Mohandas “Mahatma” Gandhi

1869–1948
Indian
Political activist and spiritual leader of India

Mahatma Gandhi was one of the most important figures in the campaign for Indian independence from the British Empire. The figurehead of the nationalist movement from the 1920s, he achieved his aims by using satyagraha, or passive resistance. In reply, the British authorities repeatedly imprisoned Gandhi, in 1922, 1930, 1933 and 1942, hoping to break his spirit. They failed, and Gandhi is upheld today as the model of what can be achieved by peaceful protest.

Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi was born in Porbander in present-day Gujarat, western India. Gandhi traveled to London to study law at University College in 1888, with the intention of becoming a barrister. He was called to the bar at the Inner Temple and returned to Mumbai (then Bombay) to start his own practice, but it failed. Instead, in 1893 he accepted a one-year contract to work in Natal, South Africa for an Indian law firm. He was horrified by the active and often violent discrimination against Indians, and this awakened in him a burning desire to fight racism and social injustice. He founded the Natal

Below: Gandhi and his followers during the Salt March of 1930, just one of Gandhi’s acts of non-cooperation against the British colonial rulers.
Indian Congress in 1894 to unite the Indian community into a political force, and organized a mass protest, using for the first time his still-evolving philosophy of satyagraha. The policy of non-resistance was ignored by the authorities, which attacked, jailed, and even shot protesters. But their brutality eventually backfired, as an embarrassed South African government had to negotiate a compromise.

In 1915 Gandhi returned to India and joined the Indian National Congress Party that campaigned for freedom from British rule. By 1921 Gandhi was its spiritual leader and encouraged the boycott of British- and foreign-made goods to revitalize local businesses and economies. He preached non-violent passive resistance and started a campaign of mass civil disobedience. He gave up wearing Western clothes, adopting instead simple homespun garments, and began weaving his own cloth, as did his followers. His policy of non-cooperation with the British included strikes, a refusal to pay taxes and a refusal to respect colonial law. The famous 240-mile salt march to Dandi in 1930 to by-pass a salt tax was a typical example of his campaigning. He commanded huge influence and respect across India, and around this time he was given the name Mahatma, meaning “Great Soul.”

Gandhi led the “Quit India” movement during the Second World War, which was ruthlessly suppressed by the British. Independence, when it finally came in 1947, did not run smoothly. Although the handover was peaceful, civil war between Hindus and Muslims appeared inevitable, as the subcontinent split into the Muslim Pakistan and East Pakistan (now Bangladesh), and the largely Hindu India. Vast numbers of people were dispossessed and left with no option but to travel hundreds of miles to safety in their new homeland. Spontaneous fighting broke out across the country and almost a million people were slaughtered.

Gandhi worked with the British authorities to sort out the enormous problems and began his last fast- unto-death, in an effort to stop the violence. On January 20, 1948 an attempt was made on Gandhi’s life. He survived, but ten days later, on the evening of the 30th, a Hindu fanatic assassinated him in the gardens of Birla House in New Delhi.

A man of great moral courage, Gandhi won the admiration of millions of Indians, as well as many Europeans. He is still upheld as the finest example of peaceful but forceful protest by people across the globe.
GANDHI COMPLETES SALT MARCH

DANDI, INDIA
APRIL 5, 1930

Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi will be forever associated with India's fight for independence against the British Raj. He was instrumental in India's eventual victory, and his salt march to Dandi in 1930 was seen as the defining moment in the struggle. Known as Mahatma, 'great soul', Gandhi was India's spiritual leader and chief political activist during its battle for autonomy, and it was his philosophy and practice of satyagraha that was integral to the success of the salt march and to the defusing of the conflict that had been grumbling on for decades.

Satyagraha means non-violent action, primarily through civil resistance. Gandhi urged his followers, rather than becoming violent and rioting – thus making the problems worse – to quietly disobey the rules and stay true to their own principles.

He rejected claims that this was just passive resistance, stating that the goal of satyagraha was 'to convert, not to coerce, the wrong-doer'. For Gandhi, success was people helping their antagonists to discover the obstruction they have raised, so that everyone can work together to remove it and come to an amicable and mutually respectful resolution. This was his main tool in trying to remove the colonial authority of the British Raj over India.

He had already been imprisoned by the British for attempting to inspire an overthrow in 1922, but a few years later he returned to the limelight, focusing on the Empire's new taxation laws on salt, which put this vital substance out of the reach of most Indians. He planned to march from his home in Sabarmati to Dandi, with the intention of producing his own salt. The 241-mile (380-km) trek drew worldwide press attention, and many Indians joined him on the way. He reached Dandi 26 days later, on April 5, 1930, reaching down to grasp his own symbolic handful of salt. Nationwide civil resistance followed, with millions of Indians producing their own salt or purchasing it tax-free. Over 60,000 were arrested, including Gandhi; the conflict went on for a year until agreement was reached: release of the prisoners for suspension of civil resistance.

This was a pivotal point in the long march towards independence, with the planet watching; the salt satyagraha of 1930 would become known as one of Gandhi's highest achievements. It wasn't, however, until 1946 that the salt tax laws were abolished, and a year later, in August 1947, that India finally became an independent nation.