

# In the Footsteps of Gandhi

*India has moved on, but its Great Soul endures, if you know where to look.*

By Tom O'Neill

Photographs by Rena Effendi

He woke before dawn, as he did every day at the ashram. In the darkness he led a prayer meeting on a patch of ground overlooking the Sabarmati River. Then he was ready. Dressed in a long loincloth, or dhoti, with a shawl around his shoulders, he grasped a bamboo staff and started out the gate. He was leaving his home of 13 years, a community devoted to his precepts of plain living and high thinking. Mohandas Gandhi was not alone. As he stepped onto a dirt road on the outskirts of Ahmadabad, the largest city in his native state of Gujarat, 78 men, two abreast, clad in white, fell into a column behind him. Pressing in on the sides of the road, hanging from trees, leaning from windows, tens of thousands of people—supporters and curious alike—cried, “Gandhi ki jai. Victory to Gandhi.”

The date was March 12, 1930. Gandhi and his troops walked for 25 days and 241 miles to the Arabian Sea to defy the unjust British law that prohibited the collection of salt in its colony. Master of the dramatic gesture, Gandhi bent over near the shore and scooped up a handful of salty mud.

As illegal salt-gathering spread across the

country, arrests and beatings followed. Gandhi was jailed for almost nine months. What authorities had dismissed as a minor act of political theater swelled into a nationwide cry for independence. A broad array of India's population—high caste and low, male and female, Hindu and Muslim—for the first time joined in protest against British rule. Now the masses had a leader. From the day he began the Salt March until his death 18 years later, Gandhi infused India with a revolutionary blend of politics and spirituality. He called his action-based philosophy satyagraha, or truth force. Gandhi's impact was indelible. He guided India to independence. He forced his countrymen to question their deepest prejudices about caste and religion and violence.

Hours after Gandhi's death from an assassin's bullets in 1948, just five and a half months after the new nation was born, Jawaharlal Nehru, India's first prime minister, proclaimed that the light left behind by the Father of the Nation would shine a thousand years.

***“How bright does that light burn today?”***



To find out, I decided to follow Gandhi. “See me, please,” he said, “in the nakedness of my working, and in my limitations, you will then know me.” I would travel his route on the Salt March. The talks he delivered and the articles he wrote speak to issues that still confront India today, and Indians still debate the legacy of the man known as Mahatma, or Great Soul. Prophet or holy fool? Hero or villain? Right path or dead end? No one questions Gandhi's incandescent influence on the world stage; his philosophy of nonviolent resistance inspired Martin Luther King, Jr., Nelson Mandela, and the Dalai Lama. On home soil the Gandhi effect is hazier. Gandhi is everywhere and nowhere. His

***“India is schizophrenic about Gandhi, seeing him as the source of all good or all evil,” said Tridip Suhrud, director of the trust overseeing the ashram where Gandhi began his march. “You can quarrel with him, you can embrace him, but if you want to make sense of India, you have to deal with the guy.”***

Even during his lifetime Gandhi proved a difficult mentor. He made uncompromising demands on family, friends, and political allies, holding them to exalted moral standards.

bespectacled face looks out from the rupee note. There are Mahatma Gandhi streets in many cities, statues too. Politicians invoke his name like an endorsement. But the absence of Gandhi is just as evident. Gandhi envisioned an India of self-sufficient villages. Caste and religion would grow faint as identity markers. Governance would stress equality and nonviolence. Try finding that today. The huge, chaotic cities (Delhi, Mumbai, Kolkata), the materialist fever of swelling middle and upper classes, the election of Hindu nationalist Narendra Modi to lead the country, an arsenal of nuclear weapons, and endemic violence against women suggest a very different national identity.

Strict beliefs about diet (he subsisted at various times on nuts, raw vegetables, and dried fruit) and sex (he took a vow of celibacy and heeded it for his last 42 years) alienated the public then as now.



*Yet the roles he played—  
politician, social  
reformer, guru,  
journalist, peacemaker,  
educator, inventor—were  
so varied, like  
characters in an epic  
novel, that he offers  
something for everyone.*



On day one of March Gandhi made a sentimental stop two miles from his ashram. Already covered in dust stirred by the crowd, he paused before a school he had founded ten years earlier as an alternative to British education. Today a sandstone arch opens onto the leafy campus of Gujarat Vidyapith, its paths filled with students. They are dressed in loose shirts and pants made of khadi, the home-made cloth that became a symbol of Gandhi's revolution, standing for the rejection of British goods and the revival of traditional industry. It's safe to say that students on other campuses in India are not wearing khadi, which roughly means "handwoven," snubbing it as unstylish. Sudarshan Iyengar, a university trustee and noted economist, makes no excuses for the school's unfashionable rules and expectations. "Here we train students in heart, hand, and head, in that order," he said, sitting on the floor wearing white khadi. "Like Gandhi, we build character through communal life and work." Iyengar's Gandhian beliefs run so deep that he can't use his laptop computer without anguishing over the implications. "I can see that Gandhi would have seen the computer as a tool to empower the individual," he told me.

"But what about the industrial process and the hidden costs that it took to produce?" What would Gandhi do? It's the core question on this campus. Students I met spoke sincerely of Gandhi as a role model. But they didn't intend to follow him in lockstep. A young woman told me she was there only because her father loved Gandhi. "For me he's so-so," she said, as a teacher nearby lifted her eyebrows in disapproval. Who will wear khadi when you return home? I asked. Only a few raised their hands. Suddenly a female student with a pink watchband approached me and exclaimed, "When I wear khadi, I feel like an extraordinary person." Our talk broke up at the sound of bells. It was spinning time. To prepare Indians for independence by inculcating discipline and self-reliance, Gandhi urged women and men, including the highest officials, to produce at least 25 meters of yarn a year, enough to meet one's needs. "Every revolution of the wheel spins peace, goodwill, and love," he preached. Obeying the tradition, some 500 students filed into the auditorium carrying boxes with portable spinning wheels. Sitting cross-legged, they took out tufts of cotton and began spinning, their arms moving in and out, in and out. The only sound was the whisper of hundreds of spinning wheels speaking Gandhi's message.

Gandhi was a fast walker, his pace remarkable for a 61-year-old man who was the oldest on the march and whose joints ached from rheumatism. Each day, averaging 10 to 12 miles in inescapable heat, the party stopped in settlements to pray, rest, eat, and allow their leader to speak before rapt audiences. Gandhi was the first national figure to connect with rural Indians. For him the village was the soul of India. If Gandhi traveled to the same places today, he would see, probably to his dismay, that rural India remains in many ways stuck in time. In Vasana, a cotton-farming village where the marchers halted under a mango tree that still stands, I found a statue of Gandhi with his walking stick. A drift of garbage had collected at its base. Cows and buffalo trod hypnotically on the dirt lane, followed by barefoot boys. Women in saris hurried past with firewood on their heads. As a crowd gathered around me, a man in jeans stepped forward to apologize for the unkempt memorial. I asked him if anyone wore khadi. Not anymore, he said. After a few more questions the man lost his cool. "People come here and talk about Gandhi, Gandhi, Gandhi, but nothing is done for us. There is no development," he complained. "We need a bridge over the river and a roof over the statue's head."



Gandhi's vision of villages as the most fertile ground for India's progress now seems like a utopian fever dream. Cities are where the jobs and schools and social life are. Urban problems—pollution, crime, overcrowding, traffic—dominate the national conversation. But almost 70 percent of India's more than 1.2 billion people still live in the countryside. For Gandhi, a Hindu deeply influenced by the life of Jesus Christ, the highest calling was to go among the poor and "feed them first and then feed ourselves." He appealed for volunteers to live in villages and bring change. Some still hear the call. Five years before I met him, Thalkar Pelkar, a quiet young man always dressed in khadi, moved to Pedhamali, a scattering of mud-walled homes strung along a dry riverbed in western India. A graduate of Gujarat Vidyapith, he had committed to two years of unpaid rural development work. He wasn't totally gung ho. "I knew there was a chance I would get beaten up and pushed out," he said. Pelkar moved into a room without water or electricity. To fit in, he cut his hair and learned the local dialect. For months he battled loneliness and questioned his worthiness. In his room he hung a grainy photo of Gandhi. What would Gandhi do? The question weighed on him like a bag of stones. Today the portrait hangs prominently in Pelkar's new home, a once abandoned house he fixed up. Sitting on the floor with his wife, Snehan, and his son, Ajay, Pelkar, after some prodding, listed his accomplishments. He had revived the dairy, sparing women a 12-mile walk to buy milk. He had put women in charge of its accounting and testing. He had encouraged parents to send their children to school; enrollment had tripled to more than 150, bringing more classrooms and teachers. Three winters ago, seeing six-year-old Ajay abandoned on the street, he had adopted him. Is your work done here? I asked. Pelkar sighed. "At first," he said, "I thought two years would be enough to finish my project. Now I think it will take a whole lifetime."



The crowds that greeted Gandhi along the Salt March were unlike any that modern India had seen—in schoolyards and fields, women by the hundreds showed up to hear Gandhi speak. They flooded the streets to accompany the marchers through towns. Fearing violence, Gandhi had chosen only men for the march, but he regarded women as natural allies. "I feel they will be worthier interpreters of nonviolence than men," he said, "not because they are weak, as men in their arrogance believe them to be, but because they have greater courage."

As was the case with many of his moral crusades, Gandhi's campaign for gender equality was too soon. At its roots India remains a conservative, patriarchal society. Gandhi spoke out against child marriage, violence against women, the dowry system, and lack of schooling for women, but all remain embedded in daily life, despite flickers of progress. Yet fighting back, Gandhi style, has also endured. "My strength is my women," said Ela Bhatt, rocking on a bench swing in her simple home in Ahmadabad. She is the founder of the Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA), a trade union and cooperative that counts more than 1.8 million members. Bhatt, born three years after the Salt March, looked like a sweet grandmother. The story she told, however, was full of steely determination. Bhatt quit her job as a lawyer for a textile union and in 1972 set up SEWA, reflecting the Gandhian belief in the dignity of work. For a few cents, the women gained access to training classes, bank loans, health insurance, and child care. "Women in India have always been treated as second-class citizens," she told me. "But they are the family leaders. Assets are safer in their hands." Echoing Gandhi comes naturally to Bhatt. Her grandfather, a doctor, was beaten and jailed during the salt protests.





Her parents joined the independence movement. “I owe so much to the atmosphere of those times,” she said. “It was filled with idealism.” Bhatt’s organization started a revolution of its own, seeding women-based labor groups across southern Asia. “I am not a Gandhi scholar, nor a devotee,” Bhatt said pointedly. “I am a Gandhi practitioner.” Where SEWA is active, villages are different. Women seem bolder, more self-confident. In Sihol, near the Salt March town of Anand, inside a patched-up building lit by small windows, shuttles clack-clacked as women at wooden looms wove saris and towels. Before, said Gauriben Vankar, the only work she could find was in tobacco fields for pennies a day. Now she was making many times that for each sari. “We can work out of the sun now, near our homes,” she said, “and we have more money for food.” Gandhi was a provocateur, frequently challenging his audience. In Gajera, ten days after the march began, he sat on a platform before an expectant crowd, and he said nothing. The audience grew uneasy. When Gandhi finally spoke, he said that he would not deliver his talk unless



the village leaders invited Untouchables to sit in their midst. This was an unorthodox demand. Hindus shunned as polluted these members of the lowest caste. They did the filthiest jobs. They lived separately. They were forbidden to enter temples or draw water from village wells. Even their shadows were not allowed to touch other Hindus. Gandhi had posed perhaps the most vexing test to those who professed to follow him. Shamed, officials motioned for the Untouchables on a nearby hill to join the gathering. In Gajera no one wanted to tell me where I could find the Dalits (the preferred name now, literally meaning “broken”). Finally I asked the poorest looking person in sight, a sun-beaten woman carrying a jug of water on her head. She pointed to a cluster of blue-painted homes off by themselves. It was her neighborhood. Residents came out to greet me, excited to talk to an outsider. Life has improved some since Gandhi’s visit. “In earlier times we had to bring our own cups to tea shops,” said a woman. “And when we brought grain to the house of a higher caste, they sprinkled water on the ground afterward to purify it.”



Their economic status, though, has hardly changed: The bottom-caste townspeople remain poor, like most Dalits, who comprise one in six Indians. Most older adults in Gajera work in the castor bean fields. Some younger ones have low-paying jobs in a glass factory. Only in cities did I meet Dalits who could imagine joining India's mainstream. At a street-sweeper colony in Delhi, where Gandhi would often stay, a few young Dalit men approached me to brag that they were students, the first in their families to attend university, thanks to government scholarships.

Gandhi would have been overjoyed to meet them. By example—he adopted an Untouchable child—and by ceaseless campaigning, he fought to remove the stigma of associating with Untouchables, whom he called Harijans, or Children of God. Yet he achieved no significant breakthroughs.

Despite government protections, Dalits still suffer widespread, often violent, discrimination. They belong to an India that Gandhi would sadly recognize.

At last they could hear the sea. After walking for more than three weeks, the marchers were closing in on the coastal village of Dandi as much of India and the Western world watched. Security forces, the press, and crowds of onlookers and supporters massed, waiting to see what would happen. Their leader had spent decades preparing for this moment. Gandhi came of age as an activist and organizer not in India, but in South Africa. He had arrived there in 1893 at the age of 24 as a provincial lawyer, and it was there that he first experienced virulent racism and injustice. In prisons in South Africa, where he was held for leading demonstrations against color-based laws, Gandhi studied the Bible and the Koran and the writings of Leo Tolstoy, Henry David Thoreau, and John Ruskin. He established experimental communities in Durban and Johannesburg, then part of a British colony. By the time he returned to India to live in 1915, Gandhi had conceived his daring vision of satyagraha, a way of pursuing truth through nonviolent resistance, patience, and compassion.

For many historians, biographers, and activists, the Salt March was Gandhi's purest achievement. Through marches, fasts, civil disobedience, and mobilization of women, youth, and the dispossessed, Gandhi created a new playbook for social movements. In India, Gandhi-inspired organizers have led numerous nonviolent campaigns, especially on environmental issues such as forest destruction and dambuilding. "If you're a Gandhian, you don't just preach, you do," says P. V. Rajagopal, an activist who put himself and his followers to the test.



The issue was landlessness. Since Gandhi's time, the poor in India have steadily lost land to governmental development, corrupt landlords, and natural disasters, with little or no compensation. For Rajagopal and his organization, Ekta Parishad (Unity Association), a modern-day Salt March was needed. To enlist recruits, Rajagopal and a cadre of supporters spent almost a year visiting 26 of India's 29 states, traveling to villages like Chhatapur, in Bihar, one of the poorest states.

In a schoolyard on a scorching day, he addressed a few hundred people, mostly Dalit women. "It's good to be angry," Rajagopal said through a squawking microphone. "We're not asking for computers, or TVs, or vehicles, or other comforts. We're asking for land for houses, and so we can grow food. We've waited long enough. Who will join me on a march to Delhi?" Hands shot up. Rajagopal, a short man with graying hair who moves swiftly between charmer and firebrand, bowed his head in thanks.

As his SUV bumped down a narrow dirt road between villages, Rajagopal explained that he was tapping the best part of Gandhi. "People end up picking what side of Gandhi they want," he said. "I pick the radical side, not the Gandhi of prayer and meditation, but the fighting Gandhi. Bring back the Gandhi who fought against injustice and oppression." Rajagopal also wants to bring back the padyatra, or foot march. "Walking is a message," he said. "You're challenging yourself, your comfort, your body. And it's a spiritual act. Your moral power gets stronger and stronger as you go."

Six months later the message stretched for miles on a road leading to Delhi. Tens of thousands walked three abreast. The disciplined marchers started at first light. By midafternoon, after covering about ten miles, they stopped under the shade of bushes and trees to eat their one meal of the day: lentils and rice. "We have nothing left to lose," a woman from Bihar said fiercely. "These days on the road are nothing compared to our struggles at home."

Mohandas Gandhi broke the law in the early morning of April 6, 1930. In Dandi, near the sea, the man called Bapu, or "father," by friends and strangers, bent over and pulled up a handful of muck. By the day's end hundreds of supporters had done the same. Across India over the next months others joined in, illegally manufacturing salt from the sea faster than police could confiscate it. The Salt March did not topple British rule—independence would come 17 years later—but it cracked the foundations.



It's difficult to re-create the scene. The contours of the coast have changed, and the spot where Gandhi picked up salt is now dry ground. Finding Gandhi in a rapidly changing India is also not easy—nor should it be. When have visionaries, with their demands and ideals, ever dwelled comfortably in the mainstream? But as I looked for Gandhi, seeking him amid the clamor and complexity of urban and rural life, I found him. His spirit of defiance, high-minded and tough-natured, animates campaigns against corruption, rape, caste violence, and slum clearances. The growing confidence and achievements of women conjure up Gandhi's demand to admit them into India's public life. At his former ashrams, I felt the power of his example of simple living. Gandhi was by some lights a tragic failure, unable, for instance, to prevent Hindu-Muslim conflict or the breakaway of majority-Muslim Pakistan. But on the beach in Dandi, the sight of Muslim and Hindu families wading into the surf, hems of saris lifted, head scarves pushed back, testifies to the endurance of the secular, tolerant democracy that Gandhi saw as India's inheritance. The light in the darkness, as Nehru described Gandhi's legacy, drew me to a settlement unmarked on maps in a

rural area of Maharashtra state. On a 40-acre spread near Gadchiroli, a community has sprung up of doctors, nurses, computer engineers, medical students, interns, family members, and support staff, recruited by Abhay and Rani Bang, co-founders of the Society for Education, Action and Research in Community Health (SEARCH). Since the mid-1980s, Abhay, a physician; Rani, a gynecologist; and their colleagues have trained health workers, most of them illiterate women, in 124 villages. The results have been almost miraculous. In villages that have adopted their model of care for newborns, infant mortality rates have fallen dramatically. This approach to neonatal care, relying on local men and women trained in simple techniques (such as using an abacus to count breaths), has been adapted across India and in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. Bang never met Gandhi, but he feels close to him, having grown up on his Sevagram ashram in Maharashtra. Sitting behind a desk heaped with reports, Bang told me he often debates in his head with Gandhi about such challenges as environmental threats, religious violence, and healthy diets.



*“The Old Man predicted so much,” Bang said.*

*“His principles are everywhere you look.”*

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