

Addendum A: Historical Context for Gandhi's Thoughts and Actions

Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, leader of the Indian nationalist movement and known in his later life as Mahatma ("great soul"), was one of the greatest national leaders of the 20th century. His methods and philosophy of nonviolent confrontation, or civil disobedience, not only led his own country to independence but also influenced political activists of many persuasions throughout the world.

His mother was a devout adherent of Jainism, a religion in which ideas of nonviolence and vegetarianism are paramount. Gandhi stated that he was most influenced by his mother, whose life "was an endless chain of fasts and vows." When, in the company of boyhood friends, he secretly smoked, ate meat, told lies, or wore Western clothing, he suffered intense feelings of guilt. These feelings forced him to make resolutions about his moral behavior that were to remain with him.

Married by arrangement at 13, Gandhi went to London to study law when he was 18. He was admitted to the bar in 1891 and for a while practiced law in Bombay. From 1893 to 1914, he worked for an Indian firm in South Africa. During these years, Gandhi's humiliating experiences of overt racial discrimination propelled him into agitation on behalf of the Indian community of South Africa. He assumed leadership of protest campaigns and gradually developed his techniques and tenets of nonviolent resistance known as *satyagraha* (literally, "steadfastness in truth").

Returning to India in January 1915, Gandhi soon became involved in labor organizing. The massacre of Amritsar (1919), in which troops fired on and killed hundreds of nationalist demonstrators, turned him to direct political protest. Within a year, he was the dominant figure in the Indian National Congress, which he launched on a policy of non-cooperation with the British in 1920-22. Although total non-cooperation was abandoned, Gandhi continued civil disobedience, organizing protest marches against unpopular British measures, such as the salt tax (1930), and boycotts of British goods.

Gandhi was repeatedly imprisoned by the British and resorted to hunger strikes as part of his civil disobedience. His final imprisonment came in 1942-44, after he had demanded total withdrawal of the British (the "Quit India" movement) during World War II.

Gandhi also fought to improve the status of the lowest classes of society, the casteless Untouchables, whom he called harijans ("children of God"). He believed in manual labor and simple living; he spun thread and wove cloth for his own garments and insisted that his followers do so, too. He disagreed with those who wanted India to industrialize.

Gandhi was also tireless in trying to forge closer bonds between the Hindu majority and the numerous minorities of India, particularly the Muslims. His greatest failure, in fact, was his inability to dissuade Indian Muslims, led by Muhammad Ali Jinnah, from creating a separate state, Pakistan. When India gained independence in 1947, after negotiations in which he was a principal participant, Gandhi opposed the partition of the subcontinent with such intensity that he launched a mass movement against it. Ironically,

he was assassinated in Delhi on Jan. 30, 1948, by a Hindu fanatic who mistakenly thought Gandhi's anti-partition sentiment both pro-Muslim and pro-Pakistan.

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