

JOHANNESBURG, SOUTH AFRICA

THE CROWD PRESSED into the city square. Some three thousand Indian men had gathered—Muslim, Hindu, and Christian. Some wore English-style suits and hats; others were dressed in traditional Indian tunics and turbans or rectangular caps. They had come to break a law.

At the front of the crowd, a large three-legged pot stood on a platform. A stack of nearly two thousand papers, registration certificates and licenses that the South African government required Indian citizens to carry, was placed in the pot. Wax was poured over the papers and the stack was set alight. An enormous cheer rose with the flames and smoke as the papers burned. The men yelled and whistled and threw hats into the air. A group of Chinese men then mounted the platform. Their certificates were added to the fire.

The shouting was so loud that it was a long time

before the leaders on the platform could address the crowd. When they finally could be heard, one of the men to give a speech was an Indian lawyer named Mohandas Gandhi.

The campaign of the South African Indians against unfair laws that treated them differently from white citizens had begun nearly two years before. But this was the first action in which a mass of people deliberately broke the law. A reporter from a British paper compared the action to the Boston Tea Party.

PLEASE DO NOT LOOK TO MY LIFE,
BUT TAKE ME EVEN AS A LAMPPRO
ON THE ROAD. MOHANDAS GANDHI

MOHANDAS KARAMCHAND GANDHI was born to a Hindu family in India in 1869. At the time, Britain ruled over India. As a young boy Gandhi had a model of courage and independence in his father, who dared to challenge an insulting remark made by a British political agent about an Indian prince. The agent was furious and had Gandhi's father arrested, but he eventually dropped the charges, and the two became friends.

Gandhi's mother had the deepest influence on the young boy through her tenderness. Though she could seem strict because she held such high standards for her children's behavior, one of the standards of her moral code was kindness and compassion. Every morning there were twenty or thirty desperately poor people waiting at the gate to the Gandhi household, knowing they would be given money or food.

In grade school Gandhi was introduced to Indian poetry. One verse in particular stayed with him his whole life. The poem spoke of the virtue of using love to overcome injustice. "If a man gives you a drink of water and you give him a drink in return, that is nothing," the verse said. "Real beauty consists in doing good against evil." Gandhi was also influenced by the philosophy of nonviolence or *ahimsa*, practiced by the many followers of the Jain religion who lived in his community.

As a young man Gandhi traveled to London to study

law. There he discovered the words of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount, which said, "Love your enemies and pray for them that persecute you." Gandhi also reread a Hindu scripture, the Bhagavad Gita, to which he had been introduced as a boy. Finally he read work by the Russian writer Leo Tolstoy, which was full of passionate sympathy for peasants who were treated unjustly.

The young Indian lawyer who arrived in South Africa in 1893 was a shy and soft-spoken man who had no dreams of becoming a leader of any kind. He was the model of a perfect British gentleman, speaking impeccable English, dressed in English clothing, committed to the values of British law and empire.

Soon after his arrival in South Africa, he had an experience that set the course of his life in a new direction. He was traveling by train on a first-class ticket when a white passenger objected to sharing the coach with a dark-skinned occupant. The train conductor ordered Gandhi to the third-class car. When he refused he was thrown off the train at the next station, where he spent the night outside, shivering in the cold. The next day Gandhi took a horse-drawn coach. Once again he was told to give up his seat. When Gandhi continued to sit there, the driver began to beat him until a white passenger protested.

These personal experiences of injustice shocked the young lawyer. Though he had intended to return to India,

he was persuaded to remain and practice law among his countrymen in Johannesburg, working to improve the conditions of their lives. Gandhi helped form an association of Indian citizens and began to speak out.

In 1906 the South African government passed the Asiatic Registration Act. All Asian residents were required to register and be fingerprinted. No white citizens had to register. The Indian community was outraged; fingerprinting was for criminals.

VIOLENCE IS AN INTENSELY ACTIVE
FORCE WHEN PROPERLY UNDERSTOOD
AND USED. MOHANDAS GANDHI

At a mass meeting on September 11, 1906, Gandhi made his first call for a nonviolent response. For a number of years he had been reflecting on the potential for powerful resistance using nonviolent means. He knew of examples of protests and boycotts in Ireland, India, and South Africa and had kept track of the massive nonviolent uprisings of Russian citizens in 1905.

Though in his 1906 speech he used the term “passive resistance,” he soon challenged the use of it to describe his work. Passive resistance suggested weakness or not doing anything. Also, though nonviolent, such resistance could be motivated by hate or anger.

Gandhi had a different vision. He sought to replace violence with love, not just in his actions, but in his mind and heart as well. He imagined nonviolent *action* with the goal not of beating opponents, but of winning them over.

Within two years he found an Indian name for his idea—*satyagraha*. It combined the word for truth, *satya*, with the word *agraha*, for firmness or force. He believed that refusing to harbor violence of any kind was a choice that came out of strength, not weakness. And he saw the possibility that it could be extraordinarily powerful. By *satyagraha* Gandhi meant the strength of active nonviolent resistance to injustice.

The mass burning of registration papers in August 1908 was one of many acts of resistance led by Gandhi in South Africa, where he had a chance to experiment with his new ideas. Gandhi taught that if a law was unjust and caused harm, a moral person had a responsibility to resist it. Laws could be resisted by noncooperation: refusing to go along with them, such as refusing to be fingerprinted. “Noncooperation with evil is as much a duty as is cooperation with good,” Gandhi said. Laws could also be re-

sisted by civil disobedience, which means breaking a law in order to change it. When the Indians burned their registration cards, they were practicing civil disobedience.

The more Gandhi supported the cause of Indian workers in South Africa, the more he came to identify with them. His closest supporters lived with him in a separate religious community, or ashram. There everyone shared the physical work equally.

For seven years Gandhi and his followers used noncooperation and civil disobedience to protest the mistreatment of Indians in South Africa. The Indian protesters were beaten, arrested, jailed, and some were even shot, but they refused to give up or to resort to violence. Finally, in 1914, the Minister of the Interior, General J.C. Smuts, was forced to negotiate an agreement with Gandhi, giving in to many of his demands. The Indians' Relief Act was passed, overturning some of the most restrictive laws. Gandhi's campaign on behalf of Indians in South Africa had succeeded.

In 1915 he took his message and his methods home to India. The man who returned to his homeland was dressed not in the clothes of an English gentleman, but in the draped cloth of the poor.

For more than thirty years, Gandhi organized nonviolent resistance against the British occupation of India. Throughout those years he also worked tirelessly to bring

together different groups of Indians, especially Hindus and Muslims. All these actions were guided by his absolute commitment to a loving nonviolence, *ahimsa*, which means never causing harm.

In his later years Gandhi was an odd figure, a little man in a loincloth whose personal possessions became simpler each year. At the ashram he and his followers spent hours in prayer and meditation, and an hour or two each day spinning cotton thread. By his example he hoped to encourage Indians to make their own cloth instead of depending on fabric imported from England.

Gandhi was a strict vegetarian and also tried experimental diets of very limited foods that were not always good for his health. He believed in self-sacrifice in all aspects of life, and in the expectation of suffering in the pursuit of what was right. When he could think of no other action, he announced a personal fast, going without food as a means of calling attention to injustice. To millions of Indians he was known as the Mahatma, or "Great One."

The Great Salt March of 1930 was perhaps his most famous action. At the time the British had a tax on salt. Though it was a free natural resource, abundantly available along India's coast, the British wanted to control salt. They outlawed the collection and distribution anywhere but at official salt depots, where it was taxed. Gandhi saw the salt tax as a cruel injustice to the poorest people, who

had to pay for something that should have been free, like the air and the water. He also saw it as a perfect example of the evil of a foreign government controlling the lives of people whose land they had occupied. He decided to defy the law.

He set out on March 12, 1930, with seventy-eight followers, marching for twenty-five days to the sea. Along the way he passed through villages where he spoke out against the salt tax. More and more people joined the march. By the time they reached the coast on April 5, more than fifty thousand had gathered, and the eyes of India, the British government, and the world were on Gandhi. The following morning he reached down and scooped up a handful of salt from the shore.

Gandhi was arrested a month later. That year, more than sixty thousand Indians were put in jail for following his example. The action caused political groups all over India to unite in the struggle for independence and put enormous pressure on the British. By 1931 Gandhi was involved in negotiations with the occupation government.

In 1946 India achieved independence from England. But Gandhi didn't feel triumphant at the victory, because at the same time India became independent, it was divided. A law called the Partition, enacted in 1947, separated India's Muslims from its Hindus, creating the new country of Pakistan for Muslims. Gandhi was heartbroken. All the

work he had done to heal the divisions between Muslims and Hindus seemed to have failed.

Gandhi was assassinated in 1948 by a Hindu man who hated his attempts to bring Hindus and Muslims together. At the time of his death the Mahatma was known around the world. He was a leader who, half a century after his death, continues to inspire other leaders in every corner of the globe. Some walk Gandhi's path in their vision of peacemaking and their ability to call others to peace. Others follow in his footsteps as they respond to the needs of the poor. Still others have studied the ideas of community he attempted to model on his ashrams.

There are those who have continued to experiment with active nonviolent strategies of resistance to evil, whether or not they directly followed Gandhi.

By his words, his actions, and his example, Mahatma Gandhi left the world a new teaching: to oppose injustice with the force of unrelenting truth and a nonviolent spirit, overcoming hate with love, while being willing to sacrifice oneself for the cause. He demonstrated at an entirely new level the power and possibility of individual and mass nonviolent resistance, a legacy that people all over the world continue to explore.

MORE TO THE STORY

MOHANDAS GANDHI. 1869-1948

Gandhi's first acts of nonviolent resistance took place in South Africa, not in his homeland of India, because he had moved there to serve the Indian community as a lawyer. South Africa is home to a large number of Indians who are descendants of workers brought from India by the British for labor on sugar plantations and in mines as early as 1860.

Living in South Africa and later India, Gandhi worked side by side with Muslims, Hindus, and people from a variety of other religions. Both countries are home to people of many different religious traditions, including followers of three of the world's largest faiths: Christianity, Islam, and Hinduism. Hinduism is the oldest religion in the world and is practiced mainly in India. It is a broad term that covers many different beliefs and spiritual practices, including yoga. Many Hindus believe in more than one god.

Islam is the world's second-largest religion. People who practice Islam are called Muslims. Like Christians and Jews, Muslims believe in one god. Mosques are the places where Muslims go to pray and worship God, whom they call Allah.

During most of Gandhi's life, India was ruled by the British Empire. An empire is a country that takes over and controls other countries. When an empire invades another country and stays there, it is called an occupation. Many nonviolent movements have been aimed at ending occupations.

