

What Made Gandhi's Nonviolence Work?

The history of war and violence in our world is well documented. Mankind has often settled its conflicts at the point of a spear or barrel of a gun. However, there is another way.

Mohandas Gandhi was born in 1869 in the Indian coastal city of Porbandar. His father was a prominent **Hindu** who taught his son to respect all religions. Gandhi's mother was a **Jainist** who taught Mohandas that all people, in fact all living things, are holy. Following custom, Gandhi married young and at age 19 sailed for London to study law. At this time, colonial India was the crown jewel of the powerful British Empire. Gandhi knew that he was looked down upon by many of the English, but he was impressed that Englishmen followed the law.

After getting his degree, he returned to India to establish a law practice.

Things did not work out well. During his first trial in India, Gandhi was so overcome by shyness he couldn't speak. So when a businessman living in South Africa invited him to try his luck there, Gandhi jumped at the offer. Life in South Africa also started badly.

Three weeks after he arrived, the full force of European racism came crashing down on him when he was thrown off a train; he was a "colored" man daring to hold a first-class ticket. Despite his shyness, Gandhi found the insult too much to bear, and in the process of fighting back, was arrested and sent to jail. From this experience, he became known as a leader, first to his friends, then to his fellow prisoners, and finally to the Indian community at large.

When Gandhi returned to India in 1896 the wretched poverty he saw everywhere sickened him. Rickety tin and cardboard shanties clung

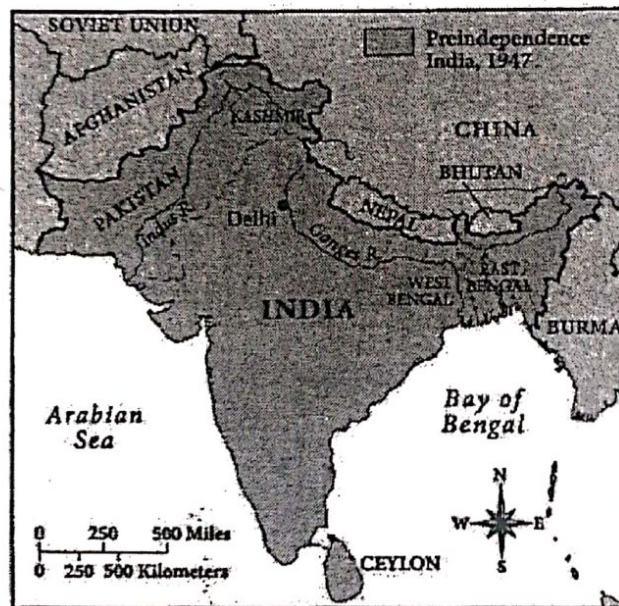
to the outer walls of wealthy homes. Rickshaw drivers, clothes tattered and feet bare, carried white colonials to their places of business. Everywhere "European Only" signs enforced privilege. In fact, to be successful in this world the English had built, Indians were expected to imitate their rulers – wear their clothes, copy their manners, accept their standards of beauty. Gandhi refused.

Gandhi wanted people to live free of all class, wealth, and educational distinctions, even those imposed by India's ancient **caste system**. But first he had to build a community that modeled this classless society. He shed the clothes that made him look like a British lawyer and dressed in a poor man's traditional loincloth.

He spent time each day at a spinning wheel making homespun cloth. And he did the undignified chores of the **untouchables**, people so low they are below caste. At first these practices seemed absurd. Then little by little, because of the purity of his life, Gandhi came to be known as "**Ma-hatma**" or "Great Soul."

Gandhi came to see that India's self-respect was

tied to independence. But England was a giant whose might was feared around the globe. India had grappled unsuccessfully with English power for 200 years. How much more difficult would it be for the gentle Gandhi to bring about change, let alone independence? And yet, in the end, Gandhi succeeded where others had failed. India won its independence in 1947 and Gandhi has been given much of the credit for this achievement. Examine the documents that follow and then answer the question before us: *What made Gandhi's nonviolence work?*



Gandhi Definitions

Porbandar – capital city of district (province) in India, famous for its building stone, and manufacturing

Prominent – important, well-known, leading citizen – usually wealthy

Jainist - religion that teaches reincarnation, and noninjury to living creatures,

Crown Jewel – a prized asset, achievement, or person.

Wretched – unfortunate in condition or circumstances; miserable; pitiable

Rickety – likely to fall or collapse; shaky

Shanty – a poorly made house, usually made out of scavenged materials.

Rickshaw – two wheeled passenger cart pulled by a person (see pic)

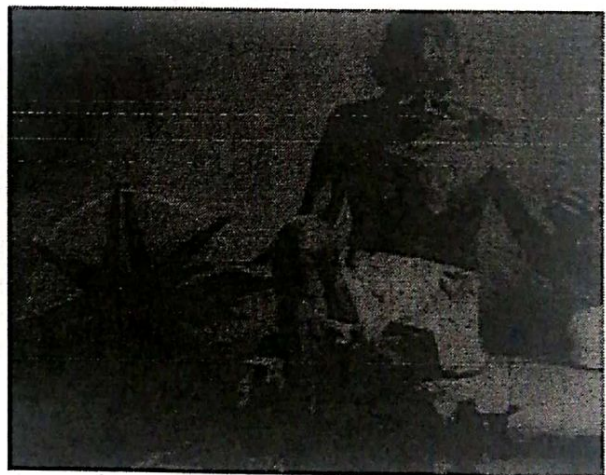
Caste System – Class system/levels of society

Loincloth – a single piece of cloth wrapped round the hips, worn by men in as their only garment. (see pic)

Spinning Wheel – device that converts cotton fibers to thread (see pic)

Untouchables – Indian people who did cleaning, animal slaughter

Absurd –ridiculous, laughable, idiotic, stupid, foolish, silly,



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Background Essay Questions

Answer in complete sentences!

1. In what year was Mohandas Gandhi born? How many years after the American Civil War (1860-1865) was this? (Hint: Present date – 1965)
2. What was Gandhi's field of study when he went to London?
3. What did Gandhi like about the English?
4. Where did Gandhi go after faltering (not doing well) as a lawyer in India?
5. What was going on in South Africa at the time?
6. Was Gandhi, an Indian, treated respectfully in this South African system of racism? Why or why not?
7. Why was Gandhi thrown in jail in South Africa?
8. What did Gandhi find wrong with India when he returned in 1915?
9. What did Gandhi refuse to accept about the British in India?

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10. What are "rickshaws"? Are they fair to the driver?

11. What were Gandhi's feelings about the Indian caste system, a system that divided people into classes?

12. According to the Background Essay, "[Gandhi] had to build a community that modelled [a] classless society". What does this mean?

13. In the last paragraph of the Background Essay says that Gandhi came to realize that for Indians to have self-respect, they would have to become independent from England. Do you agree that self-respect requires independence?