

How Gandhi Changed the World

He wasn't the first, nor would he be the last, but the wiry, bespectacled man from Gujarat is certainly the most famous of the world's peaceful political dissidents.

Mohandas Gandhi — also affectionately known as Mahatma — led India's independence movement in the 1930s and 40s by speaking softly without carrying much of a big stick, facing down the British colonialists with stirring speeches and non-violent protest. For his troubles, he's often named among the 20th century's most important figures and remains revered in India as a father of the nation.

More than anything else, historians say, Gandhi proved that one man has the power to take on an empire, using both ethics and intelligence. Other peaceful resisters such as Martin Luther King Jr. during the 1960s civil rights movement and Tibet's Dalai Lama have emulated his methods in years since, shaking up the dynamic of world politics in the process.

Urges Britain to quit India

It is hard to imagine the thin, robed Gandhi working in the rough and tumble world of law, but Gandhi did get his start in politics as a lawyer in South Africa, where he supported the local Indian community's struggle for civil rights. Returning to India in 1915, he carried over his desire to improve the station of the lower classes.

Gandhi quickly became a leader within the Indian National Congress, a growing political party supporting independence, and traveled widely with the party to learn about the local struggles of various Indian communities.

It was during those travels that his legend grew among the Indian people, historians say.

Finding extreme poverty and famine in his own Gujarat province, Gandhi led an initiative to clean up the area, install new schools and build hospitals. He was ultimately arrested by British-appointed landlords for causing unrest, but talked his way out of jail and negotiated better conditions for the Indian farmers. When news about this sneaky feat spread through India, he earned the nickname "Bapu" — or Father.

Indeed, Gandhi was known as much for his wit and intelligence as for his piety. When he was arrested several more times over the years for his actions during the movement, Gandhi calmly fasted in prison, believing that his death would embarrass the British enough to spur independence, which had become the focus of his politics by 1920.

Gandhi's non-cooperation movement, kicked off in the early 1920s, called for Indians to boycott British goods and traditions and become self-reliant. His most famous protest came in 1930, when Gandhi led thousands of Indians on a 250-mile march to a coastal town to produce salt, on which the British had a monopoly.

Inspires civil rights

India finally gained full independence in 1947 when Gandhi was 78. Although some historians argue that independence was inevitable with Britain's economic collapse after World War II, most agree that it would not have happened without the foundation of dissent he built among several hundred million Indians throughout the 1920s and 30s.

Ironically, the ultimate proponent of non-violence was killed by assassination in 1948 while walking to his evening prayer meeting.

Today, Indians, anti-war protestors and authors, for the many interesting quotes he provided, celebrate Gandhi as a preeminent figure. Not 20 years after his death, Gandhi also had a direct impact on the history of the United States.

Martin Luther King Jr. is said to have been heavily influenced by Gandhi's philosophy of non-violence, believing it to be the only logical approach to the problem of race relations in America.

19 Greatest World Leaders and Thinkers Who Were Inspired by Mahatma Gandhi

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The list is long, diverse and awe-inspiring. Here's what the world's greatest leaders and thinkers of the 20th century had to say about Mahatma Gandhi. Read on.

While Winston Churchill, the man who famously dismissed Gandhi as a "half naked fakir," may have been no fan of the Father of our Nation, Indians can take great pride in the fact that some of the most well-known personalities of the 20th and 21st centuries cite the Mahatma as their role model.

1. Barack Obama

In 2009, when Barack Obama was visiting Wakefield High School in the US, a ninth grader asked the would-be President: "If you could have dinner with anyone, dead or alive, who would it be?" Obama chuckled and answered: "Well, dead or alive, that's a pretty big list. You know, I think that it might be Gandhi, who is a real hero of mine."

2. Aung San Suu Kyi

Nobel Peace Prize winner and prominent Burmese freedom fighter Aung San Suu Kyi, while addressing students at Columbia University in New York in 2012, said Gandhi had been one of the major influences in her life and she urged the students to read his works.

3. Nelson Mandela

Nelson Mandela, great leader of the South African people and another giant of the 20th century anti-colonial struggle, often cited Mahatma Gandhi as one of his greatest teachers: "Gandhi's ideas have played a vital role in South Africa's transformation and with the help of Gandhi's teaching, apartheid has been overcome."

4. HH Dalai Lama

His Holiness the Dalai Lama, monk and exiled leader of the Tibetan people, has always said he is a follower of Mahatma Gandhi. Both the leaders were representatives of the idea that political change must be secondary to spiritual evolution. "I have the greatest admiration for Mahatma Gandhi. He was a great human being with a deep understanding of human nature. His life has inspired me," said the Dalai Lama.

5. John Lennon

British musician and member of the revolutionary band, The Beatles, John Lennon referred to Gandhi as an influence on his music. John and his wife Yoko Ono protested for non-violent interactions in the world, and for the end of the Vietnam War.

6. Martin Luther King Jr.

“Christ gave us the goals and Mahatma Gandhi the tactics,” said Martin Luther King Jr., the beloved civil rights leader in the United States of America, who adopted non-violence as the weapon of choice to help millions of African Americans fight for their rights.

7. Albert Einstein

Albert Einstein and Gandhi were big admirers of each other and exchanged letters frequently. Einstein called Gandhi “a role model for the generations to come” in a letter, writing about him. “I believe that Gandhi’s views were the most enlightened of all the political men in our time,” he said.

8. Al Gore

Former US Vice-President and environmentalist Al Gore acknowledges Gandhi’s influence on him, especially in his fight against global warming: “Mahatma Gandhi’s philosophy of satyagraha can be translated to mean truth force. It is this truth force which can help us to fight this battle honestly and with people’s participation.”

9. Steve Jobs

When Steve Jobs started his second innings at Apple in the year 1997, he stood before a giant portrait of Mahatma Gandhi and said these words before a packed audience: “Here’s to the crazy ones. The misfits. The rebels. The troublemakers...because the people who are crazy enough to think they can change the world, are the ones who do.” It is believed that Mahatma Gandhi inspired these words.

10. Rabindranath Tagore

Although Rabindranath Tagore and Gandhi had some sharp differences, the former was the first notable contemporary to refer to the latter as Mahatma. “Mahatma Gandhi came and stood at the door of India’s destitute millions...who else has so unreservedly accepted the vast masses of the Indian people as his flesh and blood...Truth awakened Truth,” he said.

11. Pearl S. Buck

Noted American writer and novelist, Pearl S. Buck, had this to say after the assassination of Mahatma Gandhi: “He was right, he knew he was right, we all knew he was right. The man who killed him knew he was right. However long the follies of the violent continue, they but prove that Gandhi was right. ‘Resist to the very end’, he said, ‘but without violence’. Of violence the world is sick. Oh, India, dare to be worthy of your Gandhi.”

12. U Thant

The third Secretary General of the United Nations, U Thant: “Many of his principles have universal application and eternal validity, and I hope the passing years will show that his faith in the efficacy of nonviolent pressure as an agent for peaceful change is as justified today all over the world as it was in his time in India.”

13. Will Durant

American historian, Will Durant, best known for writing *The Story of Civilization*, spoke some of the most inspirational words ever about the Mahatma: “Not since Buddha has India so revered any man. Not since St. Francis of Assisi has any life known to history been so marked by gentleness, disinterestedness, simplicity of soul and forgiveness of enemies. We have the astonishing phenomenon of a revolution led by a saint.”

14. Richard Attenborough

Film director and producer Lord Richard Attenborough’s film *Gandhi* swept the Oscars in 1983. Speaking of his inspiration, he said: “When asked what attribute he most admired in human nature, Mahatma Gandhi

replied, simply and immediately, 'Courage'. 'Nonviolence', he said, 'is not to be used ever as the shield of the coward. It is the weapon of the brave.'

15. Ho Chi Minh

Vietnamese communist revolutionary leader, Ho Chi Minh, was also an admirer of Gandhi: "I and others may be revolutionaries but we are disciples of Mahatma Gandhi, directly or indirectly, nothing more nothing less," he said.

16. Cesar Chavez

Gandhi had a great effect on Mexican-American labor movement and civil rights leader Cesar Chavez and his advocacy for Latino farm workers. Chavez modeled many of his tactics, like boycotts and hunger strikes, on Gandhi's methods. "Not only did he talk about non-violence, he showed how non-violence works for justice and liberation," said Chavez.

17. Louis Fischer

Famous Jewish-American journalist Louis Fischer who penned *The Life of Mahatma Gandhi*, inspiration for Attenborough's award-winning film *Gandhi*, said on Gandhi's assassination: "Just an old man in a loin cloth in distant India. Yet when he died, humanity wept."

18. Haile Selassie I

Emperor of Ethiopia, Haile Selassie I, was a Gandhi admirer. "Mahatma Gandhi will always be remembered as long as free men and those who love freedom and justice live," he said.

19. George Bernard Shaw

And finally, no one of course could say it better than Nobel-prize-winning Irish playwright and passionate socialist, George Bernard Shaw: "Impressions of Gandhi? You might well ask for someone's impression of the Himalayas."