

## MAHATMA GANDHI

### (FROM A SEDITIOUS FAKIR TO A SPIRITUAL GIANT)

A man who changed the world, Mahatma Gandhiji, was a man of simple birth but of noble principles. He dedicated his entire life serving the human society and he was indefatigable fighter for human rights being aware of this problem even before the international community was. He was a strong advocate and propagator of Ahimsa, which placed Gandhiji among the greatest humans ever lived on the Planet. Ahimsa, the highest principle of Indian spiritual tradition, means a non-violence, not hurting anyone neither physically, emotionally or mentally (Maheshwarananda). What led Gandhi to apply this ancient wisdom of Indian spiritual masters to the contemporary political situation?

It all began in 1489 when Vasco da Gama, a Portuguese mariner, discovered a sea-way to India. Hungry for treasures of this vast land, the Europeans started to occupy and colonise it. The first were the Portuguese and then the British followed by establishing the East India Company in 1600. The entire India was subjugated by the 1849. The Company created strong and well trained army to fight against the rebels and to enthrone despots loyal to the British. The people of India were exposed to ungracious exploitation and just between 1757 and 1857 20 billions of rupees in gold were extorted from them. The opening of the Sues Channel in 1869 even increased this exploitation. It is estimated that 26 millions of the Indians starved between 1876 and 1900 due to the lack of food which was exported to England. The Channel enabled the British to consolidate their dominion over India (Enciklopedija leksikografskog zavoda 143). But on October 2, at the same year, a boy named Mohandas Gandhi was born at Porbandar, on the western coast of India and he would defeat the oppressors with the only weapon he had - truth and love.

His family belonged to the caste of vaisyas-the merchants. Both parents had a great influence on the young man. Gandhi's father Karamchand Gandhi was a Diwan, a Chief Minister of Porbandar, and that definitely stimulated Mohandas to study law. On the other hand his mother Putlibai, who was a very faithful woman, gave him spiritual knowledge of Hinduism and taught him to respect all living beings. Though she was not versed in the scriptures, actually, she was even unlettered, she radiated immense of love and her austerities and fasts impressed all her children greatly. It is marvellously described on the website [mkgandhi.org](http://mkgandhi.org), how this image of love and sacrifice ripped inside him until it finally flowed out bursting the bonds of family and community, until it embraced the whole of humanity. At the age of 13 he

was married to Kasturbai Makanji who was a daughter of some Pordaban merchant (engagedpage.com). Though they met for the first time at the wedding ceremony they remained happily together till Kasturbai's death in 1944. When Gandhi was 19, he left for London to study law and finished it three years later. In the centre of Empire, Gandhi was very lonely. He did not care for the pleasures of wine and women and this removed him from his colleagues (Nicholson). But the principle of Ahimsa opened him the door into the British society. Gandhi was of course strict vegetarian so he published several articles on vegetarianism and even became a member of the Executive committee of the London Vegetarian Society. In Bays water, where he stayed for a short time, he formed a vegetarian club. He came into contact with at least one eminent vegetarian, Sir Edwin Arnold(mkgandhi.org). The British could not even in their dreams imagine that this ideas of not hurting anyone carry the power which is stronger than their cannons and would eventually force them to leave India.

Not succeeding in India as a lawyer, Gandhi went to Durban in South Africa where he got an opportunity to defend an Indian merchant in 1893. In South Africa the whites treated Indians hardly any better than they did the natives. If in India his family status guaranteed him relatively high position in the society, in South Africa he would be treated by the whites just as other Indians who were socially and legally nearly equalled with the blacks (Privat). Gandhi experienced the lessening of human rights of such an extension for the first time. On his journey from Durban (Gandhi left Durban because he did not agreed to take off his turban at the court) to Pretoria he was ordered to leave the first class compartment and shift to the van compartment. Since he refused the request he was unceremoniously turned out of the carriage. It was a bitterly cold night as he reached the waiting-room of Maritzburg station thinking over what had happened. Gandhi was now wondering whether he should leave Africa or accept these affronts and humiliations when something happened to him in that cold and dark waiting-room. Later this incident seemed to him as one of the most creative experiences of his life. From that hour, he was determined not to accept injustice as a part of the natural- or unnatural- order in South Africa. He decided to fight against this injustice not so much for redeeming his own self-respect as that of his community, his country and of humanity in general (Nicholson). Though he was a pacifist he joined the British army during the Boer War since he hoped that the Indians would be equalled with the British. We should understand that for Gandhi loyalty to a state and to its government was an obligation. He tried very hard to please the British by organising and commanding sanitary squads. But soon he

realised that the British had only one goal - to banish the kulis (Indian workers) back to Asia. In 1907 Gandhi uttered his idea of Satyagraha for the first time and began his non-violent fight against the oppressors of the South Africa. He interpreted the Satyagraha as [ ] a passive resistance which is an all-sided sword and it can be used anyhow. It blesses him who uses it and him against whom it is used. Without drawing a drop of blood it produces far-reaching results. It never rusts and cannot be stolen (mkgandhi.org). The aim was not to defeat the British by force but to make them aware that their actions are wrong. In practise this would mean to bear all the sufferings and humiliations without complaining. Gandhi's struggle attracted attention from Lord Hardinge, the viceroy of India, who courageously denounced the high-handed policies of the South African Government. Negotiations between Gandhi and the South African Government began under pressure from Delhi and London. In 1914 Gandhi and general Smuts reached an agreement which promised more respect and dignity for the Indians of South Africa. This was the first victory of Satyagraha (Nicholson).

In 1915 Gandhi returned to India and to his surprise people thronged to see him at the pier. Gandhi did not immediately begin to fight for the Indian independence but decided first to learn more about the situation and problems in the country. He started building an ashram in Sabarmath (near Ahmedabad) and soon his way of life attracted many followers who settled there (Nicholson). Gandhi was now recognised as a fighter for human rights interceding for the rights of the untouchable (people who were not members of any caste), poor farmers and industrial workers. He still believed that the Indians should serve the Empire in order to gain its civil rights so when he was requested to help the British in the World War I he agreed on calling up the volunteers. But at his disappointment, the British again did not keep their promises about establishing the Indian government. So Gandhi resolved that he would struggle against the British dominion in India. He proclaimed hartal, some kind of a general strike, and according to gandhiinstitute website this was the beginning of his 28 years long fight for the independence. After the great massacre in Amritsar in 1919 where 379 people were killed and more than thousand injured, he began opposing the British hegemony openly. In 1920 the Indian Congress adopted Gandhi's resolution where also the idea of swaraj-the Indian government was included. Gandhi reformed the Congress and gave it a new value. He changed it into a democratic organisation with branches all over the country. Then he went on a journey spreading the idea of non-co-operation with the British government in India and boycotting the British products. Due to his political activity Gandhi was arrested in 1922 and then released in 1924 because of appendicitis. But he did his time on his own before he

continued his fight. In 1929 he started his historical salt walk of which the highest point was when he reached the sea coast and picked up a handful of salt. People immediately understood this symbolical act and began to produce salt on their own since the taxes on salt were inhumanly high. The result of this travelling was that Gandhi and 60 000 of other people were imprisoned what provoked peaceful protests all over India. As a token of a protest about 2.500 members of the Congress peacefully marched towards the salt pans of Dharsana where Gandhi was arrested. The British police officers who were guarding the salt pans brutally beat the protestors who did not show any sign of revolt. This scene went on for a several hours until two persons were killed and 320 severely injured. The British soldiers were unable to stop protestors by force and their cruel attitude towards the Indians was not approved not even in England. The seditious fakir, as angry Churchill marked Gandhi, was eventually invited to the viceroy's palace for negotiations. The viceroy Lord Irwin and Gandhi agreed on free extracting of salt and Gandhi held up the non-co-operation. The Satyagraha showed its power (Nicholson).

In 1931 Gandhi travelled to a conference to London as the only representative of the Congress. Gandhi deeply enchanted the British public. Do you think you were properly dressed? , people asked him after the king granted an audience to him. The king had enough on himself for both of us , he modestly replied. His plainness truly impressed the people and they understood what injustice was being done to India. The conference itself however brought no progress. After the World War II the labourists won the elections in England and they were more in favour of the Indian independence. Leave India to God , said Lord Mountbatten who was the last British viceroy of India and who was also a close friend of Gandhi (Collins, Lapierre). Finally, India gained independence in 1947 and soon after this, in January 30, 1948, Gandhi was shot in front of his house Birla.

How did Gandhiji change the human history? India was the first country which gained independence from the imperialist in a non-violent manner. He showed that what people need is a virtuous leadership based on truth and love for all. Hitler and Gandhi lived approximately in the same historical period, they had the same power (Gandhi in people, Hitler in technology) and charisma and people would follow them anywhere. But what Hitler did to the world and especially to the Germans under false pretence of liberating them and gaining the Lebensraum is no more comparable to Gandhi's philosophy of Ahimsa and Satyagraha which were the only weapons he used in his fight for the Indian independence. Being on the

side of the truth no one could ever accused him of harming his opponents. There were, on the other hand, politicians in India who browsed on the history of the French and Russian revolutions or the Italian and Irish nationalist struggles and it was patent to them that force would only yield to force but luckily they did not prevail (gandhiinstitute). We can only imagine where a war between the well armed British and a nation of 200 millions of people could have led the entire world.

It is remarkable why people followed Gandhi and not the revolutionists. A two hundred million nation somehow should not be afraid of clash of arms with the British who indeed had predominance in technology but their military troops were thousands of miles away. What did Gandhi have that others did not? Gandhi was in my opinion firstly a very intelligent person and secondly a very good observer. He did not preach his idea of Satyagraha already from his childhood but the life circumstances in Africa and later in India brought him to certain cognition which he consistently utilised at any cost. The fact that he was prepared to sacrifice himself, to die but not to kill, gave him the credibility and genuineness which attracted the crowds. The greatness of Gandhi's nobility and the nobility of those who followed him can be realised from his explanation of why a non-violent way [ ] I am not pleading for India to practice non-violence because it is weak. I want her to practice non-violence being conscious of her strength and power. No training in arms is required for realisation of her strength. We seem to need it because we seem to think that we are a lump of flesh. India has to make her choice. She may try, if she wishes, the way of war and sink lower than she has....If India can possibly gain her freedom by war, her state will be no better and will be, probably, much worse than that of France or England.... (gandhiinstitute). Truly, the British did not die of Indian bullets but they did die of their shame.

Mahatma Gandhi's idea of non-violent fight for particular aim was the first such an example in the modern history of a mankind. Though this principals were stated and known for ages and spoken by many people, Gandhi was that one who lived this principles in reality and has also inspired millions of people to follow them. Gandhi showed us that no conflict can be solved by force but that only the Ahimsa is the way to the eternal peace and understanding among nations and cultures of the World.

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