

Gandhi the Man:

How One Man Changed
Himself to Change the World

INFORMATIONAL TEXT
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Introduction

Using methods of nonviolent civil disobedience, including protests and marches, Mahatma Gandhi (1869–1948) led the independence movement that eventually overthrew British rule in India. Later, Gandhi and his followers challenged excessive land taxes, discrimination, and the mistreatment of women, ultimately inspiring people around the world to organize for civil rights. In his heralded biography, *Gandhi the Man: How One Man Changed Himself to Change the World*, Ekmath Easwaran tells the story of the remarkable leader. This excerpt focuses on Gandhi's famous Salt March to the sea.

“Gandhi was right: the body might be frail but the spirit was boundless.”

from the Introduction: Gandhi: Then & Now

Growing Up in Gandhi's India

I like to say I grew up not in British India but in Gandhi's India, because he dominated my world like a colossus¹. I was a small boy when he returned after twenty years in South Africa and was hailed as Mahatma, “great soul,” in 1915. I was too young (and my little village too isolated) to have much awareness of the tragedies that impelled him into national leadership in those early years. Only when I went to college, at the age of sixteen, did I discover his weekly “viewpaper,” *Young India*. Gandhi was pouring his heart out in those pages, and despite the country's widespread **illiteracy**, I daresay his words reached into every one of India's villages as the paper was passed from hand to hand and read out to audiences everywhere along the way.

My college years were turbulent ones in Indian affairs. I must have been a junior on the night of December 31, 1929, when at the stroke of midnight the Indian Congress declared independence and **unfurled** the flag of a free India. Its motto, pure Gandhi, came from the most ancient scriptures: *Satyam eva jayate*, “Truth ever conquers.” Jawaharlal Nehru said later that on that night “we made a tryst with destiny.” Those were thrilling times for a village boy away at college, but they were only the beginning. Like the Americans with their Declaration of Independence, we had also made a tryst with war. But this was to be a war without weapons. In March 1930, Gandhi wrote the British Viceroy that he intended to launch nonviolent resistance by marching to the sea to break a **statute** that made the sale and manufacture of salt a government **monopoly**, adding that he would accept the consequences cheerfully and that he was inviting the rest of India to do the same. That letter, the journalist Louise Fischer observed with pleasure, “was surely the strangest ever received by the head of a government.” But the Salt March² provided brilliant theater. Gandhi and his small band of volunteers took fourteen days to reach the sea,

1. **colossus** a gigantic statue

2. **Salt March** an act of civil disobedience which took place from March to April 1930 in India, led by Mahatma Gandhi, to protest British rule in India

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stopping at every village along the way and making headlines around the world. By the time he reached the ocean the procession was several thousand strong. When he picked up a handful of sea salt from the beach and raised it as a signal to the rest of India, millions of people around the world must have watched him on the newsreels. But in India nobody needed the media. The country simply exploded in utterly nonviolent disobedience of British law.

- 3 What no one dared to expect was that in the face of police charges, beatings, arrests, and worse, the nonviolence held. Everyone knew Gandhi would drop the campaign if there was any violence on our part, no matter what the provocation. We “kept the pledge” day after day, filling the jails literally to overflowing. Many veterans of those days recall their terms in prison as the high point of their lives; Gandhi had made “suffering for Truth” a badge of honor.
- 4 I can’t describe the effect this had on me, on all of India. Obviously it was high drama, but most significant for me was the human **alchemy** being wrought. These were ordinary people, family, friends, school chums, acquaintances, men and women we saw daily at the marketplace or at temple, at work or school; all ages, high caste and low, educated and ignorant, cultured and crude, rich beyond calculation and unbelievably poor. How had they suddenly become heroes and heroines, cheerfully stepping forward to be beaten with steel-tipped batons, hauled off to jail, stripped of their livelihoods, sometimes even shot? Called to be more than human, we looked around and saw that we were capable of it. Gandhi was right: the body might be frail but the spirit was boundless. We were much, much stronger than we had thought, capable of great things, not because we were great but because there was divinity in us all—even those who swung the clubs and wielded the guns. For me, the burning question became: What was the secret of this alchemy?

Excerpted from *Gandhi the Man: How One Man Changed Himself to Change the World* by Eknath Easwaran, published by Nilgiri Press.

