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**Mahatma Gandhi - transformation from Politician to a Saint**

*Mahatma Gandhi is one of the most famous Indians ever to have walked the planet. Through his work, the less privileged people of the world have gained a higher quality of life. Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi was the pre-eminent political and spiritual leader of India during the Indian independence movement. He was the pioneer of satyagraha, the resistance to tyranny through mass civil disobedience, firmly founded upon ahimsa or total non-violence, which led India to independence and has inspired movements for civil rights and freedom across the world. Gandhi first employed non-violent civil disobedience as an expatriate lawyer in South Africa, during the resident Indian community's struggle for civil rights. After his return to India in 1915, he organized protests by peasants, farmers, and urban labourers concerning excessive land-tax and discrimination. After assuming leadership of the Indian National Congress in 1921, Gandhi led nationwide campaigns to ease poverty, expand women's rights, build religious and ethnic amity, end untouchability and increase economic self-reliance. Gandhi employed non-cooperation, non-violence and peaceful resistance as his weapons in the struggle against British. He aimed to achieve Swaraj or the independence of India from foreign domination. Gandhi spent a number of years in jail in both South Africa and India. As a practitioner of ahimsa, he swore to speak the truth and advocated that others do the same. Gandhi lived modestly in a self-sufficient residential community and wore the traditional Indian dhoti and shawl, woven with yarn he had hand spun on a charkha. He ate simple vegetarian food, and also undertook long fasts as a means of both self-purification and social protest. His campaigns of passive resistance and civil disobedience proved to be a great success. Gandhiji will always be remembered as a true nationalist who worked tirelessly for upliftment of the people of India.*

**Keywords:** Independence, disobedience, truth, untouchability, fundamental rights, nationalist, movement

## **Introduction**

Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi was the pre-eminent political and spiritual leader of India during the Indian independence movement. He was the pioneer of satyagraha, the resistance to tyranny through mass civil disobedience, firmly founded upon ahimsa or total non-violence, which led India to independence and has inspired movements for civil rights and freedom across the world. Although Mahatama Gandhi was in no way the originator of the principle of non-violence, he was the first to apply it in the political field on a huge scale. The concept of nonviolence and nonresistance has a long history in Indian religious thought and has had many revivals in Hindu, Buddhist, Jain, Jewish and Christian contexts. Gandhi explains his philosophy and way of life in his autobiography *The Story of My Experiments with Truth*. He was quoted as saying: "When I despair, I remember that all through history the way of truth and love has always won. There have been tyrants and murderers and for a time they seem invincible, but in the end, they always fall — think of it, always." "An eye for an eye makes the whole world blind."

In applying these principles, Gandhi did not fail in taking them to their most logical extremes in envisioning a world where even government, police and armies were nonviolent. He was of the view that the science of war lead one to dictatorship but the science of non-violence alone can lead one to pure democracy. Power based on love is thousand times more effective and permanent than power derived from fear of punishment. In accordance with these views, in 1940, when invasion of the British Isles by Nazi Germany looked imminent, Gandhi offered the following advice to the British people (*Non-Violence in Peace and War*): "I would like you to lay down the arms you have as being useless for saving you or humanity. You will invite Herr Hitler and Signor Mussolini to take what they want of the countries you call your possessions...If these gentlemen choose to occupy your homes, you will vacate them. If they do not give you free passage out, you will allow yourselves, man, woman, and child, to be slaughtered, but you will refuse to owe allegiance to them."

However, Gandhi was aware that this level of nonviolence required incredible faith and courage, which he realized not everyone possessed. He therefore advised that everyone need not keep to nonviolence, especially if it were used as a cover for cowardice. Gandhi guarded against attracting to his satyagraha movement those who feared to take up arms or felt themselves incapable of resistance. Gandhi also came under some political fire for his criticism of those who attempted to achieve independence through more violent means. His refusal to protest against the hanging of Bhagat Singh, Sukhdev, Udham Singh and Rajguru were sources of condemnation among some parties. Gandhiji's championing of non-violence, even when facing a violent adversary, has stimulated public reflection and enkindled political action in different forms across the world.

## **Civil rights movement in South Africa**

In South Africa, Gandhi faced discrimination directed at Indians. He was thrown off a train at Pietermaritzburg after refusing to move from the first class to a third class coach

while holding a valid first class ticket. Travelling farther on by stagecoach he was beaten by a driver for refusing to travel on the foot board to make room for a European passenger. He suffered other hardships on the journey as well, including being barred from several hotels. In another incident, the magistrate of a Durban court ordered Gandhi to remove his turban - which he refused to do. Apartheid was thriving, so anybody who was not white was treated as inferior, second class citizens. Gandhi decided to do something about this problem though, and began his method of passive resistance and non-cooperation, drawing on the likes of Tolstoy and Jesus as his inspirations. These events were a turning point in his life, awakening him to social injustice and influencing his subsequent social activism.

It was through witnessing firsthand the racism, prejudice and injustice against Indians in South Africa that Gandhi started to question his people's status within the British Empire, and his own place in society. Gandhi extended his original period of stay in South Africa to assist Indians in opposing a bill to deny them the right to vote. Though unable to halt the bill's passage, his campaign was successful in drawing attention to the grievances of Indians in South Africa. He helped found the Natal Indian Congress in 1894 and through this organization, he molded the Indian community of South Africa into a homogeneous political force. In January 1897, when Gandhi landed in Durban he was attacked by a mob of white settlers and escaped only through the efforts of the wife of the Police Superintendent. He, however, refused to press charges against any member of the mob, stating it was one of his principles not to seek redress for a personal wrong in a court of law.

In 1906, the Transvaal government promulgated a new Act compelling the registration of the colony's Indian population. At a mass protest meeting held in Johannesburg on 11<sup>th</sup> September that year, Gandhi adopted his still evolving methodology of satyagraha or non-violent protest, for the first time, calling on his fellow Indians to defy the new law and suffer the punishments for doing so, rather than resist through violent means. This plan was adopted, leading to a seven-year struggle in which thousands of Indians were jailed including Gandhi, flogged, or even shot, for striking, refusing to register, burning their registration cards or engaging in other forms of non-violent resistance. While the government was successful in repressing the Indian protesters, the public outcry stemming from the harsh methods employed by the South African government in the face of peaceful Indian protesters finally forced South African General Jan Christiaan Smuts to negotiate a compromise with Gandhi. Gandhi's ideas took shape and the concept of satyagraha matured during this struggle. Satyagraha—Gandhi's nonviolent action—was not a way for one group to seize what it wanted from another. It was not a weapon of class struggle, or of any other kind of division. Satyagraha was instead an instrument of unity. It was a way to remove injustice and restore social harmony, to the benefit of both sides. Satyagraha, strange as it seems, was for the opponent's sake as well. When Satyagraha worked, both sides won.

He wanted the basic human rights of food, clothing, shelter, education, jobs, healthcare, and dignity for the hundreds of millions of impoverished Indians. But he called for justice by first living in radical solidarity with the poorest of the poor. He demonstrated in his daily life, through the use of the spinning wheel and communal living, how they could transform their own lives, even as they sought political independence. He wanted to stop

oppression everywhere in the world, but he did not want to use the methods of the oppressors and in the process become just another imperialist. He wanted to reach the heights of sanctity in his own life, and so he disciplined himself ruthlessly, denied himself basic pleasures, and shared his mistakes and faults with the world.

### **Gandhi's Struggle for India's Independence**

On July 18, 1914, after negotiating a breakthrough settlement with the government, Gandhi left South Africa for good. He embarked on a trip to England, and finally returned to India permanently on January 9, 1915, to a hero's welcome. Under the guidance of G. K. Gokhale, a revered politician, Gandhi spent his first year back rediscovering his homeland by criss-crossing the country, learning its problems and listening to the poor. He reacquainted himself with India's needs and potential and studied how he could apply the lessons of satyagraha learned in South Africa to India's struggle for independence from Britain. Gandhi set up another ashram, on the Sabarmati river near Ahmedabad, where he lived for the next sixteen years. Over 250 people eventually joined his community, which practiced the same austerity he originally witnessed at the Trappist monastery in South Africa. Each member professed 14 vows, including truth, nonviolence, celibacy, poverty, fearlessness, physical labor, tolerance of all religions, and making their own clothes. They prayed together, ate together, farmed the land, published newspapers, and prepared themselves to suffer and die in the nonviolent struggle for independence.

### **Champaran and Kheda**

Gandhi's first major achievements came in 1918 with the Champaran agitation and Kheda Satyagraha, although in the latter it was indigo and other cash crops instead of the food crops necessary for their survival. Suppressed by the militias of the landlords mostly British, they were given measly compensation, leaving them mired in extreme poverty. The villages were kept extremely dirty and unhygienic and alcoholism, untouchability and purdah were rampant. Now in the throes of a devastating famine, the British levied a tax which they insisted on increasing. The situation was desperate. In Kheda in Gujarat, the problem was the same. Gandhi established an ashram there, organizing scores of his veteran supporters and fresh volunteers from the region. He organized a detailed study and survey of the villages, accounting for the atrocities and terrible episodes of suffering, including the general state of degenerate living. Building on the confidence of villagers, he began leading the clean-up of villages, building of schools and hospitals and encouraging the village leadership to undo and condemn many social evils.

Gandhi employed non-cooperation, non-violence and peaceful resistance as his weapons in the struggle against British. In Punjab, the Jallianwala Bagh massacre of civilians by British troops caused deep trauma to the nation, leading to increased public anger and acts of violence. Gandhi criticized both the actions of the British Raj and the retaliatory violence of Indians. He authored the resolution offering condolences to British civilian victims and condemning the riots which, after initial opposition in the party, was accepted following Gandhi's emotional speech advocating his principle that all violence was evil and could not be justified. But it was after the massacre and subsequent violence that Gandhi's mind focused upon obtaining complete self-government and control of all Indian government

institutions, maturing soon into Swaraj or complete individual, spiritual, political independence.

His main impact came when he was arrested by police on the charge of creating unrest and was ordered to leave the province. Hundreds of thousands of people protested and rallied outside the jail, police stations and courts demanding his release, which the court reluctantly granted. Gandhi led organized protests and strikes against the landlords who, with the guidance of the British government, signed an agreement granting the poor farmers of the region more compensation and control over farming, and cancellation of revenue hikes and its collection until the famine ended. It was during this agitation, that Gandhi was addressed by the people as Bapu (Father) and Mahatma (Great Soul). In Kheda, Sardar Patel represented the farmers in negotiations with the British, who suspended revenue collection and released all the prisoners. As a result, Gandhi's fame spread all over the nation.

In December 1921, Gandhi was invested with executive authority on behalf of the Indian National Congress. Under his leadership, the Congress was reorganized with a new constitution, with the goal of Swaraj. Membership in the party was opened to anyone prepared to pay a token fee. A hierarchy of committees was set up to improve discipline, transforming the party from an elite organization to one of mass national appeal. Gandhi expanded his non-violence platform to include the swadeshi policy — the boycott of foreign-made goods, especially British goods. Linked to this was his advocacy that khadi (homespun cloth) be worn by all Indians instead of British-made textiles. Gandhi exhorted Indian men and women, rich or poor, to spend time each day spinning khadi in support of the independence movement. This was a strategy to inculcate discipline and dedication to weed out the unwilling and ambitious and to include women in the movement at a time when many thought that such activities were not respectable activities for women. In addition to boycotting British products, Gandhi urged the people to boycott British educational institutions and law courts, to resign from government employment and to forsake British titles and honours.

In 1932, through the campaigning of the Dalit leader B. R. Ambedkar, the government granted untouchables separate electorates under the new constitution. In protest, Gandhi embarked on a six-day fast in September 1932, successfully forcing the government to adopt a more equitable arrangement. This was the start of a new campaign by Gandhi to improve the lives of the untouchables, whom he named Harijans, the children of God. On 8<sup>th</sup> May, 1933 Gandhi began a 21-day fast of self-purification to help the Harijan movement. Gandhi returned to the head in 1936, with the Nehru presidency and the Lucknow session of the Congress. Although Gandhi desired a total focus on the task of winning independence and not speculation about India's future, he did not restrain the Congress from adopting socialism as its goal. The World war II broke out in 1939 when Nazi Germany invaded Poland. Initially, Gandhi had favored offering non-violent moral support to the British effort, but other Congressional leaders were offended by the unilateral inclusion of India into the war, without consultation of the people's representatives. All Congressmen elected to resign from office en masse. After lengthy deliberations, Gandhi declared that India could not be party to

a war ostensibly being fought for democratic freedom, while that freedom was denied to India itself.

As the war progressed, Gandhi intensified his demand for independence, drafting a resolution calling for the British to Quit India. This was Gandhi's and the Congress Party's most definitive revolt aimed at securing the British exit from Indian shores. Quit India became the most forceful movement in the history of the struggle, with mass arrests and violence on an unprecedented scale. Thousands of freedom fighters were killed or injured by police gunfire, and hundreds of thousands were arrested. Gandhi and his supporters made it clear they would not support the war effort unless India was granted immediate independence. He even clarified that this time the movement would not be stopped if individual acts of violence were committed, saying that the ordered anarchy around him was worse than real anarchy. He called on all Congressmen and Indians to maintain discipline via ahimsa, and Karo Ya Maro (Do or Die) for the cause of ultimate freedom.

In 1947, India gained independence, something that Gandhi had worked towards for a long time. He was against partition though, wishing that those of Muslim and Hindu faith could live peacefully side-by-side. He was also very critical of the caste system, whereby some Indians of high social standing were deemed 'untouchable'. When Mahatma Gandhi was assassinated on January 30, 1948, the world hailed him as one of the greatest spiritual leaders, not just of the century, but of all time. He was ranked not just with Thoreau, Tolstoy, and St. Francis, but with Buddha, Mohammed and even Jesus. "Generations to come will scarce believe that such a one as this ever in flesh and blood walked upon this earth," Albert Einstein wrote at the time.

Gandhi's legacy includes not just the brilliantly waged struggle against institutionalized racism in South Africa, the independence movement of India, and a groundbreaking path of inter-religious dialogue, but also highlights the first widespread application of nonviolence as the most powerful tool for positive social change. Gandhi's nonviolence was not just political: It was rooted and grounded in the spiritual, which is why he exploded not just onto India's political stage, but onto the world stage, and not just temporally, but for all times. Gandhi was, first and foremost, a religious man in search of God. For more than fifty years, he pursued truth, proclaiming that the best way to discover truth was through the practice of active, faith-based nonviolence. If he had wanted, Gandhi could have lived a very comfortable life as a lawyer. Instead he devoted it to prayer, fasting and meditation. He wore basic clothes and lived off fruit, vegetables and milk. He gave up his personal comfort to bring well-being to millions of others.

The tie that binds Gandhi's life together is that Gandhi tried to be a person of integrity and authenticity. He wanted to do God's will, and he did not want to be a hypocrite. That meant he had to identify as radically as possible with the poorest people on the face of the earth. If he wanted to achieve the heights of divinity, he said to himself, he had to touch the bottom of humanity and become one with the starving millions. He learned quickly that the path to God required the ongoing purification of his own heart and life. Throughout fifty years of letter-writing, he always maintained that the way to peace, justice and salvation,

begins first with the purification of one's own heart and daily life. As he purified his inner life, he stepped deeper into public turmoil and willingly suffered for his political beliefs, undergoing repeated arrests, trials, imprisonments, death threats, attempts on his life, constant verbal abuse and fasting for his causes, coming to the brink of death on several occasions.

Never had such religious idealism been practiced politically and socially on the world stage. "I am endeavoring to see God through the service of humanity, for I know that God is neither in heaven, nor down below, but in every one," Gandhi wrote to a friend on August 4, 1927. If God is in everyone, Gandhi believed, then he would have to love everyone, even his enemy. He would have to side with the most oppressed, impoverished, suffering people on the planet, and not just once, but every day and for the rest of his life, come what may. If he remained true to this hard road, he knew his outcome was assured: not only political independence and peace, but the vision of God. In this spiritual search, Gandhi came up with the method of satyagraha as a holy strategy for social and political revolution and widespread structural change. If one were willing to suffer and die for justice and peace, Gandhi taught, without even the desire to retaliate or kill, then the spirit of all-encompassing redemptive love would capture even God's attention, win the sympathy of the world and wear down the opponent in the process until justice and freedom were achieved. It is a foolproof method, he insisted.

As Gandhi sought the spiritual roots of political struggle, he realized more and more that he could never hurt or kill another human being, or indeed, any creature; that there was no cause, however noble it may appear that justified the taking of another life. "Every act has its spiritual, economic and social implications." "The spirit is not separate. It cannot be." Gandhi saw everything he did as a religious act. "I believe God is always near me," he wrote a friend in 1906. "God is never away from me. May you also act in this faith. Believe that God is near you and always follow the truth." To understand Gandhi, we need to notice his daily dedication to prayer, meditation, and scripture study. When he was a child, Gandhi's nurse taught him whenever he was scared, to repeat God's name over and over again throughout the day. He tried to continue this practice every day for the rest of his life. He sought to experience the presence of God every minute of his life. This personal spiritual search, coupled with his dramatic public search for God's nonviolent transformation of the world, inspires us today to attempt the same spiritual journey in our own lives. Prayer was critically important for Gandhi. Each morning, he spent one hour in silent meditation before sunrise. Each evening, he spent another hour in silent meditation. Every day for fifty years, he read from Koran, Bhagavad Gita.

Gandhi viewed the Hindu scripture as a radical call to complete renunciation, steadfast love, and perfect nonviolence. He wrote many commentaries on the Gita, translated it several times, and tried to change his life and habits to fit its teachings. Using the teachings of the Gita, he summed up the model human being as one "who is jealous of none; who is a fount of mercy; who is without egotism; who is selfless; who treats alike cold and heat, happiness and misery; who is ever forgiving; who is always contented; whose resolutions are firm; who has dedicated mind and soul to God; who causes no dread; who is not afraid of

others; who is free from exultation, sorrow and fear; who is pure; who is versed in action yet remains unaffected by it; who renounces all fruit, good or bad; who treats friend and foe alike; who is untouched by respect or disrespect; who is not puffed up by praise; who does not go under when people speak ill of him; who loves silence and solitude; and who has a disciplined reason.” Gandhi spent his days trying to incarnate this spiritual ideal. Gandhi then was not just as lawyer, politician, activist, social reformer, or revolutionary: Gandhi was a contemplative, a person of God, a saint. He showed the possibilities not just of Hinduism and Christianity in practice, but what it means to be human. He did so because he relied on God. He allowed God to disarm his heart and in the process became an instrument for God’s disarmament of the world.

### **Gandhi’s Message of Nonviolence**

Gandhi’s greatest contribution to humanity is his message of nonviolence as the way to peace, justice, and God. Gandhi took seriously the biblical commandments, “Thou shalt not kill” and “Love your enemies,” along with the Hindu tradition of *ahimsa* (non-killing), and applied this renunciation of violence to his own heart and life as well as to South Africa, India and the world. But he taught that nonviolence is not just refusal to kill: it is the action of love and truth as a force for positive social change. Indeed, he insisted that nonviolence was the most active and powerful force in the world. Since he saw it as the force of God, the method of God, the power of God at work for good among the human race, he concluded that nonviolence is more powerful than nuclear weapons. If millions of ordinary Americans would practice nonviolence, would peacefully, publicly and actively resist the production and maintenance of nuclear weapons, disarmament would be assured. Nonviolence always works, he said, because it uses the method of suffering love to melt the human heart.

Though few nations have disarmed, Gandhi’s life and teaching offers an ideal that many uphold. From grassroots activists to Nobel Laureates, billions of people around the world know about Gandhi and have been touched by him. Dorothy Day, Nelson Mandela, the Dalai Lama, and Archbishop Tutu have all expressed their debt to Gandhi. While Gandhi was a brilliant political strategist and revolutionary, what set him apart from others was his unique reliance upon God in his public practice of nonviolence. Nonviolence for Gandhi was not just a tactic, but spirituality, a way of life, the centre of his religion. “Nonviolence succeeds only when we have a real living faith in God,” Gandhi insisted.

### **Gandhi’s Contribution to Modern Spirituality**

Gandhi’s contributions to modern spirituality include not only his impact on social movements around the world through the political strategy of active nonviolence and satyagraha, but his transforming influence on religion itself. Many of the world’s religions have been inspired to return to their root beliefs of truth and nonviolence that they all share in common. Gandhi’s influence is so great and yet so sublime that it is hard to categorize his many contributions and achievements. But a few essential teachings can be gleaned for his life work and testimony. Gandhi’s primary contribution to spirituality and the world itself is nonviolence. Gandhi insisted that if our worship of God is honest, if our faith is sincere, if we want to be people of prayer, indeed, if we want to be fully human, we need to become people



of nonviolence. Gandhi worshipped the God of nonviolence, and announced that every major religion was rooted in nonviolence. He taught that nonviolence could be put into practice at every level of human life, in our own hearts, among our own family and friends, in our local communities, as well as nationally and internationally. He said that each of us can do it, from the poorest prisoner to presidents willingness to go to jail and his defense of the untouchables were other ways to share in the poverty of the masses. “Self-realization I hold to be impossible without service of and identification with the poorest,” Gandhi wrote. If we want to find God, he said, we must go to the poor, walk with them, serve the poor, learn from them, be disarmed by them and become one with them. The poor will teach us the truth, show us God, and share God’s reign with us. Gandhi held that radical purity of heart bears enormous positive ramifications for the entire world. He firmly believed that the more we purify our inner lives, the more our lives will serve God’s work to end war, poverty and injustice. He taught that personal integrity was necessary for an authentic spirituality, for nonviolence. To this end, he suggested regular fasting throughout one’s life, and became an advocate and proponent of fasting as a way to repent of one’s personal sins and the sins of those we love.

Gandhi practiced a living solidarity with the poor and oppressed. Long before liberation theology, Gandhi gave away his money and personal possessions, renounced his career, moved to a communal farm, made his own clothes, dressed like the poorest Indian peasants, and shared their meager diet of fruits and vegetables. He asked the people to serve one another. Then, peace would grow among us. “Whether humanity will consciously follow the law of love, I do not know,” Gandhi wrote. “But that need not disturb me. The law will work just as the law of gravitation works, whether we accept it or not. The person who discovered the law of love was a far greater scientist than any of our modern scientists. Only our explorations have not gone far enough and so it is not possible for everyone to see all its workings. He firmly believed that the more we purify our inner lives, the more our lives will serve God’s work to end war, poverty and injustice. Gandhi practiced peace through prayer and mindfulness. He radiated peace and laughed constantly. He was full of joy. The more influential his life became, the more he relied on prayer, seeking greater solitude, even taking one day a week in total silence for the last two decades of his life. His commitment to prayer and his devotion to the spirit working in his heart through prayer transformed Gandhi from a politician to a saint, someone who does God’s will, through whom God speaks and moves and touches the human race.

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