

Mohandas Gandhi (1869-1948):
Major Events in the Life of a Revolutionary Leader

Items appearing in **bold** are included in the glossary.

1869 On October 2 in the small principality of Porbandar, Gujarat Province (Northwest India), Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi was born third son to a wealthy Hindu family. His father, Karamchand Gandhi, was a high-ranking official of the regional government.

India had been a British crown colony for over a decade when Gandhi was born. In 1857, following a series of well publicized and bloody rebellions by Indian troops serving the **British East India Company** (“the Company”), the crown stepped in to assume direct control of most of the subcontinent. The Company became increasingly active in Indian internal trade and politics since its charter as a joint-stock trading company in 1600. By the nineteenth century, the Company had become the de facto government of much of India, exercising direct or indirect control over nearly all of the country. The rebellions of 1857 highlighted the more exploitative aspects of Company rule, catalyzing a movement by British reformers to shift control of India from private Company rule to direct rule by the British government.

1888 Against the wishes of his family, Gandhi sailed for England to study law. In London, he was exposed to new ideas and many elements of British society and culture — he took dancing and violin lessons, read new religious works, and participated in British vegetarian groups.

1891 Gandhi became officially licensed to practice law in court. Weary of life in London and having accomplished his goal of becoming a lawyer, he returned to India.

1893 Gandhi traveled to South Africa to take a position as a legal consultant for an Indian trading and shipping company. Gandhi’s time in South Africa was crucial to his political evolution. The inequality and discrimination of South Africa’s colonial society were shocking to him, sharpening his political awareness and spurring his commitment to anti-colonial politics.

When Gandhi arrived in 1893, South Africa consisted of two British colonies — Cape and Natal — and two Dutch colonies — Transvaal and the Orange Free State. The Indian population was small in South Africa (about three percent of the total population of the country) and consisted of mostly indentured laborers and free traders. Indians enjoyed few rights in South Africa and, although many of them were British subjects with voting rights, Indians were still victim to prejudice and racism. Discrimination was particularly harsh in the two Dutch colonies, where Indians were prohibited from owning property in most areas, forbidden to vote in local elections, and subject to a curfew that made it a crime to walk the streets at night.

- 1894** Gandhi worked with other Indian-rights activists in South Africa to create the Natal Indian Congress, an organization committed to giving Indians a collective voice in South African politics.
- 1899** Gandhi organized an Indian Ambulance Corps at the beginning of the **Boer War** (1899-1902) to provide relief to injured British soldiers. Although Gandhi did not support the war on principle, he created the Ambulance Corps to send a message to the British that Indians were capable and responsible individuals who deserved the same rights as other British subjects.
- 1904** Gandhi established the Phoenix Settlement, where his followers and friends (both Indian and European) experimented with living in community. This included a life devoted to vegetarianism, fasting, and alternative farming techniques. It was from here that Gandhi founded, edited, and published the journal *Indian Opinion* that served as a venue for Indians to express their ideas about the social and legal inequities in South Africa.
- 1906** Gandhi organized his first *satyagraha* campaign of peaceful non-cooperation to protest the Transvaal Asiatic Amendments Act — a law that required the registration and fingerprinting of all Indians living in the Transvaal. Until 1911 when this act, known as the “Black Act” was repealed, Gandhi continued to protest this legislation, organizing resistance throughout the Transvaal.
- 1914** Gandhi decided to return to India. Once there he continued to hone and refine the strategies of protest and resistance he had developed in South Africa.
- 1915** By the time Gandhi sailed into Bombay, news of his fight for Indian equality in South Africa had spread throughout India, and he was welcomed home as a hero. Wanting to familiarize himself with the problems in Indian society, Gandhi spent most of the next year traveling throughout the country by train. The poverty, famine, and government corruption that Gandhi saw on his travels convinced him of the need for social and moral reform.
- Gandhi established the Satyagraha Ashram at Kochrab, Ahmedabad, Gujarat Province (Northwest India). The ashram was a spiritual retreat for his followers similar to the Phoenix farm in South Africa. Shocking the Hindu community, Gandhi invited a family of **untouchables** to live on his farm. Opposed to what he saw as anachronistic Hindu practices, Gandhi campaigned for the rights of the untouchables for the rest of his life. In 1917, Gandhi relocated the Ashram to a site near the Sabarmati River in Ahmedabad and renamed it the Sabarmati Ashram.
- 1919** Gandhi helped to organize nationwide protests against the Rowlatt Acts, legislation aimed at suppressing Indian nationalism and activism through the suspension of Indian civil liberties, especially the right to public organization and protest. That same year, in an attempt to maintain public order, heavily armed British troops killed more than 350 unarmed Indians who had gathered for a Sikh religious celebration,

many of them women and children. The event, which took place just outside the city of Amritsar, Punjab (northern India), quickly came to be known as the “Jallianwala Bagh Massacre” or the “Amritsar Massacre.” Gandhi responded to the killings with a well publicized three-day fast and began to accelerate his program of resistance to colonial rule.

- 1920** Gandhi organized a massive boycott of British goods and taxes to protest Western materialism and the British economic exploitation of India. Gandhi promoted locally produced goods over those imported from Britain.
- 1922** British authorities arrested and tried Gandhi for seditious acts. In this trial, known as “The Great Trial,” Gandhi pleaded guilty to the charges, but argued that he had broken the law only to protest the gross inequities in Indian society. He was sentenced to six years in jail, but was released after two years when he had to undergo an appendectomy. Fearing the public response should Gandhi be returned to jail after his illness, British authorities released him from custody.
- 1928** Gandhi organized a tax strike in the city of Bardoli, Gujarat Province (Northwest India) to protest the creation of a constitutional reform committee that did not include a single Indian member. While he had originally argued for reform within the British system rather than revolution, it was around this time that Gandhi began to assert the need for complete Indian independence.
- 1930** In protest of the Salt Act (1882), which forbade Indians from making their own salt, Gandhi led a 200-mile march from his ashram in Ahmedabad to the coastal town of Dandi (also in Gujarat.) When he arrived at Dandi, Gandhi knelt down and symbolically picked up a piece of natural, unprocessed salt from the shore, thereby violating British law. His march received widespread support across India, inspiring thousands of Indians to follow his example of non-violent civil disobedience. British authorities arrested more than one hundred thousand protesters, including Gandhi himself, but were forced to release Gandhi and other Indian leaders to negotiate an end to the protests.
- 1932** After once again being imprisoned by British authorities, Gandhi began his “fast until death” to protest the British proposal to create a separate electorate for the **untouchable** caste. The fast ended when Indian and British leaders came together to negotiate a settlement whereby all Indians would be included in the same electorate regardless of their place in Hindu society. Although he was criticized by some, especially those who saw Indian Independence as the most important issue at hand, his fast inspired many to become sympathetic to the cause of the untouchables. When Gandhi undertook another fast to purify his body, British authorities, nervous that he would not survive another fast, released him from custody.
- 1933** Gandhi was largely absent from national politics for the next seven years. He spent his time visiting villages throughout India, speaking against the mistreatment of

untouchables, women, and children, and campaigning for better and more pragmatic education in rural areas.

- 1940** With the eruption of World War II in 1939, Gandhi soon returned to active politics. Great Britain had involved India in the war without its consent and British authorities began to strictly censor criticism of the war. In response to British censorship, Gandhi launched another *satyagraha* campaign, resulting in the arrest of thousands of protesters.
- 1942** Gandhi launched what became known as the “Quit India” movement. The **Indian National Congress** passed the “Quit India” resolution demanding that the British recognize Indian independence. In support of the resolution, Gandhi launched his last nationwide *satyagraha* campaign. Along with other Indian leaders, Gandhi was arrested and imprisoned. (For more on the Quit India movement, see <http://www.sscnet.ucla.edu/southasia/History/Gandhi/Quit.html>.)
- 1945** At the end of World War II, the Labor party came into power in Britain. Weary of war and empire, Labor politicians worked with Indian leaders to establish India as an independent state.
- 1946** With the uncertainty of an independent India on the horizon, tensions between Hindu and Muslim leaders began to increase. Both Hindus and Muslims feared they would not receive adequate representation in the new Indian government. Violent conflict erupted across India between Muslims and Hindus. Both sides were unwilling to compromise, and talks began about the division of India into two states — one controlled by Muslims, the other controlled by Hindus. Gandhi, who had long urged the Indian people to cast aside their religious and ethnic differences, faced the reality of an India divided along religious lines.
- 1947** On August 14, India declared its independence. The country was partitioned into two separate states: India, with a largely Hindu population, and Pakistan, with a largely Muslim population. Jawaharlal Nehru became the first president of India. Muhammad Ali Jinnah, the Muslim leader who had petitioned for the formation of Pakistan, became governor-general of Pakistan. Partition launched one of the largest human migrations in history, with over ten million people forced to relocate.
- 1948** On January 30, Gandhi was assassinated by a Hindu nationalist. Shot three times in the chest, Gandhi died at the age of 78.

The Legacy of Gandhi

More than fifty years after his death, Gandhi is still remembered for his legendary *satyagraha* campaigns and his philosophy of nonviolent resistance. Gandhi’s philosophy has inspired many of the most famous resistance movements of the twentieth century — for example, the U.S. civil rights movement led by Dr. Martin Luther King, Aung San Suu Kyi’s pro-democracy movement against the military

junta of Myanmar, and the movement to end the apartheid in South Africa led by Nelson Mandela.

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