

Mahatma Gandhi: A Historical Icon

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Every generation has a few people who emerge to shape it, the happenstance breeding this are diverse and are propagated by different things. This shaping of a generation may be positive or negative depending on the situation at hand. To illustrate are people such as Nelson Mandela of South Africa who is well known all over the world for the leading role he played in the liberation of South African people leading to the end of apartheid. Adolf Hitler is another individual and was famous among the German Nazi regime for his stand against the Jew. Although some of the things he did were very dreadful, leading to the death of up to three million people and playing an imperative role in the emergence of the Second World War, he is still silently hailed by many up to date who ascribe to his philosophy. In the field of Science and Chemistry are people such as, Sir Isaac Newton and Albert Einstein of Germany, both are acclaimed for the marvels they did in explaining some of the earth's processes. The term historical icon is used to refer to people who hold a given idea or school of thought (Forrest & Barrett, 2001). To illustrate, Adolf Hitler is revered as an icon of hate, malice, and violence. To the contrary, Nelson Mandela is an icon of love, in that, he expressed all that love is, as love holds no grudge, love forgives, and love loves at all times. This paper looks at the life and times of Mahatma Gandhi, a historical figure that emerged to shape the world and the Indian independence and is widely considered one of the greatest human being of the 20th century. To the current generation, he has ceased to be any other ordinary person and has become a phenomenon to behold.

Mahatma Gandhi was born in 1869 in Porbandar India where his father served as the chief minister of the state which was part of the British Empire. His mother was a deeply religious woman and fasted habitually. As a young boy, one of his favorite activities was twisting dog's ears. Indian classics stories of Shravana and King Harischandra played a

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significant role in shaping his childhood, something that his autobiography resonates about. At the age of 9, he joined a nearby school, where he studied history, arithmetic, geography, and the Gujarati language (Gandhi, 2008). Two years later, he entered High school, and it is reported that he was an above average student, with no interests in core curricula activities such as games and other sports. For this reason, all his interest were collapsed to books and school work mostly.

Having been born in an illustrious and eminent family, at the age of 13, he married Kasturba Makanji in an arranged wedding and in accordance with the customs and practices of the region at that time. At the age of 16, he lost his father and shortly after that his baby. Kasturba gave birth to their second son in 1893; she would after that give birth to two more children when they moved to South Africa (Prabhu & Rao, 2007). As a student, Mahatma Gandhi was a shy young man and very timid to the extent that he slept with lights on, this character progressed to his teenage life.

Initially, he wanted to be a doctor, but with the position his father held in the sorority, he wanted him to become a government minister and maybe inherit his position of influence. And in an attempt to attain this, his family enrolled him to join the legal profession. He cruised to London to study law but found it very rough to cope with the culture shock he encountered. His mother was not impressed with this and did not want Gandhi to leave his young family. But because of the zeal and zest he had towards education, to win the approval of his mother and wife, he made a vow to them that he would abstain from taking meat, drinking alcohol and women while away (Wolpert & Wolpert, 2002). In 1888, he left Porbandar headed to Mumbai, and upon arrival, he was hosted by the local Bania community among which the leader knew his father. After learning what Gandhi was up to, local elders of the community warned him to take precautions for England would tempt him on a daily basis to compromise his belief and indulge

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in meat and drinking, he informed them of the promise he had made to his mother and wife. The local chief was not impressed with this and excommunicated him altogether, this did not perturb him, and after that, he sailed off to London, his brother was around to witness his departure.

While in London, his childhood shyness and introvert-ness character did not leave him, to deal with this, he joined a public practice group that enabled him to overcome this fear; this went a long way towards shaping his future legal practice as it required him to communicate most of the time. While in London, he was fully committed to the meatless life he had promised his wife and mother, he joined the London Vegetarian Society, at the same time; he started reading sacred texts that enabled him to learn more about different religions of the world (Gandhi & Gandhi, 2009). At the age of 22, he was admitted to the bar and shortly returned to India in 1893 to, unfortunately, find that his mother had died. In practicing law, he found it difficult to establish himself as a Lawyer, and it is recorded that in his first court room case, he was not able to cross examine a witness; he fled the room shortly after reimbursing his client the fee. After that, he left to South Africa to represent an Indian trader in Durban; and ended up spending more than 20 years there. While in South Africa the happenstance surrounding him at that time shaped and fashioned his political and ethical views and prepared him for the coming future, the impact of this experience would remain with him for the rest of his life and will play a leading role in helping him overcome different obstacles that he encountered later.

There are several things that made Mahatma Gandhi a historical figure and an icon that many will talk and remember for many years to come. One, he vehemently fought racial discrimination which was prevalent in South Africa (Freeman, 2015). To illustrate, he was once dismissed from sitting together with Europeans in the first class coach of a train and was rather asked to move to the third class coach yet he had a valid first class ticket with him. In another

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instance, while traveling in a stage coach, he was asked to move to the foot board to give room to a European passenger and was beaten up by the driver when he refused to comply. He sat on the train floor wondering whether to return to his home country or fight for his rights. But considering that in his home, things were not much better. He decided to protest and was allowed to board the train in the coming days. Over and above that, he was denied acceptance by many South African hotels when he went out to look for accommodation. Such practices were common in South Africa as Indians and Blacks were treated as second class citizens. These manifestations become the turning point of his life, and he started questioning his status in society and that of his people, this is after witnessing the high level of racism and prejudice they were subjected to. This made Gandhi decide to fight racial discrimination and was vividly visible when the Natal assembly wanted to pass a law prohibiting non-Europeans from voting. He became the leader of the Indian community and formed the Natal Indian Congress that vehemently opposed the bill, over and above that, by forming the Natal Indian Congress; Gandhi was able to in bring all Indian communities leaving in South Africa together (Meer, 2012). Though the bill sailed through several years later, the impact of Gandhi in resisting such oppression was felt and brought to light the grievances of Indians and other minority South Africans who were under oppression. Closely connected to one above is that, during the South African war, Gandhi was on the front calling on all Indians to participate and support the war if their call to be full South African citizens were to be legitimate. Gandhi organized a group of volunteer corps that formed a medical unit that attended on wounded black soldiers.

Two, the Satyagraha campaign he spearheaded while in South Africa led to the enactment of the Indian relief act. This was an aftermath of a law passed in 1906 that required all Asians male to be fingerprinted and carry a form of a pass while in Transvaal province. In addition, the

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Supreme Court made a decision that was seen to disallow Indian marriages. As against this, he formed the Satyagraha campaign of nonviolence resistance. The campaign was driven on the proposition to resist such laws willingly without causing any violence, problem or strain and to endure any punishment that one will be subjected to harmoniously. In 1913, the campaign intensified as Indians fought the introduction of the £3 tax. The tax was introduced as a punishment for those Indians who had refused to return to their mother country at the end of their indenture period in South Africa. At this time approximately 62,000 Indians were leaving in South Africa. The campaign lasted for seven years, and thousands of Indians were jailed and others killed in the process. As prisons filled up, General Smut was forced to negotiate with Gandhi, and he requested those Indians who wanted to extend their stay in South Africa to register voluntarily. Coupled with public outcry against mistreatment of nonviolent protesters from other people, in 1914, the Indian relief act was passed allowing Indians to move freely in Transvaal province (Gandhi, 2014).

Third, in 1915, Gandhi returned to India which was still under the British rule and won his first war of civil disobedience at Champaran in the year 1917 (Pouchepadass, 2009). The British had forced poor occupants of the region to grow Indigo and other types of cash crops instead of food crops of their choice; they were then made to sell the produce of the same at low prices to British Landlords. This was mistreatment of the highest order concerning the fact that they grew these crops in deplorable weather conditions coupled with the harsh taxes they had to pay, this left a majority of them in abject poverty. And as a result, Gandhi led the community in organized dissents and slowdowns causing the British Landlords to sign treaties permitting more compensation to the farmers. It is at this time that people started referring to him as Mahatma, meaning soul. This was as a testament to the Kind of person that Gandhi was, for the reason that

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he had joined Chaparan residents to fight this vice under the invitation of Raj Kumar Shukla, a local money lender and ended up helping the local community to combat this hostility wholeheartedly. The outcome of the Champaran agitation is recorded as the first active and fruitful participation of Gandhi in shaping India's path to independence.

Fourth, in the year 1918, he fruitfully led a nonviolent tax revolt in Kheda (Hardiman, 2013). The revolt was fashioned experimentally to resemble that of Champaran and was based on non-violence approach. At this time, India had been hit by flood and famine leading to low crop output. However, the British refused to listen to the cry of the farmers when they requested for tax relief as a result of low production; they instead threatened to confiscate their land and properties and auction it. Together with Vallabhbhai Patel, who ended up being India's future Home Minister, they led the revolt asking all Kheda peasants not to co-operate and not pay this revenue even with the confiscation of their land and properties, Kheda people stood behind Gandhi and Patel. And after five months of this grand standing, the government granted the farmer's tax waivers and returned all the land and property that had been confiscated from some of the people.

Gandhi led the famous noncooperation movement of the early 1920s which was an aftermath of the Jallianwala Bagh Massacre (Datta & Settari, 2011). The massacre ensued after the British blocked the only access route to Jallianwala Bagh and then shot on a crowd of peaceful protesters killing a thousand people in the process. This massacre became the most famous action of the British rule in India. As against this, Gandhi led the movement and urged Indians to boycott all that was British, which included, their educational institutions, refusing to work for them and their law courts. In addition, they were to disown all British titles and honors. Gandhi's capabilities to gather thousands of Indians towards a given course on a large scale

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become a manifest at this time and would trickle down towards independence. Although the movement was very peaceful and to that extent successful, Gandhi feared that it would turn violent. And in 1922, as a rejoinder of the killing of three peaceful protesters, the Indian people set on a police station run by the British, set it on fire, consequently killing 22 people present at that time. This made Gandhi call off the protest for the reason that it had started taking the wrong course. His initial plan was for the revolt to remain as much as possible non-violent. After calling for the non-co-operation movement, he was arrested after that for publishing what was said to be seditious materials and would end up spending six years behind bars.

Mahatma Gandhi was at the center of the famed salt march to Dandi. Since the passing of the British Salt Act in 1882, Indians were prohibited from collecting and trading on salt, those who tried were humiliated by heavy taxes and penalties. With this law, the British had been able to keep this precious commodity under their feet and had monopolized it. Forcing local natives to buy the same products from British merchants at inflated prices. And since salt was an essential dietary element among Indians, Gandhi was convinced what the British were doing was inhumane and decided to take action. He wrote a letter to British Viceroy Lord Irwin calling for the repeal of the Salt Act, failure to which he would lead a non-violent protest as a demonstration to the British people of the wrong they had done to the Indian people for so long (Weber, 2009). His letter was not replied to, and as a revolt against this, in 1930, Mahatma Gandhi together with a group of supporters set on a journey of 241 miles, where they were to trek to the Arabian Sea coast on foot. On the way, he addressed dozens of people in different villages and condemned the injustices that the British had subjected Indians too for many years. As they neared the sea coast, thousands of people had already joined the walk making it a long procession. After 24 days of walking they arrived at the Sea coast, and upon their arrival, as a sign of disobedience

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against the British, he collected salt from the seaside and his actions went viral throughout India causing thousands of people to reciprocate his actions by disregarding the Salt act. Many thronged to the shore and started harvesting salt. Gandhi was then arrested together with more than 50,000 people; this apprehension, however, came a little bit late for it had already captured the attention of the world as several media houses such as the New York Times had already started following the procession. This gave the campaign the global limelight it needed and exerted much pressure to the British rule in India.

After spending some years in jail, Gandhi was released and came out to lead the Quit India movement of 1942 that called for India's independence and an end to the British rule. At the heart of the 2nd world war, Gandhi argued that India and its people could not be dragged into a war that was propagated to be fighting for people's democratic freedom while the Indian people were still in captivity and under chains of dictatorship, where they were still held incommunicado by the British totalitarian rule. He called for the British to stop recruiting Indian people as soldiers to fight for them. In his speech, he made a call to all Indians of good will of doing or die. Calling all people to be prepared to die while liberating their mother country (Chopra, 2006). His speech led to the imprisonment of a big number of India's National Congress leaders. But even with their arrest, numerous protests continued to take place throughout the country. As a consequence, many were killed, and it is reported that up to 100,000 arrests were executed at this time. However the Quit India call by Gandhi managed to unite all Indians, and upon his release in 1944, he continued with the struggle, and it is recorded that he went on a 21 day fast in protest. Though demonstrations had been suppressed by the end of 1944, it became apparent to the British that their continued stay in India will be difficult, and they started planning on how they were going to hand over power.

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Mahatma Gandhi was the principal leader of the Indian independence attained in 1947 and is referred to as the founding father of the Indian nation to date. Over and above that, after India received its independence, he did not tire; he continued to fight social injustices commonly referred by many at the time as untouchability among India's people (Gandhi, 2012). They included issues to do with imperialism, racism, segregation, and communalism. To illustrate his dedication towards this course, it is recorded that, he launched drives aimed at improving the lives of impoverished Indians, for instance, opposing early child marriages that were common in India, and purdah practices that were characterized by women covering their faces while in public.

Although Mahatma Gandhi is a celebrated Icon all over the world for the role, he played in shaping the world. His life demonstrates a number of weaknesses and shortcomings that the current generation can learn from. This is vital for the reason that without learning from history, people are deemed to repeat the mistakes of yesterday. And as the adage goes, a wise person learns from the experience of others than of self. During the 1st world war of 1914-1918, Mahatma Gandhi was on the front line recruiting Indian soldiers to fight for the British without setting any pre-conditions (Marwick, 2001). This was done in vain superstitious hope that those in England would at the end reciprocate with love and consideration and grant India its self-rule. Many young people lost their lives not to forget the emotional turmoil that their families had to suffer back at home due to separation with their loved ones. Gandhi's action showcases his pitiable political skills as he failed to utilize such a golden opportunity to secure and grant his people what they wanted, which was freedom. To the contrary, he ended up sacrificing thousands of Indians lives to propagate British Imperialists without any benefit after that.

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Such kind of blunders slipped further as Gandhi committed himself towards the mobilization of the Khilafat agitation between 1920-1922 (Minault, 1982). This was a non-negotiated endeavor that Gandhi committed to without setting any preconditions again. Some scholars term his actions a tragi-comical mistake of immeasurable proportion as it aimed to restore the Ottoman Caliphate that the Arabs had vehemently revolted against while Turks strived to dissolve it on the other end. This had put the two groups in opposing positions. As the Caliphate came to an end in 1924, it came to the attention of all, that it was purely a retrograde movement and more specifically to Indians nationalities for the reason that it created divisions between Islamic supporters and non- Muslims leading to numerous violence. In the end, it is said that Gandhi failed to treat the movement seriously by considering principles of practical politics but rather replaced everything with imagined and idealized thoughts basing everything on Khilafat doctrine.

During the call for Independence, Gandhi showed his indecisiveness when he called off mass action, many people had embraced it and were willing to go all the way for India to be freed. His move angered his close friends as it crushed their hopes and dreams, but internationally, his character did not suffer any negativity. To many Indians, the treaty he had with Viceroy leading to an end of the mass action came at the detriment of thousands of India's citizens. He proceeded with such qualities into the 2nd world war as he was undecided whether to let Indians engage in the war or not. His initial intention not to allow India to be dragged into this war could have been justified on the basis of pacifist principle or could have been seen as a sign of pride for the Indian people. But to the surprise of many, Gandhi failed, as other Indians joined the war as suppliers of different army goods and others as soldiers. These actions ended up sidelining Gandhi, and they threw him into political irrelevance and oblivion.

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Gandhi lived in peculiar times, and some of the things he did cannot escape unmentioned. To begin with, Gandhi wrote two letters to Adolf Hitler at the onset of the Second World War, one in 1939 and the other one in 1940. In this letters, he referred to him as dear friend. He did this in recognition of the evil that Hitler was propagating to Jews in Germany. The main reason for writing the letter was because Gandhi was aware that love can only win hate. For darkness cannot drive out darkness, only light can. And the darkness of evil that had blanketed Hitler could only be overtaken by anything else. It could only be defeated if people reciprocated towards him with some shreds of tenderness and love without prejudice and hypocrisy. In the letter, he asked Hitler to embrace peace and nonviolence in all he did. Over and above that, Gandhi went ahead to apologize to Hitler if the letter angered him (Payne, 2016). Of interest to note is that, although it is not known whether Hitler read the letter or not, several months later he signed the non-aggression pact with the Soviet Union.

In one of the Speeches given by Gandhi in 1931, the following words are paraphrased, if peace is to be realized in a harsh world, and if a successful war is to be executed to overcome all evil and wrongs within. The best place, to begin with, was with the children who are tomorrow's future. What he meant with this is that civilizations and old age practices can only be overcome through education. This can be equated to building a strong foundation to support a house, for the strength of a house is not in the formwork but the foundation. This can be truncated further to symbolize children as the basis upon which future generations are built on. Gandhi was driving the proposition that, by teaching children to embrace non-violence and clinch on resolving conflicts peacefully, war and bloody confrontations would be a thing of the past. Once young ones have been taught and have encompassed such tendencies, they would, in turn, pass similar practices to future generations, therefore, creating a circle of people that clinches peace, love,

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and non-violence. Continuous repetition of this circle from one generation to another will make peace the very essence of any society. These were great thoughts from Mahatma Gandhi and had they succeeded and spread to all parts of the world; the current generation could be leaving in a world of peace and tranquility. Void of political strifes and tensions that are rampant at the moment and have threatened to trigger another war, worse than the 2nd world war because of the existence of nuclear weapons. In teaching children who are tomorrow's future, there are several ways through which this can be done, one is at home through their immediate family members, for this is the first environment that a child interacts with once born. And two, by ensuring that schools incorporate different classes in their timetables for this purpose, for example, some classes could be introduced from which children are taught the importance of peace viz a viz war. Over and above that, if possible, visitation should be made on existing war sites; if this is not feasible, documentaries can be shown for they are the first-hand source of past information and more so history. This will go a long way to showing young ones that war breeds no good.

Mahatma Gandhi left a legacy that influenced and continuous to influence many leaders. One such leader is Martin Luther King Jr. What is interesting about this two people is that they faced racial discrimination on similar grounds. To Gandhi, it occurred during a train ride while for Luther it was a bus ride experience he had while traveling with his teacher when the driver asked them to stand for a white to sit down. Though Luther was hesitant in the first place, his teacher asked him to stand for he would be breaking the law if he failed to do so. And when grown and as student at Crozer Theological Seminary, he decided to dedicate the rest of his life to the deepest concern of humanity at that time, and fight racial discrimination. It is reported that it is the work Mahatma Gandhi that influenced him to come to this conclusion. Guided by the mission of on nonviolence and total faith in God. The greatest influence of Luther came in 1955

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when a black woman by the name Rosa was arrested for declining to offer her seat to a white. African – American boycotted state transport for almost a year until Alabama segregation laws were declared unconstitutional by the courts. Martin Luther had been appointed the leader of the movement and guided it with zeal and gusto. Guided by Gandhi's philosophy, Martin Luther continued with activism and was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize at a young age of 35. In his acceptance speech, he termed non-violence as the greatest weapon that humanity had been bestowed with for it pierces without hurting and ennobles those who wield it. Unfortunately, he was shot dead four years later while addressing a gathering comprising people of different background in Tennessee (Fairclough, 2005).

Nelson Mandela of South Africa is quoted to have said that he drew most of his inspiration from Mahatma Gandhi although they never met. Both of them are considered the greatest leaders of the 20th century for the things they did when it comes to anti-colonialism. Drawing inspiration from Gandhi and embracing his ideas, apartheid was overcome in South Africa. And although Nelson Mandela is referred to as the Father of South Africa democracy, Gandhi is seen by many as its grandfather, and Mandela only managed to finish what had been started before chronologically. The two are also talked about together for the huge resemblance that is to be noted between the fights against racial discrimination and anti-apartheid campaigns that they undertook. Other notable persons include John Lennon of the revolutionary band, scientists Albert Einstein, Former US vice president and environmentalist, Al Gore among others.

Some of the things that led to Gandhi actions have to do with familiarity, having grown in India under the British rule; he had indeed become aware of the racial discrimination that his people had been subjected to. For example, issues to do with salt collection along the sea bed

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where locals were never allowed to harvest, process or even trade with it. And as he grew, these issues become vividly apparent to him, and after getting fed up with the hoi Polloi life of his people, he started different movements and campaigns. In addition, his own personal endeavors must have played a major role in shaping him to become the man he ended up being. In his autobiography, it is recorded that Gandhi read a lot and drew a lot of inspiration from such works. Some of the people that Gandhi learned from include Raychandbhai and Tolstoy, who wrote the book, the Kingdom of God is within you. Over and above that, Gandhi led the salt march without any army or weapon, on arrival to the sea bed; he collected Salt as a sign of defiance hence sending a strong message to the whole country (Bligh, & Robinson, 2010). This is a man who was determined to suffer regardless the repercussions that would ensue from such actions, and had he not done that, India would not have seen any change and would have remained under the British.

To conclude, the place of Mahatma Gandhi in shaping the history of the world cannot be underestimated. In his death, his words and actions still speak, and they speak louder to illustrate to the current generation that change can be attained without shedding any blood. The many things that Gandhi was able to achieve were accomplished peacefully, and although some confrontations would end up taking place leading to death of a few people. This is an important lesson that if embraced and practiced by a majority of individuals, the world would be a better place. Over and above that, the fact that Gandhi showed no interest in becoming India's first leader but rather supported Nehru shows his selfless nature. He did not come out or sound like a man that thought that people owed him anything for the things he had done. Scholars that have analyzed his life say that he relinquished this desire because he was old, and he reasoned that if he died shortly after independence and him being India's leader, the country could have easily

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destabilized because of power wrangles that would have resulted. Even when one is doing good for the benefit of humanity, not all people will be impressed, some will plan on the back on how to stop or frustrate you, and this is exactly what happened to Mahatma Gandhi as he was shot on the chest at close range in 1948. Bringing to an end an icon that this world will never replace.

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