GANDHI, M. K. (1869-1948)

Mohandas Karamchand (sometimes called Mahatma, or “great soul”) Gandhi was an Indian lawyer, a champion of Indian independence from Great Britain, and an advocate and theorist of non-violent civil disobedience who became one of the leading political and spiritual figures of the twentieth century. Born on October 2, 1869 in the province of Gujarat in northwestern India, Gandhi trained in England as a lawyer. Offered a position in Pretoria, he became an activist for the Indian community in South Africa, where he lived from 1893-1914. After his return to India in 1915, Gandhi took on the British Empire through a series of non-violent resistance actions that played a major role in securing Indian independence in 1947. Gandhi was assassinated by a Hindu militant on January 30, 1948.

Gandhi’s thought was shaped by a complex range of traditional and modern ideas from both Indian and Western contexts, and his vision inspired in turn civil rights and independence movements across Africa, Asia, and the Americas. Central to Gandhi’s philosophy is the concept of *satyagraha*, (literally, truth force), the name Gandhi gave to the strategy of non-violent resistance. Both a political tool and a spiritual quest, *satyagraha* assumed various forms in Gandhi’s different campaigns. Campaigning against pass laws in the Transvaal, Gandhi organized burnings of registration cards. In the 1920s, he urged a boycott of British textiles and the production of homespun cloth (*khadi*). In 1930, he organized a month-long march to the sea, where he made salt in defiance of British law, and upon the outbreak of WWII, Gandhi and the Indian National Congress refused to cooperate with the British war effort.

Gandhi saw non-violence (*ahimsa*) as a positive force for overcoming conflict and hatred, not simply as the absence of violence, and he emphasized the need for psychological preparation for non-violent struggle. Gandhi himself spent numerous stretches in prison in both South Africa and India, and he made frequent use of fasting as a political and spiritual technique, whether to purify and discipline himself or to protest against and quell outbursts of violence.

Gandhi’s campaigns were instrumental in forming a democratic and diverse conception of the Indian nation, and they were noteworthy for the wide range of Indians they included. He worked with Indians (and sympathetic Westerners) from various castes and religious traditions, and he was deeply troubled by the partition of India and Pakistan. He objected early to the concept of untouchability, expecting himself and others to perform tasks traditionally considered unclean, and he sought both to rename the Untouchables as *Harijan* (or “children of God”) and to eliminate restrictions on their access to housing and Hindu temples. Gandhi’s campaigns deliberately included women, and he opposed both child marriage and the seclusion of women (*purdah*).

Like other anti-colonial leaders, Gandhi was critical of the West, particularly its materialism, secularism and unequal distribution of wealth. He organized several experiments in communal (or ashram) living, which emphasized a simple lifestyle and peaceful co-existence.

Despite widespread reverence for Gandhi’s moral vision, some elements of his thought were and remain controversial. Some of his associates were frustrated by his commitment to pacifism at politically awkward times, such as during WWII. Orwell, for example, criticized Gandhi’s non-violent forms of resistance as ineffective against totalitarian regimes. Nehru saw poverty as something to be eliminated rather than embraced, and Gandhi’s economic vision of self-reliant villages and small-scale industry has proved less enduring than his political one. Gandhi’s asceticism and some of the ways he tested his commitment to celibacy have also troubled his contemporaries and admirers. It is worth noting, however, that Gandhi never considered himself a holy man or a systematic philosopher.

Gandhi was a prolific writer and correspondent whose ideas evolved in response to events around him and whose collected works make up 100 volumes. His most frequently cited books are *Hind Swaraj* (*Indian Home Rule*, 1909) and his 1927 *An* *Autobiography or The Story of My Experiments with Truth*.

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