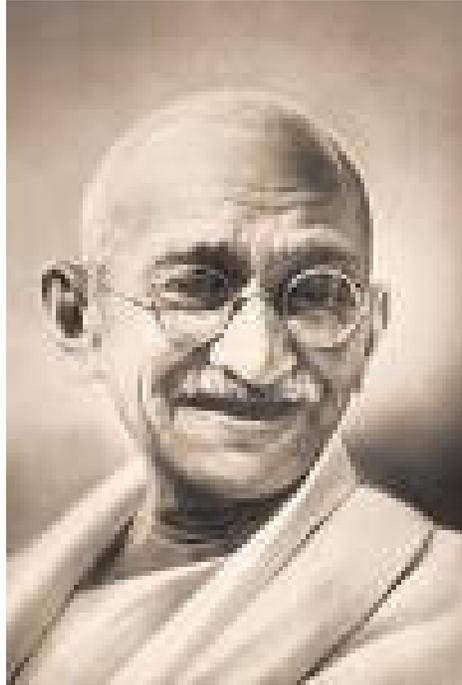


Mohandas Karamchand (Mahatma) Gandhi (1869-1948)

“An eye for eye only ends up making the whole world blind” - Gandhi



While Mohandas (Mahatma) Gandhi is considered the father of the Indian independence movement, he also spent twenty years in South Africa working to combat discrimination. It was there that he developed the concept of *satyagraha*, a non-violent way of protesting against injustice.

In India, Gandhi's integrity, simplistic lifestyle and minimal dress endeared him to the people. He spent a large part of his life working to better the lives of the poor and to free India from British rule.

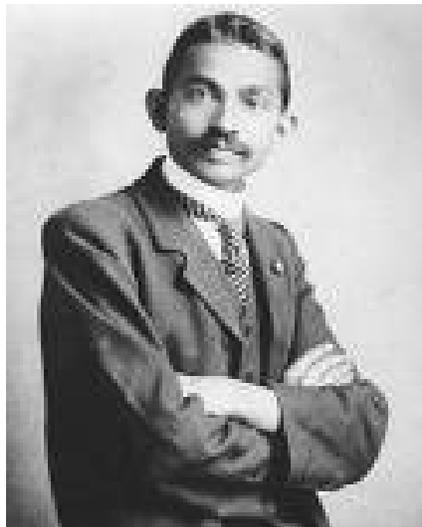
In his youth, Mohandas Gandhi was a mediocre student, shy and soft-spoken., although by his own admission there was a short period of minor rebellion! At age 13, he married Kasturba (also spelled Kasturbai) - an arranged marriage. Kasturba bore Gandhi four sons and unconditionally supported his endeavors until her death in 1944.

In September 1888 at age 18 Gandhi left India for London without his wife and newborn son in order to qualify as a barrister. In an effort to fit into English society, Gandhi at first

attempted to make himself into an English gentleman; he bought new suits, fine-tuned his English accent, learned French and took violin and dance lessons. After three months, he decided all + this was a waste of time and money and spent the remainder of his three-year stay in London as a serious student with a very simple and frugal lifestyle.

While in London Gandhi re-discovered an earlier interest in vegetarianism. Although most of the other Indian students ate meat while they were in England, Gandhi was determined not to do so and through his search for vegetarian restaurants learned of and joined the London Vegetarian Society. The group consisted mainly of intellectuals who introduced Gandhi to authors such as Henry David Thoreau and Leo Tolstoy. It was also through interaction with members of the Society that Gandhi began to re-read the *Bhagavad Gita*, an epic poem which is considered a sacred Hindu text. This exposure to new ideas was to provide the foundation for his later beliefs.

Gandhi in South Africa



Gandhi as a lawyer in South Africa in 1906

Gandhi was admitted to the Bar on June 10, 1891 and set sail for India two days later. For the next two years, he attempted to practice but found himself hampered by a lack of knowledge of the substance and nature of Indian law. Consequently, when offered a year-long appointment to take a case in South Africa, he grasped the opportunity and,

once again leaving his family, he set off, arriving in British-governed Natal in May 1893. Although his initial aim had simply been to earn a little money and in the process learn more about law, it was in South Africa that Gandhi was to be transformed from an exceedingly quiet, shy man to a resilient and powerful opponent of injustice and discrimination.

This transformation began on a business trip taken shortly after his arrival. Gandhi was asked to make the long trip from Natal to the capital of the Dutch-governed Transvaal province of South Africa. Travel was by train and stagecoach. When Gandhi boarded the first train at the Pietermaritzburg station, he was informed by railroad officials that he must transfer to the third-class passenger car, even though he held a first-class ticket. . Gandhi refused to do so. The police were called and he was thrown off the train.

That night, while sitting in the cold of the railroad station, Gandhi contemplated whether or not he should return home. On the same journey, when travelling by stagecoach, he was barred from several hotels and beaten by the driver of a stagecoach for refusing to travel on the foot board to make room for a European passenger. Gandhi was to acknowledge that it was through witnessing firsthand the racism, prejudice and injustice experienced by Indians in South Africa that he began not only to look at his own status in society but the status of India and its people within the British Empire. Gandhi gave the matter considerable thought and decided that he could not let discrimination and injustice go unchallenged. He was going to fight it.

During the first three years Gandhi studied the law, gathered evidence, wrote letters to officials and organised petitions. On May 22, 1894 he established the Natal Indian Congress (NIC). Although it began as an advocate for wealthy Indians, Gandhi worked diligently to expand its scope to cover all classes and castes. His activism became increasingly well-known not only in South Africa but in Britain and India as well. Within a few short years, Gandhi had become a leader of the Indian community in South Africa.

In 1896 Gandhi returned to India with the intention of taking his wife and two sons back to South Africa. While he was in India, there was an outbreak of bubonic plague. It was

believed that poor sanitation was the cause of the spread of the disease and Gandhi offered to help inspect latrines and examine ways of improving sanitation. He volunteered to take part in the inspection and was one of the few prepared to inspect the latrines of the lower caste – the “untouchables.”

Finally, on November 30, 1896 Gandhi and his family set sail for South Africa. He did not realise that while he had been away, his pamphlet setting out Indian grievances, known as the *Green Pamphlet*, had been exaggerated, distorted and as a result widely misinterpreted. When Gandhi's ship reached the harbour in Durban it was refused docking and detained for 23 days. The official reason was quarantine requirements. The real reason for the delay was a large, angry mob of white South Africans waiting on the dock, incensed by a rumour that Gandhi was returning with two shiploads of Indian passengers with the aim of “over-running” South Africa.

There were ugly scenes when the family finally disembarked. Fortunately Gandhi had planned ahead and arranged for his family to slip quietly away, but he was physically and verbally assaulted and had to be rescued by the police. However, it soon became obvious that the rumour was unfounded and matters settled down. The incident – especially Gandhi's calm and non-confrontational handling of the situation - heightened his prestige in South Africa.

When the Boer War broke out in 1899, Gandhi organized an Indian Ambulance Corp of 1,000 to work with the British army. He then returned to India and spent 12 months touring extensively, giving speeches and drawing attention to the inequalities suffered by lower cast Indians. At the end of this period he returned to South Africa.

Influenced by the *Bhagavad Gita*, Gandhi wanted to purify his life by adopting the concepts of *aparigraha* (non-possession) and *samabhava* (equality of all). When a friend gave him by John Ruskin's *Unto This Last* (1860), Gandhi was enthused by the ideals put forward by the author. In June 1904 he was inspired to establish a community called the *Phoenix Settlement* just outside Durban. The Settlement was an experiment in communal living - a way for people to eliminate needless possessions and to live in a society as

equals. Gandhi moved his newspaper the *Indian Opinion*, his workers and eventually his own family to the *Settlement*. Each community member was allocated three acres of land on which to build a dwelling of corrugated iron. All members of the community were trained in farming and were expected to help with the production of the newspaper.

In 1906, believing that family life was inhibiting his full potential as a public advocate, Gandhi took the vow of *brahmacharya* - one of abstinence against sexual relations, even with one's own wife. Thinking that one passion fed others, Gandhi also further simplified the strict vegetarian diet he had been following for years, limiting himself to foods that were unspiced, usually uncooked fruits and nuts. Fasting, he believed, would also help still the urges of the flesh.

***Satyagrah* - “passive resistance”**

Gandhi firmly believed that his taking the vow of *brahmacharya* allowed him the focus to develop 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. He preferred the translation "truth force."

Gandhi believed that exploitation was only possible if both the exploited and the exploiter accepted it. He maintained that if one could rise above the current situation and see the universal truth, then one had the power to make change. Truth, in this context, could mean "natural right," a right granted by nature and the universe that should not be impeded by man.

In practice, *satyagraha* was a focused and forceful non-violent 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, and would;

- freely accept physical assaults to his person and the confiscation of his property;
- not use foul language to smear his opponent;

- as a practitioner of *satyagraha* never take advantage of an opponent's problems.

The goal was that there not be a winner and loser but rather that all would eventually see and understand the "truth" (as defined above) and agree to rescind the unjust law.

The first time Gandhi used *satyagraha* officially was in South Africa, beginning in 1907 when he organized opposition to the Asiatic Registration Law (known as the Black Act). Passed in March 1907, the Black Act required all Indians - young and old, male and female – to be fingerprinted and to carry registration documents with them at all times. Using *satyagraha*, Indians in South Africa refused to be fingerprinted and picketed the documentation offices. Protests were organized, miners went on strike, and masses of Indians travelled illegally from Natal to the Transvaal in defiance of the Act. Many of the protesters were beaten and arrested, including Gandhi. (This was the first of Gandhi's many gaol sentences.) It took seven years of protest, but in June 1914, the Black Act was repealed. Gandhi had proved that non-violent protest was a powerful and successful strategy.

Having spent twenty years in South Africa helping to fight discrimination, Gandhi decided in July 1914 that it was time to return to India. On his way home, he stopped over in England. World War I broke out very shortly after his arrival and Gandhi decided to stay and form another ambulance corps of Indians to help the British. However, the British climate adversely affected Gandhi's health and he left for India in January 1915.

Gandhi's struggles and triumphs in South Africa had been widely reported in the international press, so by the time he reached home he was not just a national but an international hero. Although he was eager to begin reforms in India, a friend advised him to wait a year and spend the time traveling around to fully acquaint himself with the people and their problems. This he did, but Gandhi soon found his fame and the continual adulation he received getting in the way of his ability to truly comprehend the every-day conditions in which the poor lived. In an attempt to travel more anonymously, he began wearing a loincloth (*dhoti*) and sandals (the dress of the masses.). If it was cold, he would add a shawl. This was his style of dress for the rest of his life.



Gandhi's room in the *Sabarmati Ashram*

During this year of observation, Gandhi founded another communal settlement, this time in Ahmadabad, and called it the *Sabarmati Ashram*. He lived on the Ashram for the next sixteen years, along with his family and a number of others who had been part of the *Phoenix Settlement*. It was also 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, with the creation the name for Gandhi and for publicising it. The title truly reflected the feelings of the millions of Indian peasants who viewed Gandhi as a holy man. However, Gandhi himself never cared for the title because it seemed to imply that he was special, whereas he viewed himself as ordinary.

After this year of travel and observation was over, he was still limited in his actions by the World War. As part of *satyagraha*, Gandhi had vowed never to take advantage of an opponent's troubles so, with the British fighting a major war, Gandhi felt he could not apply added pressure by actively pressing for Indian independence from Britain.

However, this does not mean he sat idle. Instead of fighting the British, Gandhi used his influence and *satyagraha* to reduce inequities between Indians. For example, he persuaded landlords to stop forcing their tenant farmers to pay increased rent and mill owners to settle a strike peacefully. He made use of his fame to appeal to the moral sense

of landlords and used fasting to pressure the mill owners to settle. Gandhi was by this time physically weak - continual fasting was taking its toll - and such was his reputation and prestige that people did not want to risk being held responsible for his death

***Swaraj* - the struggle for Indian self-rule**

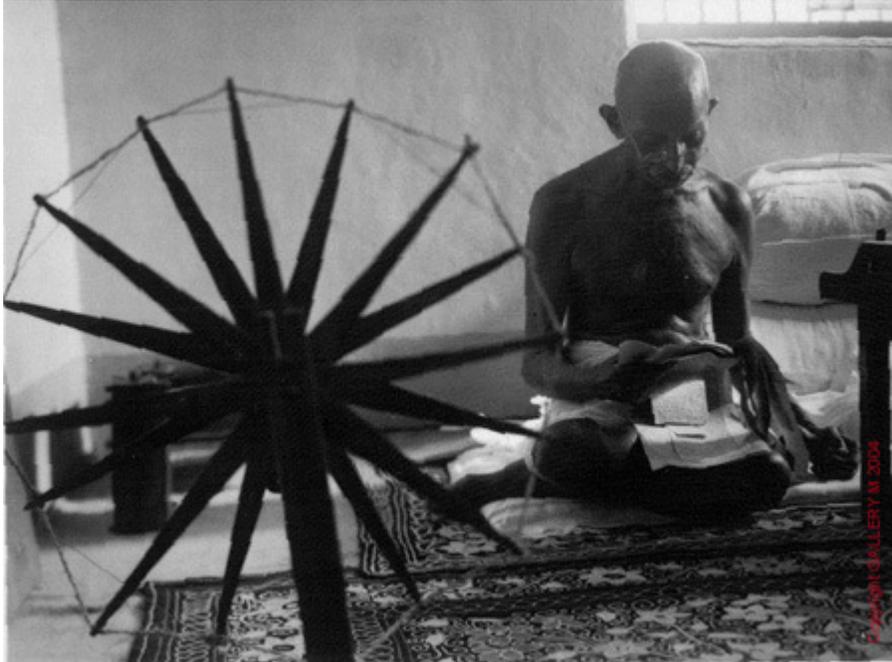
When the First World War ended, it was time for Gandhi to focus on the fight for Indian self-rule (*swaraj*). In 1919, the British gave Gandhi something specific to fight against - the *Rowlatt Act*. This Act gave the British in India almost total free-rein to identify "revolutionary" elements among the Indian population 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 turned violent.

Even though Gandhi called off the *hartal* once he learned of the violence, over 300 Indians died and over 1,100 were injured in British reprisals in the city of Amritsar. The Jallianwala Bagh Massacre, also known as the Amritsar Massacre, was named after the Jallianwala Bagh (Garden) in the northern Indian city of Amritsar where, on April 13, 1919, British Indian Army soldiers under the command of Brigadier-General Reginald Dyer opened fire on an unarmed gathering of men, women and children. The firing lasted about 10 minutes. Official British Raj sources placed the fatalities at 379. According to private sources there were over 1000 deaths, with more than 2000 wounded.

The Indians were further incensed and the violence that had erupted showed Gandhi that the Indian people did not yet fully recognise the power of *satyagraha*. He spent much of the 1920s advocating for *satyagraha* and struggling to learn how to control nationwide protests and prevent them from becoming violent.

In March 1922, Gandhi was jailed for sedition, tried and sentenced to six years in prison. After two years he underwent emergency surgery for appendicitis and was released on the grounds of ill-health. Upon his release, Gandhi found his country embroiled in violent confrontation between Muslims and Hindus. As penance for the violence, Gandhi

began a 21-day fast, known as the Great Fast of 1924. As he had not fully recovered from surgery many thought he would die on day twelve, but he rallied. His fast brought about a temporary peace.



During this decade, Gandhi once again began advocating self-reliance as a way of gaining freedom from the British. For example, from the time that the British had established India as a colony, the Indians had supplied Britain with raw materials and in return imported expensive, woven cloth from England. Gandhi advocated that Indians spin their own cloth to free themselves from this reliance on the British, and popularized this idea by traveling with his own spinning wheel, often spinning yarn even while giving a speech. The image of the spinning wheel (*charkha*) became a symbol for Indian independence.

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, a nation-wide protest against British taxes. would be organized. The deadline came and passed with no change in British policy. There were many British taxes to choose from, but Gandhi wanted to select one that symbolized British exploitation of India's poor. The answer was the salt tax. Salt was a

spice used in everyday cooking, even for the poorest Indian yet the British had made it illegal to own salt not produced or sold by the British.



Gandhi on the Salt March

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 set out from the *Sabarmati Ashram* and headed for the sea, about 200 miles away. The group travelled about twelve miles a day in the scorching sun, with others joining along the way until the marchers numbered almost two thousand. They reached the coastal town of Dandion late on 5th April and prayed all night. In the morning, Gandhi made a symbolic gesture by picking up a piece of sea salt that lay on the beach. Technically, he had broken the law.

This signalled the beginning of a momentous national movement. Indians began 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 being sold across the country. The spirit engendered by the march was contagious and spread. More marches and peaceful protests were held. 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. The British had

hoped Gandhi's arrest would stop the march, but they had seriously underestimated his influence. The poet Mrs. Sarojini Naidu took over and led 2,500 marchers to the Saltworks. On arrival they found 400 policemen and six British officers waiting for them. The marchers approached in columns of twenty--five at a time and were beaten with clubs, often around their heads and shoulders. After the first 25 marchers had been beaten to the ground, another column of 25 would approach and be beaten, until all 2,500 had marched forward and been pummeled. The international press watched as the marchers did not even raise their hands to defend themselves. The news of the brutal beating of peaceful protesters by the British 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 the right of limited salt production by Indians and the release of all the peaceful protesters from gaol on condition that Gandhi call off the protests. While many Indians felt that Gandhi had not demanded and obtained enough concessions, Gandhi himself recognised it as a firm step on the road to independence.

However, 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, he came out of retirement five years later when the British viceroy brazenly announced, without consultation with Indian leaders, that India would support England during World War II, an arrogant move which served to revitalise the Indian independence movement.

Many in the British Parliament realised that they were once again facing mass protests and began discussing ways of creating 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. However, Gandhi had waited long enough, He organized a "Quit India" campaign in 1942. In response, the British once again gaoled him. However, by the time he was released from prison in 1944, Indian independence at last seemed in sight.

Unfortunately, however, major disagreement had arisen between Hindus and Muslims. Since the majority of Indians were Hindu, the Muslims feared not having any political power in an independent India. The Muslims wanted the six provinces in northwest India, the population of which was largely Muslim, 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 a hurdle even for the Mahatma. Massive violence erupted - rape, slaughter, the burning of entire towns. Gandhi toured India, hoping his mere presence could curb the violence. Although violence did cease when and where Gandhi visited, he could not be everywhere. The British, recognising the threat of a fierce civil war, decided to leave India in August 1947. Before leaving, they were able, against Gandhi's wishes, to persuade the Hindus to agree to partition. On August 15, 1947, Great Britain granted independence to India and recognised the newly formed Muslim country - Pakistan.



With Lord and Lady Mountbatten (the last Viceroy of India) at Government House, New Delhi, in March 1947.

Partition was not to be a peaceful solution. 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 now found themselves in Pakistan packed up their belongings and set off to walk to India. The lines of refugees stretched for many miles and many died along the way from illness, exposure, and dehydration. As 15 million Indians were uprooted from their homes, Hindus and Muslims set about attacking each other with a vengeance.



Gandhi with Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, the first Prime Minister of India.

To stop this widespread 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 13th, 1948. Realizing that the frail and aged Gandhi could not withstand a long fast, both sides worked together to negotiate a peace. On January 18, a group of more than a hundred representatives approached Gandhi with a promise of a plan for peace. Only then did Gandhi's fast end. 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 and in part they blamed Gandhi for the separation.

Gandhi had been fiercely opposed to the concept of partition as it contradicted his vision of religious unity. He had written on 6 October 1946: "The demand [for the establishment of a Muslim state] as put forth by the Moslem League is un-Islamic and I have not hesitated to call it sinful. Islam stands for unity and the brotherhood of mankind,

not for disrupting the oneness of the human family. Therefore, those who want to divide India into possibly warring groups are enemies alike of India and Islam. They may cut me into pieces but they cannot make me subscribe to something which I consider to be wrong

Gandhi was unflinching and inflexible in his criticism of those who attempted to achieve independence through more violent means and in his opposition to any suggestion that violence be employed, saying, "There was a time when people listened to me because I showed them how to give fight to the British without arms when they had no arms...but today I am told that my non-violence can be of no avail against the [Hindu–Moslem riots] and, therefore, people should arm themselves for self-defense."

He also wrote of the impending Holocaust "The German persecution of the Jews seems to have no parallel in history. The tyrants of old never went so mad as Hitler seems to have gone. And he is doing it with religious zeal. If there ever could be a justifiable war in the name of and for humanity, a war against Germany to prevent the wanton persecution of a whole race, would be completely justified. But I do not believe in any war." He advocated the use of passive resistance by the Jews.. "Suffering voluntarily undergone", he said " will bring them an inner strength and joy."

This rigid *ahimsa* implies pacifism, and consequently was met with criticism from across the political spectrum. *Ahimsa* (a Sanskrit term meaning *non-violence*) is a rule of conduct that bars the killing or injuring of living beings. It is closely connected with the notion that all kinds of violence entail negative karmic consequences. The extent to which the principle of non-violence can or should be applied to different life forms is a matter of controversy between various authorities, movements and currents within Buddhism, Hinduism and Jainism and has been a matter of debate for thousands of years.



The Martyr's Column at the *Gandhi Smriti* in New Delhi, marks the spot where Gandhi was assassinated.

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 five in the evening, when it was time for the prayer meeting, Gandhi began the walk to Birla House. A crowd had surrounded him as he walked, supported by two of his grand-nieces. A young Hindu named Nathuram Godse stepped before him and bowed. Gandhi bowed back. Godse then rushed forward and shot Gandhi three times. Although Gandhi had survived five other assassination attempts, this time he fell to the ground, dead.

His assassination was an international catastrophe. A period of mourning was set aside in the United Nations General Assembly. The teachings of Gandhi were to inspire others, notably Martin Luther King, Jr. and Nelson Mandela. A practising Hindu all his life, Gandhi was an avid theologian and read extensively about all major religions. Later in his life when he was asked whether he was a Hindu, he replied: "Yes I am. I am also a Christian, a Muslim, a Buddhist and a Jew."



Sabarmati Ashram

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