



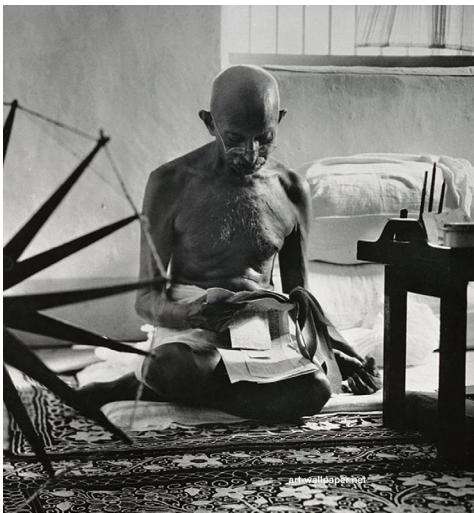
A Brief Life of Mahatma Gandhi

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Often referred to as Mahatma (“the great-souled one”) because of his deeply spiritual lifestyle, Mohandas K. Gandhi is considered the father of modern India. Gandhi was born in 1869 in western India to parents of the merchant caste. At the age of 19 he married his wife Kasturbai and went to England to study law.

After practicing law in Bombay for a few years, he was offered the opportunity to represent the Indian community of South Africa. Soon after his arrival in South Africa, Gandhi had a first-hand experience of racial discrimination when he was forced to leave his seat in a first class train compartment to make way for a white man. Refusing to give up his seat, Gandhi was evicted from the train and had to spend the night in the frigid Maritzburg train station.

In South Africa, Gandhi fought against racial laws directed against Indians by the South African government. Founding the Natal Indian Congress Party and a weekly paper, *Indian Opinion*, Gandhi led the Indian opposition to these unjust laws and at the same time began to develop a strategy for civic resistance that would become the foundation for all his later work. He referred to this strategy by the Indian word *Satyagraha*. The term is a combination of *satya* (truth) and *agraha* (holding firm to) and can roughly be translated as “truth force.” Using a combination of non-violent resistance and noncompliance to unjust laws, Gandhi’s methods were so successful that he succeeded in having many of the discriminatory laws of the South African government repealed.



Inspired by the Russian author and radical Christian Leo Tolstoy, Gandhi also began a radical experiment in simple living that was characterized by self-sufficiency. Setting up communal farms in South Africa, Gandhi began performing manual chores that were usually the jobs of members of lower castes, including cleaning his own toilet. He also began producing and wearing his own homemade clothes, using a simple spinning wheel. (The photo of Gandhi spinning his own clothes, in fact, would eventually become the iconic image of him.) Eventually, Gandhi would give away most of his family’s worldly possessions, leaving himself with only his trademark (loincloth) and sandals.

As he grew older, Gandhi began to take on many of the practices of Hindu renunciates. In 1906, he took a vow of celibacy, essentially ending all sexual relations with his wife for the rest of his life. Seeking to live as non-violent a life as possible, Gandhi

also adopted a strict vegetarian diet that consisted mainly of fruits and nuts. It was not enough for Gandhi to refrain from acts of violence against his fellow human beings; he also believed it was important to engage in non-injury towards all sentient beings.

In 1914 Gandhi left South Africa for good and returned to his native India. Because of the world-wide fame that he had achieved in South Africa, Gandhi was immediately courted by members of the Indian Congress Party, who had been working to achieve independence for India from Britain. Applying many of the tactics he developed in South Africa to the situation in India, Gandhi almost immediately began campaigns in India aimed at highlighting British injustices against the Indian people. Perhaps the most famous of these was his protest in 1930 against the salt tax imposed by the British government. Gandhi's idea was to march 240 miles from Ahmedabad to the sea and have people collect their own salt in opposition to British law. Gandhi himself was arrested along with many of his followers, but his non-violent resistance drew the attention of the entire world and eventually forced the British to back down.

The latter part of Gandhi's life was taken up by the cause of Indian independence. In the end, even someone as admired as Gandhi couldn't bridge the religious divisions between Hindu and Muslims in India and in 1947 the country was split in two, becoming the nations of India and Pakistan. On January 30, 1948, Gandhi was leaving his living quarters in New Delhi to attend a prayer meeting, when Hindu extremist Nathuram Godse shot him three times at point-blank range.

After his death, Gandhi became a source of inspiration for people struggling for freedom throughout the world. Both Martin Luther King Jr. during the American civil rights movement and Nelson Mandela fighting against apartheid in South Africa cited him as a role model in their own attempts at non-violent protest.

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