

Mohandas (Mahatma) Gandhi

Mohandas Karamchand (Mahatma) Gandhi, the famous proponent of peace and non-violence in conflict-torn India during the early 1900's, devoted his life to achieving an independent, egalitarian and united India. His life experiences led to his discovery of *satyagraha*, non-violent protest, and he implemented this tool in his work to free India from British colonial rule and to quell the civil disputes occurring within the country. In his attempts to bring India to peace, through well planned *satyagrahas* and his detailed Constructive Programme, he himself became a symbol in India and around the world.

Gandhi was born in Porbandar India on October 2, 1869 (Parekh 1, Chatterjee 15, Fischer 13-14). His family were members of the merchant class (Vaisyas) [Gandhi directly translates as grocer (Parekh 1, Fischer 12)] but rose to high political positions. His father, Karamchand, was prime minister of Porbandar (Fischer 13) and had many close Jain friends [Jainism is a religion that employs strict non-violent and peaceful ideologies] (Parekh 1). His mother, Putali Bai, was a member of the Pranami (Prananath) religious sect that combined various beliefs and traditions including those of Hindus and Muslims (Parekh 1, Chatterjee 15). She was a deeply religious woman, and observed many religious fasts over her lifetime (Parekh 1, Fischer 15). Thus, Gandhi's own political work, religious beliefs and morals were likely influenced by his early life and the beliefs of his parent's.

Gandhi moved to England in 1888 to pursue an education as a lawyer (Fischer 27) and while there, was engulfed in western traditions and religion. He was introduced to Christianity, the Bible, especially the New Testament (Nanda 12). It was here that Gandhi began cultivating his own religious beliefs and practices in Hinduism which, over time, became infused with aspects of multiple religions including Christianity. It was at this

time that Gandhi first discovered the *Bhagavad Gita* (one part of the larger *Mahabharata* epic), and its yogic teachings, especially those of Karma Yoga which epitomizes the path of selfless action to achieve spiritual liberation (Fischer 29-33, Hick 90). This text was so important to Gandhi that it became his 'spiritual dictionary' (Nanda 13). Upon returning to India, Gandhi experienced little success as a lawyer and eventually moved to South Africa to practice.

In South Africa at this time, Hindus were often used as indentured laborers (Parekh 3, Fischer 46) and suffered from restricted rights and freedoms. Gandhi himself was subject to many indignities, and in response became a strong proponent of Indian rights and legal equality in South Africa (Fischer 48), thus exemplifying the Karma Yoga path taught to him by the *Gita*. It was here that Gandhi developed and implemented his very first *satyagraha*. This was the use of non-violent protests to achieve, not victory over an enemy, but instead a compromise or reconciliation (Nanda 4). It was considered a form of civil disobedience, which could involve public demonstrations, non-cooperation with government policies, and even fasting as a personal *satyagraha*. All forms required the graceful acceptance of the consequences of their actions (Parekh 3). Gandhi achieved many successes in regards to Indian rights while in South Africa, but was also able to unify Hindus and Muslims living there. This can be credited to the fact that many shared a common language and tradition and faced similar challenges in a foreign country. To unite Hindus and Muslims in India would prove to be more difficult in the years ahead.

While in South Africa, Gandhi explored religion further, often incorporating new religious facets into his unique brand of Hinduism, including aspects of Judaism and Christianity, which he learned from various friends (Parekh 5). However, his knowledge

of religion came mainly from reading influential texts, such as the Hindu epics of the *Ramayana* [Gandhi believed it to be “the greatest book in all devotional literature” (Chatterjee 16)], the *Mahabharata* and most importantly the *Bhagavad Gita* (Chatterjee 7, Fischer 29-30). The *Gita* inspired Gandhi to begin his life path of becoming a Karma yogi, and a man of action (Fischer 35-36). For Gandhi, religion was embodied in *dharma* (righteousness) and was the “sustaining order which upholds the individual and society and in turn has to be upheld by them” (Chatterjee 18). Thus religion was simply a moral framework for the conduct of daily life (Nanda 24). Gandhi eventually came to realize that religion played an important role in politics (Nanda 24) and was critical in maintaining a stable society (Chatterjee 18). After a period of 21 years, Gandhi returned to India, armed with his new religious views and powerful political weapon: the *satyagraha*.

India, at this time, was suffering from great civil unrest and religious disputes. Hindu-Muslim relations were strained and there was increasing opposition and animosity towards the British colonial government. The Indian National Congress, which had been established as a means of channeling Indian resentment of colonial rule into constitutional reforms and legal moderation (Fischer 132), had become ineffective due to poor leadership (Parekh 7). This ineptitude resulted in public revolts erupting throughout India. Gandhi, a supporter of the colonial rule at first, became unconvinced of its ability to maintain control over the increasing civil unrest. He did not agree with the oppressive measures taken to maintain order, but also could not agree with the Indian National Congress’s ineffective political strategy. Gandhi decided to implement his Constructive Programme which included measures to restructure India and restore peace and order to the country to prepare it for independence from the British government (Parekh 8).

The Constructive Programme focused both on large sweeping changes as well as small, mainly symbolic, changes including: abolishing the caste system and untouchability, equality for women, the use of indigenous languages and the adoption of a common, national language. It also promoted economic equality (including tribal peoples), the development of village industries and banning the use of foreign cloth (Parekh 8-9, Nanda 8). Gandhi believed that in order to restore peace and stability to India, Indian society would first have to become more *dharmic*, which could be attained if society became more egalitarian (Chatterjee 20). This idea of a *dharmic* society stems from the teachings of the *Gita* and Gandhi once said, “God’s grace and revelation are not the monopoly of any race or nation; they descend equally upon all who wait upon God” (Nanda 69). Thus any person can become close to their God through personal, loving devotion (*bhakti*), regardless of race, gender or class (Hick 131-132). He also realized the importance of symbols as a way of attaining and maintaining equality through their ability to convey strong emotional responses in the public. He used symbols such as the spinning wheel, *khadi* (home spun cloth) the cow and the Gandhi cap. Gandhi himself eventually became a symbol in his own right (Parekh 9). He believed that his Constructive Programme combined with carefully thought out and meaningful *satyagrahas* would be the key to India’s independence (Parekh 8).

Gandhi implemented his first national *satyagraha* in 1919 which involved nation wide cessation of work (*hartal*) and mass demonstrations, in response to the further losses of civil liberties and freedoms imposed on India by the colonial government (Parekh 12). It was Gandhi’s first nation wide defiance of the British government (Fischer 176). The *hartal* proved to be very successful in Bombay with six hundred followers. However,

when the hartal reached Delhi some demonstrations turned violent and Gandhi had to abandon it, calling it his 'Himalayan miscalculation' (Parekh 12, Fischer 177-178). Further oppression by the British government by banning group gatherings and demonstrations, escalated tensions in India, and on April 13, 1919 colonial forces opened fire on unarmed civilians, killing hundreds (Parekh 12, Fischer 179-180). This event was a turning point in Indian history and the stability of the British rule began to be threatened.

In response to this tragic event, and in the face of exponentially increasing violence in the country, Gandhi implemented his second nation wide *satyagraha*: The Non-cooperation Movement of 1920 (Parekh 12, Fischer 187). Gandhi based it on his belief that the government could no longer rule effectively if its citizens refused to cooperate with its policies and set up their own alternative governing institutions (Parekh 12, Fischer 187). Gandhi also attempted to incorporate the Muslim community into his nationalist movement for independence (Nanda 97). The Non-cooperation movement was unsuccessful for two reasons: alternative governing bodies were not created because the public was not willing to give up their hard earned careers (Parekh 14) and it inadvertently caused further strain in Hindu-Muslim relations. The majority of Muslims were supportive of the British governing body as it provided them with an English education and government careers (Nanda 97).

Gandhi became increasingly concerned over the growing Hindu-Muslim conflict. The emerging Muslim middle class felt that their progress was being impeded, as they were in constant competition, with the Hindus, over jobs. Most middle class Muslims did not have the access to the level of education needed to obtain these jobs and thus felt they

were at an unfair disadvantage (Fischer 220). To address their frustrations Gandhi began a twenty-one day fast to promote unity and a mutual respect and tolerance and support of a Hindu-Muslim friendship (Parekh 15, Fischer 221). However, civil unrest continued to increase until he felt that another *satyagraha* was necessary to avoid explosive violence, and edge India closer to independence. He decided to protest against the British salt tax of the 1930's by having thousands of people along India's sea coast produce salt illegally (Parekh 15-16, Fischer 268-269). Gandhi chose his salt *satyagraha* for several reasons: salt was important to all Indians and Muslims, and bore heavily on the poor, and showed the how corrupt and cruel the British government was (Parekh 15-16). The salt *satyagraha* was successful as it was able to show colonial rule was weak and could be defeated (Parekh 16). It has been considered Gandhi's most successful attempt at non-violent civil disobedience as a means to promote compromise, through the use of powerful symbolism (Nanda 81).

Hindu-Muslim relations continued to worsen and partition of India was imminent. In light of economic and political trouble Muslim's feared they would no longer be in control of their people and that a partition was necessary to maintain Muslim religious integrity (Parekh 20). Pakistan and the Indian Union were eventually formed out of the partition (Fischer 476). The newly formed Pakistan contained millions of Hindus, and likewise the Indian Union contained millions of Muslims. These newly formed minorities were concerned with their status under the new majority rulers and fighting erupted from within (Fischer 476). Gandhi disagreed with the partition on religious and traditional grounds and predicted the violence that resulted. Thus, he devoted the remainder of his life to quelling violence between the disputing parties, and bringing

about Hindu-Muslim religious equality through pilgrimages of peace (Parekh 23, Nanda 147), because he felt that all religions could be considered equal (Hick 131). His own life became a weapon in the war against violence, and he hoped that his sacrifice would act as a catalyst promoting peace and equality throughout India, as well as Pakistan (Parekh 23).

India achieved its independence on August 15, 1947 (Parekh 23). Gandhi remained focused on his pilgrimage and on January 13, 1948 began his final *satyagraha*, a fast unto death (Fischer 494), which was ultimately successful in ending the religious riots in both Pakistan and the Indian Union (Fischer 502). People, moved by his selfless action, pledged to ‘establish real peace’ between the dominions (Fischer 499). However, while he had many followers, there were still some who disagreed vehemently with his ideals and as a result Gandhi had many threats on his life (Parekh 24, Fischer 503-505). Instead of worrying for his life, Gandhi believed his death would act as a symbol to the country and achieve what he could not accomplish in his lifetime (Parekh 25). On January 30th, 1948 Gandhi was assassinated (Parekh 25).

Gandhi’s death proved to be incredibly influential in the events that would follow. It effectively united people in mourning the loss of India’s most beloved political peace activist, and calmed the conflict torn nation, and was instrumental in achieving the egalitarian society Gandhi has strived for during his life (Parekh 25). Gandhi exemplified the Karma Yoga path of selfless action, and he never wavered in his attempts to achieve a *dharmically* stable Indian society through religious and social equality. Gandhian policies and ideologies remain in Indian society and have also spread around the world in a ‘nonviolent revolution’ (Hick 203-204). His emphasis on morality, religion and non-

violent cooperative negotiations have often been used as a template to base political decisions as well as decisions made in day to day life.

References and Further Recommended Reading

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