

Mohandas Gandhi

Why Am I So Important? *Mohandas Gandhi spent almost his entire life fighting against intolerance and oppression. He educated people about the power of protesting nonviolently. Late in life, he finally freed his native India from British rule. As you read this biography, notice how Gandhi showed integrity throughout his life.*

In 1869 Mohandas Gandhi was born in a small town on India's western coast. His family was middle class. Gandhi's father was prime minister of their town, and his mother was a gentle, tolerant, wise woman who profoundly influenced Gandhi's beliefs.

As a boy Gandhi was an average student. He also was extremely timid and shy. No one saw any hint of the great man to come. At age 13, while he was still a high school student, Gandhi was married to a 13-year-old girl. After graduating, he went to college. He was miserable, as the coursework was difficult. However, his father died, and a friend said that Gandhi could have his father's job if he quickly obtained a law degree. Gandhi was thrilled by the chance for a better future, and he left India for law school in England.

Gandhi grew to love England. He studied hard, bought fancy clothes, and took lessons in French and ballroom dancing. Yet he became uneasy with all those luxuries. He knew that at home in India, millions of people were suffering in poverty under British rule. After getting his law degree in 1891, Gandhi sailed back home.

He worked as a lawyer but was unsuccessful. Eventually, he was offered a job in South Africa. There, Indian immigrants were treated as second-class citizens. Gandhi himself was discriminated against every day. He began organizing protests against racism. As a result he was stoned and beaten. Yet Gandhi, who was devoted to peace, never fought back.

Gradually Gandhi realized that the racism in South Africa was no different than racism in India. For decades he traveled back and forth between the two countries, arguing for tolerance and peace. He also founded large farms, called ashrams, where people lived simple, tolerant, spiritually pure lives. "My life is my message," Gandhi told his followers.

Gandhi refined his life and message as the years passed. He lived simply, doing his own cooking and cleaning. He homeschooled his four children. He volunteered for at least two hours every day and always he preached his message of nonviolence, or passive resistance to enemy attacks.

In 1907 the South African government passed the Black Act and demanded that all Indians be fingerprinted. Gandhi refused and was sent to prison for two months. During the next decade, he was repeatedly arrested and freed. He served hard labor and was beaten. But people were so inspired by his message and suffering that they joined him in prison. At one point, several thousand Indians joined Gandhi in jail.

Gandhi finally returned to India for good in 1893. He educated the poor, fasted, and led protest after protest against British injustices. He was arrested repeatedly and persecuted by the government. Yet hundreds of thousands of people began attending his protests. At last, in 1947, with worldwide support, he achieved the end of British rule. One year later he was shot and killed by a young man who opposed the peace process.