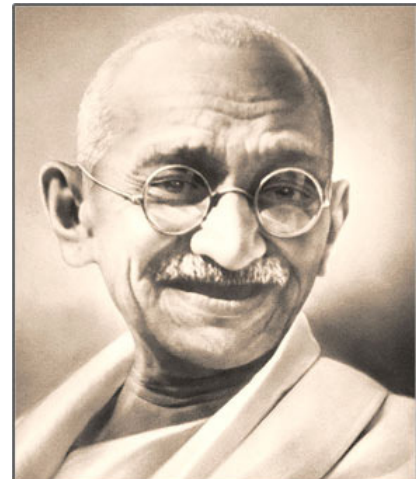


## Case Study Activist Movement in a Partly-Free Country

### Mahatma Gandhi and Indian Independence

#### Vision and Motivation

In 1893, Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi was a young man recently graduated from law school and looking for work. His search had led him to South Africa, which was at the time a hostile place for non-whites, troubled by racial and ethnic tensions.<sup>1</sup> Gandhi recalls in his autobiography facing several instances of discrimination. On his first day in court, he was asked by the judge to remove his turban – a deliberate slight to someone of Gandhi's background.<sup>2</sup> He refused to comply, left the courtroom, and wrote to the press about his



experience.<sup>3</sup> During a train journey from Durban to Pretoria, he was told by a railway official to move from the first class compartment to the third class, even though he had a valid first class ticket. Gandhi refused to go voluntarily and was physically forced out of the train.<sup>4</sup> He was beaten viciously when he objected to discriminatory treatment by a stage-coachman who would not let him sit next to the white passengers.<sup>5</sup> These acts of racial discrimination changed the course of his life.

Gandhi became inspired to fight for the rights of the large Indian community living in South Africa. Instead of going back to India, as he had originally planned, he extended his stay in South Africa to protest a new law denying Indians the right to vote.<sup>6</sup> In 1894, he helped found the Natal Indian Congress to organize people of Indian origin living in South Africa into a cohesive group

with a political voice. Over the course of his activist efforts in South Africa, Gandhi developed the strategy of non-violent resistance that would come to define him, encouraging his followers to peacefully and respectfully refuse to comply with unfair laws. He spent over 20 years in South Africa, fighting for the rights of his fellow Indians. His campaigns had mixed success, but his methods brought him and his cause international recognition. In 1914, Gandhi left South Africa and returned to India, where he would ultimately lead the movement for his country's independence.

### Goals and Objectives

Gandhi's initial goal upon returning to India was to fight for Indians' civil rights.<sup>7</sup> Just as he had done in South Africa, Gandhi worked to organize Indians into a cohesive group that could make its wishes heard, and then coordinated non-violent civil disobedience campaigns. His first effort in India was a successful 1917 non-violent campaign on behalf of exploited peasants in Champaran.<sup>8</sup> Gandhi went to Champaran to investigate the plight of peasants living there who were being exploited by landlords.<sup>9</sup> When the Champaran District Magistrate, W.B. Heycock, ordered Gandhi to leave for presenting a "danger to the public peace," Gandhi peacefully disobeyed the order.<sup>10</sup> Fearing that it would turn him into a martyr in the public imagination, the government did not imprison him for his disobedience.<sup>11</sup> Gandhi followed up this campaign with two similar local campaigns in Kaira and Ahmedabad.<sup>12</sup>

Over time, however, Gandhi's goals became more radical. A key incident that caused this shift in his thinking was the 1918 massacre at Jallianwala Bagh. The British had just promulgated the Rowlatt Bills, which would restrict civil rights including allowing trial without jury for political prisoners, and this had provoked widespread protests.<sup>13</sup> A British official, General Dyer, chose to send a message to the protesters by opening fire on a group of people who had gathered in Jallianwala Bagh to peacefully discuss the new laws.<sup>14</sup> Three hundred and seventy-nine people were killed and over 1,200 wounded, with no medical care provided.<sup>15</sup> General Dyer's actions were later supported by the House of Lords.<sup>16</sup> The massacre inspired many moderates, including Gandhi, to change their stance: instead of seeking reform from the British Raj, they demanded a completely independent India.<sup>17</sup>

In the years following the Jallianwala Bagh massacre, Gandhi took over leadership of the Indian National Congress (INC), a group that had been fighting since 1885 for greater involvement for Indians in their country's government. Under Gandhi's leadership, the INC began to launch national non-cooperation campaigns with the aim of achieving Indian independence from the British. The most significant of these was the 1930 Salt March to protest British control over the Indian economy. The British had imposed a tax on salt and forbidden Indians from producing their own salt to evade the tax. In response, Gandhi led a peaceful march over 200 miles, from his home in Ahmedabad to the seaside town of Dandi. He started with fewer than a hundred fellow-marchers, but more joined him along the way and by the time they reached Dandi the group had grown to several thousand.<sup>18</sup> Once they reached the coast, Gandhi walked to where salt had accumulated naturally in the sand, picked up some salty mud in his hand, and boiled it in seawater to produce salt.<sup>19</sup> His gesture was repeated by the others who had marched with him, and it inspired millions around India. Across the country, people were inspired to act as though the salt tax did not exist, making or buying salt illegally. Over 60,000 Indians,<sup>20</sup> including Gandhi himself,<sup>21</sup> were imprisoned for their participation, but the Salt March sparked a wave of civil disobedience campaigns that proved to be a turning point in the struggle for Indian independence.

## Leadership

To anyone who knew him when he was young, Gandhi must have seemed like an unlikely leader. As a boy he was terrified of the dark and insisted on sleeping with a night light, fearing that "thieves, ghosts, and serpents" would attack him.<sup>22</sup> As a young man, he was paralyzed by the prospect of public speaking, even in front of small and sympathetic crowds.<sup>23</sup> During his first appearance in court as a barrister, Gandhi rose to cross-examine a witness but discovered that he was unable to speak, and had to flee the room.<sup>24</sup> But through determination, as well as the transformative qualities of his life experiences, Gandhi rid himself of fear and became comfortable leading millions of people.

Much of Gandhi's power as an effective leader came from his personality, his personal beliefs, and the example he set through his lifestyle. He did not ask his followers to do anything that he did not do himself, and conversely, he held others to the same standards that he held himself –

though he knew that in reality not all would succeed in living up to those standards. A devout Hindu, Gandhi believed that it was his duty to live all aspects of his life in accordance with Hindu principles of respect for all life and commitment to the search for truth.<sup>25</sup> While living in South Africa he began to rid himself of the trappings of wealth, eventually living an extremely simple lifestyle – wearing simple homespun clothes, eating simple food that he prepared himself, and owning very few possessions.<sup>26</sup>

Gandhi drew immense courage, determination, and serenity from his religious beliefs. He was repeatedly imprisoned, often in harsh conditions, but did not show any fear or resentment when he was arrested, but instead submitted gracefully.<sup>27</sup> He conducted fasts for weeks at a time, refusing food almost to the point of death in order to morally coerce his opponents into relenting to his demands.<sup>28</sup> He was also able to treat people, even those who considered themselves his enemies, with grace because of his belief that he should feel love for all his fellow human beings – which is why, for example, he expressed grief not just for the Indian victims of the Jallianwala Bagh massacre but also for the Britons who were harmed when, against Gandhi’s wishes, some Indians responded to the massacre with violent protests. These extraordinary qualities inspired the people he met to try to emulate them, and earned him the moniker “Mahatma,” or “Great Soul.”

## Civic Environment

At the time of Gandhi’s struggle for Indians’ civil rights, India had been officially ruled by a British colonial government, sometimes referred to as the British Raj, since 1858, and under the control of the British East India Company for around a century before that. By the time of Gandhi’s return, the Raj had installed a strong central government and British rule was causing growing resentment among Indians.<sup>29</sup> The Indian economy was structured to support British interests rather than Indian interests.<sup>30</sup>

British people living in India commonly believed themselves to be racially superior to Indians and often discriminated against them and treated them with casual contempt and violence.<sup>31</sup> While some of the more liberal Britons believed that it was their duty to begin handing over power to Indians, most of the British people living in India were strongly opposed to the idea.<sup>32</sup> Describing

them as having “extraordinary inferiority in character, honesty and capacity”<sup>33</sup> Lord Curzon, the Viceroy of India, dismissed the possibility of allowing Indians to participate in their own government. “It is often said why not make some prominent native a member of the Viceroy’s Executive Council? The answer is that in the whole continent there is not an Indian fit for the post.”<sup>34</sup>

Gandhi’s commitment to pacifism and his unique style of protest unnerved British colonialists. Official documents of the British colonial government show that Gandhi’s tactics confused and disarmed them; they “struggled hard to master the situation, agonizing over their predicament, searching for historical precedents where there were none, trying to determine the basic sources or dynamics of Gandhi’s power.”<sup>35</sup> While they felt threatened by him, they could not simply remove him violently. Gandhi had inspired such a large and devoted following that any forceful steps against him by the British would have caused chaos.<sup>36</sup> Additionally, as much as they feared Gandhi’s power, they preferred to deal with Gandhi and his non-violent movement than with the violent revolutionaries who were also seeking India’s independence.<sup>37</sup>

### Message and Audience

Gandhi’s message of non-violent resistance sprang from sincere spiritual beliefs and as such was not crafted with any particular audience in mind or to win over specific groups of people. Nevertheless, his message was extremely effective at reaching different groups and influencing them in different ways.

Gandhi reached out to and inspired huge numbers of Indians of different religions, castes, and ethnicities. This desire to include all oppressed people in his struggle was not an instinctive approach but one that he learned and developed over his career as an activist. During his time in South Africa, Gandhi did not seem interested in including black South Africans and other non-whites in his campaigns. On the contrary, he and the groups he worked with often sought to win rights for Indians by distinguishing them above other non-whites.<sup>38</sup> But by the time he returned to India, he had learned the value of including all oppressed groups in his struggle for equality.

Gandhi worked hard to incorporate all Indians in the struggle for independence, and envisioned an independent India that respected all of its citizens. He worked tirelessly to abolish the caste system which hierarchically divided Hindus based on the caste into which they were born. The beneficiaries of the worst aspects of the caste system were the so-called “Untouchables,” considered to be the “lowest” caste. These “Untouchables,” generally referred today as *dalits*, were often made to suffer terrible social and economic discrimination based on nothing more than an accident of birth. Gandhi believed the liberation of the *dalits* from these social chains to be of great importance, sometimes to the frustration of his colleagues in the independence movement who did not consider the issue to be of the highest priority. Gandhi leveraged his own popularity in his campaign for the rights of *dalits* by fasting, refusing to eat for many days on end to bring attention to their struggles or to help them secure political rights.<sup>39</sup>

Gandhi also expended great efforts in trying to bring about better unity between Hindus and Muslims. Gandhi believed strongly that India should be a religiously tolerant and diverse country, and sought to emphasize that the differences between Hindus and Muslims were minor in comparison to the linguistic and cultural differences between people living in different regions of India.<sup>40</sup> He also tried to further cooperation between Hindus and Muslims by publicly fasting, but without much success. The interests of a large proportion of Indian Muslims came to be represented by a group called the Muslim League (ML), led by Mohammed Ali Jinnah. Jinnah was originally very moderate in his thinking, seeking an incremental and constitutional handover of power from Britain to India. As Hindu-Muslim tensions grew, however, Jinnah became increasingly convinced that Muslim interests would only be protected if Muslims were given their own independent state.<sup>41</sup> Gandhi tried to convince the ML that India could exist as one state that respected the rights and interests of all its citizens, but as we will later see, he was unsuccessful in this attempt.

## Outreach Activities

In the years following the 1930 Salt March, India became increasingly difficult to govern for the British, and its role in India was causing them international embarrassment.<sup>42</sup> In 1931, Gandhi was released from prison in order to represent the INC at a conference in London, organized by the British in response to the calls for Indian independence. Although Gandhi met with many

important public figures – everyone from the Prime Minister to George Bernard Shaw to Charlie Chaplin<sup>43</sup> – and though his message resonated with the British public, he made no progress in his negotiations toward achieving Indian independence.<sup>44</sup> The conference also brought to Gandhi's attention the distance between the interests of the INC and those of the Muslim League.<sup>45</sup> With growing divisions between Indians and little flexibility from the British, the movement lost momentum over the next few years.

In 1942, Gandhi and the INC decided to launch their final campaign, the Quit India movement. The campaign was to call for the British to leave India immediately or else face a massive civil disobedience campaign. Such a campaign would require a unified, nation-wide effort and in politically fractured India this would be difficult to achieve. World War II had broken out in 1939, and the British had unilaterally made the decision that Indian soldiers were to fight in Britain's defence. Indians were divided as to whether or not they should support the war effort. There were mixed feelings about civil disobedience as a tactic. And on top of these divisions there were also political, religious, and ethnic tensions. There was even strong disagreement within the INC as to whether a strong civil disobedience campaign was the correct move. In the end, the INC pushed forward with the campaign and were able to convince huge numbers of Indians to participate in it. But they failed to win the support of the ML, which had announced in 1940 its intention to create a separate Muslim state. Gandhi believed that the support of the ML was vital to the success of the movement, and so met with Jinnah several times to try to persuade him to join them – but to no avail.<sup>46</sup> Jinnah believed that the separate Muslim state was more likely to be achieved by cooperating with the British than by cooperating with the INC and so declined to join the Quit India movement.<sup>47</sup> Some have argued that the decision to forge ahead with the Quit India movement, the prominence that it brought to Jinnah, and the divisions that it cemented between the INC and the ML facilitated the partition of India into two states, India and Pakistan – a partition which has led to decades of war.<sup>48</sup>

Historians have debated how effective the Quit India movement really was. Some have argued that the movement itself was not responsible for the decision on the part of the British to leave India. Nevertheless, it was undoubtedly the most impressive non-cooperation campaign yet, prompting huge waves of protests, demonstrations, and strikes across the country. The entire INC leadership as well as 60,000 of its followers were immediately imprisoned.<sup>49</sup> But by the end

of World War II in 1945, the prisoners were released and the British had indicated that they would leave India and allow it to be an independent, autonomous country.<sup>50</sup> Through the peaceful efforts of Gandhi and his followers, who refused to accept unjust government but refused equally to resort to violence, in 1947 India became an independent state, free from British rule. The next year, Gandhi was assassinated in New Delhi by a Hindu extremist who resented Gandhi's conciliatory attitude towards India's Muslims. Despite Gandhi's untimely death, his philosophy of peaceful resistance to injustice lived on, influencing leaders such as Martin Luther King, Jr., Nelson Mandela, and Aung San Suu Kyi.

## Learn More

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<sup>3</sup> Gandhi, Mohandas K. Autobiography: The Story of My Experiments with Truth. New York: Courier Dover Publications, 1983, p 93.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, p 97.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, p 99-100.

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<sup>8</sup> Ackerman, Peter and Kruegler, Christopher. Strategic Nonviolent Conflict: The Dynamics of People Power in the Twentieth Century. Westport: Greenwood Publishing Group, 1994, p 162.

<sup>9</sup> Brown, Judith M. Gandhi's Rise to Power: Indian Politics 1915-1922. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1974.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, p 66.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, p 67.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid, p 52.

<sup>13</sup> Ackerman, Peter and Kruegler, Christopher. Strategic Nonviolent Conflict: The Dynamics of People Power in the Twentieth Century. Westport: Greenwood Publishing Group, 1994, p 163.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid, p 164.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

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<sup>18</sup> Easwaran, Eknath. Gandhi, the Man: The Story of His Transformation. USA: Nilgiri Press, 1997, p 67.

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<sup>22</sup> Gandhi, Mohandas K. Autobiography: The Story of My Experiments with Truth. New York: Courier Dover Publications, 1983, p 17.

<sup>23</sup> Easwaran, Eknath. Gandhi, the Man: The Story of His Transformation. USA: Nilgiri Press, 1997, p 19.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid, p 20.

<sup>25</sup> Gandhi, Mohandas K. Autobiography: The Story of My Experiments with Truth. New York: Courier Dover Publications, 1983

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<sup>28</sup> Jack, Homer A. The Gandhi Reader: A Source Book of His Life and Writings, Volume 1. New York: Grove Press, 1994.

<sup>29</sup> Wolpert, Stanley A. India. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005.

<sup>30</sup> Bose, Sugata and Jalal, Ayesha. Modern South Asia: History, Culture, Political Economy. New York: Routledge, 2004, p 78; Ackerman, Peter and Krueger, Christopher. Strategic Nonviolent Conflict: The Dynamics of People Power in the Twentieth Century. Westport: Greenwood Publishing Group, 1994, p 160.

<sup>31</sup> Judd, Denis. The Lion and the Tiger: The Rise and Fall of the British Raj, 1600-1947. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004, p 107.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid, p 105.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid, p 104.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Dalton, Dennis. Mahatma Gandhi: Nonviolent Power in Action. New York: Columbia University Press, 1993, p xiii.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid, p xiv.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Herman, Arthur. Gandhi and Churchill: The Epic Rivalry that Destroyed an Empire and Forged Our Age. New York: Random House, 2008.

<sup>39</sup> Though note that while Gandhi sought to help the *dalits*, his efforts were not always appreciated within the *dalit* community. B.R. Ambedkar, a very prominent *dalit* and later the primary architect of the Indian Constitution, rejected the term "Harijan" (or "Children of God") which Gandhi coined to refer to the *dalits*, finding it to be patronizing and insulting. Ambedkar also believed that by prominently and personally taking on the cause of the *dalits*, Gandhi was undermining the work that he and other members of the *dalit* community had done to secure their own rights.

<sup>40</sup> Chakrabarty, Bidyut. Social and Political Thought of Mahatma Gandhi. New York: Routledge, 2006, p 148.

<sup>41</sup> Zakaria, Rafiq. The Man Who Divided India. Mumbai: Popular Prakashan, 2004.

<sup>42</sup> Byrne, Donn. Mahatma Gandhi: The Man and His Message. Mumbai: Modern English Publications, 1984, p 88-89.

<sup>43</sup> Wolpert, Stanley A. India. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005, p 161; Mehta, Ved. Mahatma Gandhi and His Apostles. Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1993, p 150.

<sup>44</sup> Mehta, Ved. Mahatma Gandhi and His Apostles. Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1993, p 150-151.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid, p 151.

<sup>46</sup> Zakaria, Rafiq. The Man Who Divided India. Mumbai: Popular Prakashan, 2004, p 87.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> Gopal, Ram. Hindu Culture During and After Muslim Rule. New Delhi: M.D. Publications, 1994, p 129.

<sup>49</sup> Vohra, Ranbir. The Making of India: A Historical Survey. New York: M.E. Sharpe, 2001, p 84.

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