# CASE STUDY: The salt march

#### When: 1930

#### Where: India

#### Epigraph:

“Gandhi’s greatness lay in doing what everyone could do but doesn't.” —Louis Fischer, Gandhi's biographer

#### What:

Any collection of creative actions worth its salt would include a reference to Gandhi’s famous march — and the conversation would be flavored with strategic and practical lessons still resonant today. In 1930, the Indian National Congress adopted satyagraha (essentially, nonviolent protest) as their main tactic in their campaign for independence. Mahatma Gandhi was appointed to develop a plan of action; he proposed marching to the sea to make salt in defiance of the Salt Act of 1882. Violation of the Salt Act, which made it illegal for anyone to collect or produce salt except for authorized British nationals, did not immediately catch the imagination of the delegates, and was reportedly met with some laughter in the Congress. The Raj (as the British empire in India was known) did not take this idea as much of a threat either. Viceroy Lord Irwin actually wrote back to London to report, “At present the prospect of a salt campaign does not keep me awake at night.” This would soon change, however, as the salt march, which began with about eighty men, quickly gathered supporters on its way to the Indian Ocean. Gandhi framed the 240-mile march from his ashram to the sea within a traditional cultural practice known as the padyatra (a long spiritual march). Not only did this help make the whole program more understandable to the Indian public, it opened up the possibility to do outreach, gather more supporters, educate and provide training, and work the national and international press. Advance teams worked the route and followers slept out in the open in each town to be more accessible. When he and more than 12,000 supporters finally reached the sea, the day chosen to make salt was the ten-year anniversary of the first round of national resistance actions. The British were slow to react at first, allowing more Indians to join in the protest. As salt making spread, and the British responded brutally, the empire's facade of civility slipped and then fell away entirely.

#### Why it worked:

The salt march had profound cultural resonance for Indians across lines of caste and class because Gandhi did his strategic planning homework by travelling (always third class) all over India for a year. In the process of talking the pulse of the country, he recognized that in order to attract unified masses across caste and religious lines, the campaign to win something as ethereal as independence needed to be linked to a tangible manifestation of that demand. The more it affected or appealed to the poor and lower classes, and the greater the benefit for the majority of Indians, the greater the chance of expanding the movement, and therefore winning.

When people could hold the physical distillation of their labor — salt — in their hands, the esoteric, long-term goal of independence became concrete and immediate. This was action design at its most brilliant.

#### Key TACTIC used:

##### Trek:

The act of marching and the culminating act of making salt by the sea’s edge, while seemingly simple, actually offered the masses a chance to act courageously through both coordinated and dispersed action. As the march attracted more adherents, and as the movement grew, so the pillars of the empire's power (see THEORY: Pillars of support) were seriously undermined. The salt march set the stage for India’s eventual independence as Indians and Brits alike realized that rule was not practicable without the consent of the governed. That consent had dissolved into the sea.

##### Prefigurative intervention:

Making salt married an improvement in quality of life to political aspirations for independence, and provided a pattern for “constructive work” that was the backbone of a myriad of Indian resistance efforts, which included advocacy of homespun cloth, schools and gardens. In fact, the entire march was set up to prefigure an alternative way of life and social structure that modeled an ideal (and economically self-reliant) Indian society and prepared Indians to assume political leadership.

#### Other TACTICS used:

* Strategic nonviolence
* Direct action
* Distributed action

#### Key PRINCIPLES at work:

##### Put your target in a decision dilemma:

The public defiance of the salt march put the empire in a classic double bind: Each salt maker arrested would become a martyr for the movement and expose the brutal hand of the regime. Of course, by doing nothing, they also gave space for the movement to grow, and even worse, for onlookers to think that the English had either lost the will or the ability to control the situation.

##### Choose your target wisely:

Challenging the British Salt Tax perfectly embodied the injustice of the British rule. The burden of this regressive tax fell disproportionately on those who could least afford it. It also provided a way for anyone with access to seawater — upper class or untouchable, Hindu or Muslim — to participate. Outreach and education events were used throughout the march to broaden its reach.

#### Other PRINCIPLES at work:

* Know your cultural terrain
* Use the power of ritual
* If protest is made illegal, make daily life a protest
* Maintain nonviolent discipline
* Make new folks welcome
* Enable, don’t command
* Make the invisible visible
* Create levels of participation
* Reframe

#### Related THEORIES:

* Action logic
* Pillars of support
* Hamoq & hamas
* Ethical spectacle
* Points of intervention
* Floating signifier
* Revolutionary nonviolence

#### PRACTITIONERS:

* Gandhi
* Indian independence movement

#### Learn more:

[Links to particularly relevant content offline and online.]

Nonviolent Conflict, “[The Indian Independence Struggle (1930-1931)](http://www.nonviolent-conflict.org/index.php/movements-and-campaigns/movements-and-campaigns-summaries?sobi2Task=sobi2Details&sobi2Id=17)”

Video: “[Salt March](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Salt_March.ogg)”

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## Marginalia

#### Tags:

[Tags for sorting/navigation purposes, drawn from the master list of tags (TK)]

#### Pull quote:

As saltmaking spread, and the British responded brutally, the empire's facade of civility slipped and then fell away entirely.

#### Author’s bio:

#### Images:

##### Image link:

http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/thumb/7/7c/Marche\_sel.jpg/1280px-Marche\_sel.jpg

##### Image caption:

Gandhi during the Salt March, March 1930.

##### Image copyright status:

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