withstand a long fast, both sides worked together to create a peace. On January 18, a group of more than a hundred representatives approached Gandhi with a promise for peace, thus ending Gandhi's fast.

Assassination

Unfortunately, not everyone was happy with this peace plan. There were a few radical Hindu groups who believed that India should never have been partitioned. In part, they blamed Gandhi for the separation.

On January 30, 1948, the 78-year-old Gandhi spent his last day as he had many others. The majority of the day was spent discussing issues with various groups and individuals. At a few minutes past 5 p.m., when it was time for the prayer meeting, Gandhi began the walk to Birla House. A crowd had surrounded him as he walked, being supported by two of his grandnieces. In front of him, a young Hindu named Nathuram Godse stopped before him and bowed. Gandhi bowed back. Then Godse rushed forward and shot Gandhi three times with a black, semi-automatic pistol. Although Gandhi had survived five other assassination attempts, this time, Gandhi fell to the ground, dead.