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Mahatma Gandhi's Salt March in India

Non-Violence that Educates

Let us take a look at three examples of non-violence in the 20th century, one in India, one in America, and one in Europe. What lessons can we learn from each example that could be applied to our present situation in the 21st century?

We will first examine Gandhi's Salt March in India in 1930. Then, in our next talk, we'll examine the bus boycott in Montgomery, Alabama in 1955-1956, led by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Finally, we'll examine the Singing Revolution in the three Baltic States—Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania—in 1987-1991.

There are of course other examples of non-violent movements around the world, but we'll focus on these three. Then *you* can do the research, and add several more.

The events in these three non-violent movements took place in three different cultures during three different periods of history, and yet each non-violent movement had a similar goal: not only to free their people from oppression, but to raise the people up to a higher level of thinking. As they broke with the old, they were also building something entirely new.

To summarize very briefly, Mohandas Gandhi, born in India, and educated as a lawyer in England, worked in South Africa for twenty-one years, from 1893 to 1914, first as a lawyer and then as a civil rights leader, defending the rights of Indians living in South Africa against British racial repression. During this time he developed the unusual philosophy of non-violent civil disobedience—or *Satyagraha*, as he called it, Sanskrit for *Satya*, “truth”, and *Agraha*, “insistence on”.

Gandhi returned to India in 1915. He spent his first year there traveling through the country, getting to know, after his long absence, the people of each region, and the people of every caste, including the Untouchables. Because India was then a British colony, his people suffered from the repression by their European masters. For the rest of his life, Gandhi worked for two goals: India's independence from Great Britain, and the education—even enlightenment—of his people.

Back in 1882, the British had passed the Salt Act, a law that gave the British a monopoly on the production and sale of salt, which came from the boiling of sea

water. The price of salt, which included a heavy tax, was a burden on the poorest people, who were forbidden to produce their own salt, even if they lived in villages by the sea.

In 1930, at the age of sixty, Gandhi decided that he would lead a non-violent act of civil disobedience against India's British rulers, in order to encourage a spirit of rebellion among all of the people in India, including both the Hindu and Muslim populations. He especially wanted to encourage the poorest of his people by enabling them to participate in this non-violent act of civil disobedience. Thus while his strategy was overtly aimed at the British, his efforts also reached out to his people, with the hope of lifting them up from their subservience and poverty.

From March 12 to April 6, 1930, Gandhi led seventy-nine experienced volunteers from all parts of India—men who had been trained in *Satyagraha*—on the Salt March, a walk of 384 kilometers from his home base, the Sabarmati Ashram in western India, to the village of Dandi on the coast of the Arabian Sea. During the 24-day march, tens of thousands of people—including a great number of women—joined the core of 80 marchers. Gandhi had long recommended that Indians spin their own cotton thread and manufacture their own domestic clothing, as a boycott against British imported clothing. Thus his followers wore white homespun clothing, and the long procession of marchers was called the White Flowing River.

The marchers passed through 48 villages, spending the nights in some of them, where food, beds, and latrines had been amply prepared. During the months before the Salt March, Gandhi had alerted the world press, so that both journalists and filmmakers accompanied the marchers . . . and listened to Gandhi's speeches during the evenings in the villages. Gandhi made sure that the world was watching.

He also made sure that the poorest of his people were a part of this historic event. No independence from Britain was possible, nor would it have real meaning, unless every family from every caste was included in the *Satyagraha*.

Early in the morning on April 6, while journalists took notes and filmmakers made the newsreels which would go out to theaters around the world, and while thousands of his followers watched, Gandhi reached down to the beach at the water's edge and picked up a handful of crystallized salt. (This lump would later be boiled in sea water, so that the salt could be removed.) He held up the salt—Indian salt which the British had taken away from them—and proclaimed, "With these crystals of salt, I am going to shake the foundation of the British Empire."

Gandhi encouraged the Indian people to make their own salt, or to buy illegal Indian salt, and thus to boycott the British monopoly. Millions of women brought home pitchers of salt water, boiled the water until only salt was left, then shouted out their windows to their neighbors, “We have broken the salt law!”

Although Gandhi and tens of thousands of Indians were jailed for making salt, and although independence was still a long time away (August of 1947), Gandhi had planted the seed in the hearts of his people. He gave them the courage to pick up their own crystallized salt from their own beaches, and thus to stand up to the British bully.

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I am now going to turn the classroom over to you, so that you can launch into your own vibrant discussion.

Who are the bullies today, and how can we best stand up to them?

What attitudes hold people back today, and how can we encourage people to think in new and productive ways?

How do we progress from baby steps to long bold strides?

Be sure to do your own research. You will find many books about Gandhi, including his own autobiography, **Gandhi, An Autobiography: The Story of My Experiments with Truth.**

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John Slade

