

# Mahatma Gandhi

## Anti-War Activist (1869–1948)

Website: BIOGRAPHY

<https://www.biography.com/people/mahatma-gandhi-9305898>

### **Who Was Mahatma Gandhi?**

Mahatma Gandhi was the primary leader of India's independence movement and also the architect of a form of non-violent civil disobedience that would influence the world.

Mahatma Gandhi (October 2, 1869 to January 30, 1948) was the leader of India's non-violent independence movement against British rule and in South Africa who advocated for the civil rights of Indians. Born in Porbandar, India, Gandhi studied law and organized boycotts against British institutions in peaceful forms of civil disobedience. He was killed by a fanatic in 1948.

### **Religion and Beliefs**

Gandhi grew up worshiping the Hindu god Vishnu and following Jainism, a morally rigorous ancient Indian religion that espoused non-violence, fasting, meditation and vegetarianism.

During Gandhi's first stay in London, from 1888 to 1891, he became more committed to a meatless diet, joining the executive committee of the London Vegetarian Society, and started to read a variety of sacred texts to learn more about world religions.

Living in South Africa, Gandhi continued to study world religions. "The religious spirit within me became a living force," he wrote of his time there. He immersed himself in sacred Hindu spiritual texts and adopted a life of simplicity, austerity, fasting and celibacy that was free of material goods.

### **Gandhi's Ashram & the Indian Caste System**

In 1915 Gandhi founded an ashram in Ahmedabad, India, that was open to all castes. Wearing a simple loincloth and shawl, Gandhi lived an austere life devoted to prayer, fasting and meditation. He became known as "Mahatma," which means "great soul."

In 1932, Gandhi, at the time imprisoned in India, embarked on a six-day fast to protest the British decision to segregate the “untouchables,” those on the lowest rung of India’s caste system, by allotting them separate electorates. The public outcry forced the British to amend the proposal.

### **Gandhi’s Assassination**

In the late afternoon of January 30, 1948, the 78-year-old Gandhi, weakened from repeated hunger strikes, clung to his two grandnieces as they led him from his living quarters in New Delhi’s Birla House to a prayer meeting. Hindu extremist Nathuram Godse, upset at Gandhi’s tolerance of Muslims, knelt before the Mahatma before... shooting him. The violent act took the life of a pacifist who spent his life preaching nonviolence...

### **Gandhi in South Africa**

After struggling to find work as a lawyer in India, Gandhi obtained a one-year contract to perform legal services in South Africa. When Gandhi arrived in South Africa, he was quickly appalled by the discrimination and racial segregation faced by Indian immigrants at the hands of white British and Boer authorities. Upon his first appearance in a Durban courtroom, Gandhi was asked to remove his turban. He refused and left the court instead. The Natal Advertiser mocked him in print as “an unwelcome visitor.”

A seminal moment in Gandhi’s life occurred days later on June 7, 1893, during a train trip to Pretoria, South Africa, when a white man objected to his presence in the first-class railway compartment, although he had a ticket. Refusing to move to the back of the train, Gandhi was forcibly removed and thrown off the train at a station in Pietermaritzburg. His act of civil disobedience awoke in him a determination to devote himself to fighting the “deep disease of color prejudice.” He vowed that night to “try, if possible, to root out the disease and suffer hardships in the process.” From that night forward, the small, unassuming man would grow into a giant force for civil rights.

### **Satyagraha and Nonviolent Civil Disobedience**

Gandhi became a leading figure in the Indian home-rule movement. Calling for mass boycotts, he urged government officials to stop working for the Crown, students to stop attending government schools, soldiers to leave their posts and citizens to stop

paying taxes and purchasing British goods. Rather than buy British-manufactured clothes, he began to use a portable spinning wheel to produce his own cloth, and the spinning wheel soon became a symbol of Indian independence and self-reliance. Gandhi assumed the leadership of the Indian National Congress and advocated a policy of non-violence and non-cooperation to achieve home rule.

## **Gandhi and the Salt March**

In 1930, Gandhi returned to active politics to protest Britain's Salt Acts, which not only prohibited Indians from collecting or selling salt—a dietary staple—but imposed a heavy tax that hit the country's poorest particularly hard. Gandhi planned a new Satyagraha campaign that entailed a 390-kilometer/240-mile march to the Arabian Sea, where he would collect salt in symbolic defiance of the government monopoly.

“My ambition is no less than to convert the British people through non-violence and thus make them see the wrong they have done to India,” he wrote days before the march to the British viceroy, Lord Irwin.

Wearing a homespun white shawl and sandals and carrying a walking stick, Gandhi set out from his religious retreat in Sabarmati on March 12, 1930, with a few dozen followers. By the time he arrived 24 days later in the coastal town of Dandi, the ranks of the marchers swelled, and Gandhi broke the law by making salt from evaporated seawater.

[The Salt March](#) sparked similar protests, and mass civil disobedience swept across India. Approximately 60,000 Indians were jailed for breaking the Salt Acts, including Gandhi, who was imprisoned in May 1930. Still, the protests against the Salt Acts elevated Gandhi into a transcendent figure around the world, and he was named Time magazine's “Man of the Year” for 1930.

## **Legacy**

Even after Gandhi's assassination, his commitment to nonviolence and his belief in simple living — making his own clothes, eating a vegetarian diet and using fasts for self-purification as well as a means of protest — have been a beacon of hope for oppressed and marginalized people throughout the world. Satyagraha remains one of the most potent philosophies in freedom struggles throughout the world today, and Gandhi's actions inspired future human rights movements around the globe, including those of civil rights leader [Martin Luther King Jr.](#) in the United States and [Nelson Mandela](#) in South Africa.