

GS Foundation 2024: Modern India

Handout 31: Mahatma Gandhi: The Early Phase

Nikhil Sheth

"India gave us a Mohandas, we gave them a Mahatma"

A popular South African refrain.

Gandhi in South Africa

Gandhi's career began in South Africa in 1893, as a 24-year-old Barrister. Gandhi's trip to South Africa was to transform his career. Gandhi was the first Indian Barrister, to have come to South Africa.

Young Gandhi landed at Durban in 1893. His journey from Durban to Pretoria was very eventful. It consisted of a series of racial humiliations, including the famous railway incident.

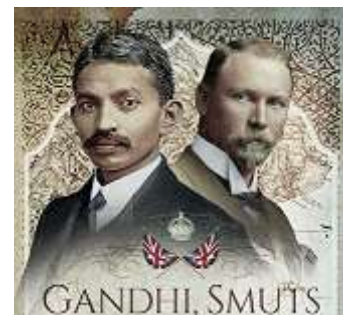
At this stage, Gandhi had no plan to live in South Africa for a long time. After his job in South Africa was over, on the eve of his departure, he raised the issue of the **Bill to disenfranchise the Indians** which was about to be passed by the Natal Legislature. The Indians in South Africa requested Gandhi to extend his stay for a period of one month to organise a protest, draft petitions and to lead the movement. Gandhi agreed to stay on for a period of one month but eventually he had to extend his stay for a period of twenty years.



Two phases of Gandhi's political activities in South Africa

Phase 1: Moderate Phase (1893/4-1906)

- During this phase, the Indians under Gandhi's leadership concentrated on petitioning and sending memorials to the South African Legislature, the Colonial Secretary in London and the British Parliament.
 - The **Natal Indian Congress (NIC)** was formed on May 22, 1894 by Mahatma Gandhi to fight discrimination against Indian traders in Natal.
 - Gandhi drew a petition which was signed by 10,000 Indians and submitted it to the Secretary of State for Colonies in London.
 - **1904: Phoenix Ashram** was established near Durban, **Indian Opinion** newspaper was started by Gandhi.
- This was the method, which he continued to believe in till 1905, and hoped that racial discrimination would end.





Phase 2: Satyagraha Phase (1906-15)

The movement was taken to another level with the campaign of passive resistance. It is in this phase that Gandhi applied **Satyagraha** as a method of political struggle for the first time in his life. **Tolstoy Farm** was created in 1910 in Transvaal which served as the headquarter of the Satyagraha movement.

Issues:

- Against Transvaal Ordinance (1906) on compulsory registration and passes for Indians
- Against Immigration Restrictions (1913)
- Against de-recognition of non-Christian Indian marriage (1913)
- Against £3 tax on ex-indentured labourers (kind of poll tax)

It was massive in dimension. Gandhi and his followers had to bear with the brutal repression of the Government. Prosecutions, deportations and economic pressures, however, could not crush the movement.

In the course of his struggle against racialism in South Africa, Gandhi had developed his philosophy of action – **Satyagraha**.

Its two major elements were truth and non-violence. Satyagraha aims at conflict resolution with the means of peaceful resistance, applied right from personal to international levels. He defined it to be soul-force, or love-force, the force, which is born of truth and non-violence.

Gandhi was well-read and studied the deeply inspiring philosophies in the **Bhagvad Gita**. He also delved into the philosophies of **Jainism, Buddha, Jesus Christ, Tolstoy, Thoreau and RW Emerson**. Though he was deeply inspired by them, he evolved his own method of struggle.

Accordingly:

- **Satya**: The Satyagrahi would *refuse to submit to whatever he considered to be wrong*.
 - It is an idea of pledge of resistance to an unjust law, with God as witness, and with no fear of consequences.
- **Ahimsa**: Satyagrahi would remain peaceful under all provocations.

Four pillars of Satyagraha:

- Absolute truth
- Absolute love
- Absolute discipline
- Absolute justice

- Gandhi opposed Violence on two fundamental philosophical bases:
 - Violence stems from the conviction that the perpetrators of violence are right, or that they know the truth. The search for truth has always been the goal of human life, but no one could ever be sure of having attained the ultimate truth.

- Gandhi argued that those who hurt others assault their own integrity. Others are us in a different form.
 - Root cause analysis:
 - He classified violence into passive and physical forms.
 - As long as we continue to ignore the root of violence, physical violence will continue in the world. Anger is the root of violence passive and physical. It is a powerful emotion. Gandhi wanted anger to be used as 'energy' – constructively
 - Means-End Relationship
 - For Gandhi, the 'means' was as important as the 'end'. He maintained that it was not the winning of a demand that was important but how it was won.
- **To change the mind and heart** of the opponent through **self-suffering**: He would resist evil but would not hate the evil doer.
 - He would vindicate truth not by inflicting suffering on the opponent but by *accepting suffering himself*. He hoped thereby to *arouse the conscience of the wrong-doer*.
- The Satyagrahi **differed from the passive resister**, for he gave up violence not for expediency but as a matter of principle. Passive resistance, Gandhi said, was a weapon of the weak while Satyagraha was the weapon of the strong.
- **Civil resistance was an integral part of Satyagraha.**
 - Civil resistance might be offered in various ways such as peaceful violation of specific laws, mass courting arrests, hartal, demonstration, picketing, marches, fasting, prayer, spinning etc. But they must be completely non-violent and there should be no element of coercion in it.
 - Disciplined cadres were trained in his ashrams.
- Satyagraha provided the unarmed people with a new weapon of struggle. It is a non-violent alternative to a violent struggle against oppression, exploitation and injustice.

Comment on Gandhi's work in South Africa:

Before his return to India in 1915, some of the issues had been resolved, partly due to Gandhi's Satyagraha and partly due to international pressure. However, racial discrimination had not ended. Thus, Gandhi's work did not provide an enduring solution for the Indian question in South Africa. Rather, after his time in South Africa, the legalized system of racialism called Apartheid was to emerge in 1940s in much more brutal form.

What Gandhi did to South Africa was, however, less important than what South Africa did to him.

- **South Africa became a sort of laboratory** for Gandhi to evolve the techniques of Satyagraha and style of leadership, at smaller scale which would be later implemented at a much larger scale in India and on much bigger issues.
- Gandhi found that the masses have immense capacity to sacrifice for a moral cause.
- **Leader of Indians:** The issues in South Africa involved different classes and religious groups of Indian origin Hindus, Muslims, Parsis, Christians, Gujaratis, South Indians, upper class merchants, lawyers, mine workers, etc. Thus, outside India, Gandhi represented a large section of Indians. He was able to **unite** them under his leadership.
- During the struggle for Indian independence, on many occasions, he derived **inspiration from his experience** in South Africa. He came to know that at times the leaders have to take **tough decisions** which would be unpopular with the followers.
- He had seen the **ups and downs** of the Satyagraha Movement in South Africa and therefore, was never frustrated by the ebb and flow of the freedom movement in India.
- The exposure he got in South Africa prepared him for the leadership of the Indian national struggle.
 - His personality underwent a crucial change in South Africa. The shy, timid and introvert Mohan Das was transformed into an **extrovert and dynamic personality**.
 - He found his **purpose in life**.
 - It was in South Africa that his **indoctrination in nationalism** was confirmed.



Gandhi's Return to India

Gandhi arrived in India on **January 9, 1915**

When Gandhi landed at Bombay, Indian political life was at a low ebb. However, on the advice of Gokhale, Gandhi decided that for the time being, he could not take a public stand on any political issue. He instead travelled different parts of India, met many people and tried to understand the situation from various perspectives.



The Early Satyagrahas in India

Ever since Gandhi's entry into Indian public life there had been numerous applications of Satyagraha. During 1917-18 he experimented with it in Champaran in Bihar and in Ahmedabad and Kheda in Gujarat.

(1) Champaran (peasant movement 1917)

- The peasants of Champaran in North Bihar were growing indigo under tinkathia system (3/20th of their holding for indigo cultivation) and were being cheated and exploited by the English planters.
- When **Rajkumar Shukla**, the local peasant leader at Champaran, invited Gandhi, he wanted to study the situation and meet the peasant.
 - The Commissioner of Champaran ordered Gandhi to immediately leave the district. Gandhi, who never tolerated injustice, refused and was ready for the consequences. He was stopped at Motihari, arrested and sent up for trial. Gandhi told the local magistrate that he had deliberately violated the law in obedience to the voice of his conscience. The magistrate sent him to prison.
- The Government was not in a mood to make Gandhi a hero by arresting him, so they decided to allow him to proceed with his enquiry. But he had already become a hero of the people, the moment he refused to leave Champaran.
- At Champaran, he started recording the statements of the peasants to make sure that they were giving correct information.
- Finally, the government had to appoint an enquiry committee, of which Gandhi was also a member.
 - This committee accepted as valid most of the complaints of the peasants.
 - It put an **end to the tinkathia system** by the **Champaran Agrarian Act of 1917**.
 - It announced that peasants were to be compensated for the illegal enhancement of their dues. Gandhi told the planters to refund only 25% of the money they had taken illegally from the peasants.



- Young nationalists like **Rajendraprasad, Mahadev Desai, Narhari Parikh and J.B. Kripalani** worked with Gandhi at Champaran.

(2) Ahmadabad (industrial labour, 1918)

- Gandhi took up his first workers' movement for the cotton mill workers of Ahmedabad over the question of a 'Plague bonus'.
 - The employers wanted to withdraw the bonus once the epidemic had passed but the workers insisted it to stay because of the rise in the cost of living during the war.
- Due to the persuasion made by Gandhi, the mill owners and the workers agreed for arbitration by a tribunal, but the mill owners breached the agreement. Gandhi advised the workers to go on strike and demanded 35% increase in wages.
- Gandhi addressed the workers every day and brought out a daily news bulletin. In order to persuade all the workers to join the movement Gandhi went on a door-to-door campaign. When the workers seemed to have lost hope, to inspire them he also went on a **fast**, *his first in India*, to rally the workers and to strengthen their resolve to continue.
- It attracted such wide all-India attention that afraid of the consequences, the mill owners came under tremendous pressure, they agreed to submit the whole issue to a tribunal, which awarded a 35% increase in the wages.

(3) Kheda (peasant movement, 1918)

- In 1918, the Kheda district of Gujarat was hit by a severe draught. The local cultivators felt that the land revenue demanded suspension/remission of land revenue on that particular year as per rules.
- Gandhi offered the peasants to organise Satyagraha.
 - **Vallabhbhai Patel, Mohanlal Pandya and Indulal Yagnik**, joined Gandhi in touring the villages.
 - The peasants demonstrated a striking solidarity by refusing to pay revenue. Even those who could afford to pay the revenue declined to do so as a matter of principle.
- The Government was eventually forced to yield ground and arrive at a settlement with the peasants.

These Satyagrahas had important consequences.

- Demonstrated Gandhi's style and method of practice. It helped Gandhi to study the real problems of the people, the strengths and weakness of the masses.
- Brought Gandhi into close contact with the masses.
 - Previously, the national movement had been elitist in character, but with the emergence of Gandhi the masses became active participants in the movement.
 - Gandhi's simple habits and simple appearance impressed the people who took him to their hearts at once.

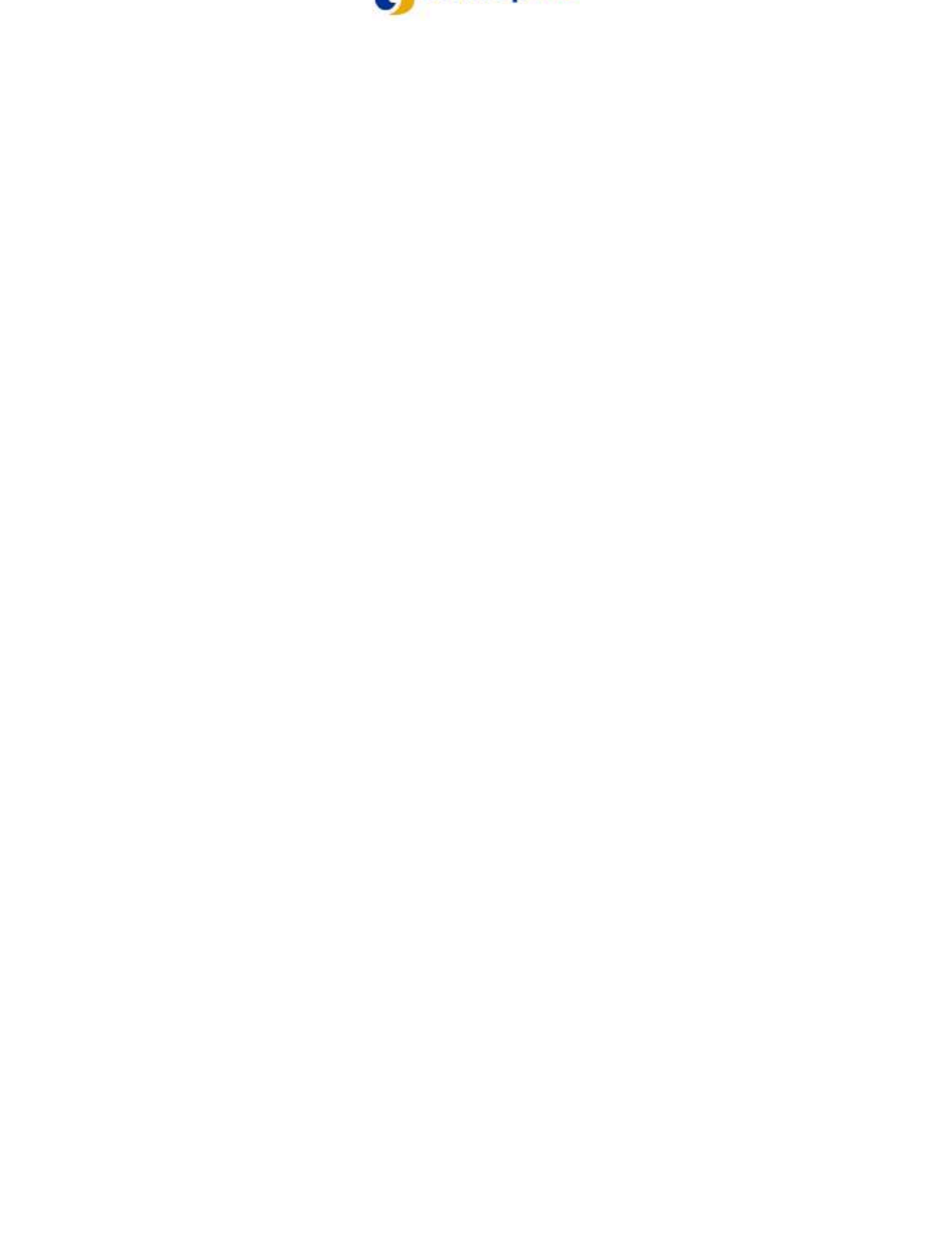
Factors Responsible for the Rise of Gandhi

- The **success of his South African experiments** had already transformed Gandhiji into national hero. Because of this the process of rise of Gandhiji leadership in India was extremely rapid.
- **Political condition in India**
 - When Gandhi arrived in India there was a need for nationalism to grow into a more broad-based movement. Even Nehru admitted that political situation in India during the war and immediately after the war was **dull**.
 - **Leadership vacuum:** by 1919-1920, many of the prominent nationalist leaders were no more. The leadership vacuum also facilitated the rapid rise of Gandhi.
 - Gokhale, Mehta and Naoroji had left this world.
 - On 1st August 1920, Lokmanya Tilak also passed away.
 - By 1919-1920 both the moderates and extremists had lost their mass appeal. Because of this the Indian nationalists were looking for new leadership.
 - In 1919-1920, an **extremely volatile environment** was prevailing in India.
 - Indians supported the British wholeheartedly in war efforts, but the reward of this co-operation came in the form of **Rowlatt act and Jallianwala Bagh** massacre.
 - There was an urgency on the part of the leaders to present a person who'd be somewhat different, untainted by any political involvement in India and also capable of developing certain ideas which the Indian followers would be find it easier to follow. During this hour of crisis Gandhi jumped to the front to lead the masses.
- **Nature of Gandhian movement:** Gandhian movement attracted lakhs of common Indians and even the commonest of Indian could participate in struggle against the British Empire.
- **The early success** of Champaran satyagraha (1917), Ahmedabad Mill satyagraha (1918) and Kheda satyagraha (1918) convinced the masses of the efficacy of Gandhian methods and thus the masses reposed full faith in his leadership.
- **Role of Gandhi's Personality:** Gandhi was *a living saint*.
 - This consistency of the words and actions of Gandhi left a deep impact on the heart and mind of common masses.
 - Gandhian simplicity was magnetic, it attracted lakhs of Indian towards him.
 - Gandhiji was a man of strong convictions. He had firm faith in the strength and capacity of the masses.

All these factors together pulled the masses towards Gandhi, and he emerged as the undisputed supreme leader of the anti-British struggle.



Features of Gandhian movement





"Satyagraha is the power of the powerless."

- Stephen Biko