

## Gandhi Introduces Civil Disobedience to India

*Mohandas K. Gandhi was a central figure in India's efforts to free itself from British imperial rule. His emphasis on non-violent methods of resistance and struggle influenced people far beyond the boundaries of India. For example, leaders of the U.S. civil rights movement in the 1950s and 1960s, such as Bayard Rustin and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., were inspired to follow Gandhi's methods.*

*Born in 1869 into a Hindu family in what is now the western Indian state of Gujarat, Gandhi went to London to study law. In 1893, he took a job in white-ruled South Africa, where the large Indian community was subject to many forms of discrimination. Gandhi became a leader in efforts to better his people's conditions there. He developed the methods that he would later use in India itself, including the technique he called satyagraha ("firmness in truth"). This included public demonstrations, fasting, civil disobedience (peacefully disobeying laws and then submitting to arrest and punishment), and negotiations.*

*Returning to India in 1914, Gandhi joined the Congress Party in its struggle for independence from Britain. But political independence was only one of Gandhi's goals. He also worked to improve relations between upper-caste and lower-caste Hindus and between Hindus and Muslims. And he tried to improve the lives of India's desperately poor peasants. He spoke out against powerful economic interests and encouraged Indians to become self-sufficient by such methods as spinning their own cloth and making their own clothing.*

*Gandhi's first use of civil disobedience in India occurred in April 1917 in the district of Champaran, in India's far north. Local peasants had invited him to the district. They complained that the English landlords treated them unjustly and required them to grow huge quantities of indigo (a plant used to make dye), which they were unable to do. Gandhi set out to visit peasant dwellings and assess the situation. But he was soon arrested. In his autobiography, Gandhi describes his part in his trial and its result.*

The trial began. The government pleader [prosecutor], the magistrate and other officials were...at a loss to know what to do. The government pleader was pressing the magistrate to postpone the case. But I interfered and requested the magistrate not to postpone the case, as I wanted to plead guilty to having disobeyed the order to leave Champaran, and read a brief statement as follows:

...I have entered the district with motives of rendering humanitarian and national service. I have done so in response to a pressing invitation to come and help the ryots [peasants], who urge they are not being fairly treated by the indigo planters. I could not render any help without studying the problem. I have, therefore, come to study it with the assistance, if possible, of the [British colonial] Administration and the planters. I have no other motive, and cannot believe that my coming can in any way disturb public peace and cause of loss of life...As a law-abiding citizen my first instinct would be, as it was, to obey the order served upon me. But I could not do so without doing violence to my sense of duty to those for whom I have come. I feel that I could just now serve them only by remaining in their midst. I could not, therefore, voluntarily leave. Amid this conflict of duties I could only throw the responsibility of removing me from them on the Administration...It is my firm belief that in the complex constitution under which we are living, the only safe and honorable course for a

self-respecting man is...to do what I have decided to do, that is, to submit without protest to the penalty of disobedience.

...I have disregarded the order served upon me not for want of respect for lawful authority, but in obedience to the higher law of our being, the voice of conscience.

There was now no occasion to postpone the hearing, but as both the magistrate and the government pleader had been taken by surprise, the magistrate postponed judgment. Meanwhile, I had wired full details to the Viceroy [the top British official in colonial India]...as also to...others.

Before I could appear before the court to receive the sentence, the magistrate sent a written message that the Lieutenant Governor had ordered the case against me to be withdrawn, and another official wrote to me saying that I was at liberty to conduct the proposed inquiry, and that I might count on whatever help I needed from the officials. None of us was prepared for this prompt and happy result...The country thus had its first direct object-lesson in civil disobedience.

*After his release from custody, Gandhi went ahead with his investigation. Often he was surrounded by admiring crowds of poor people. As a result of Gandhi's efforts, the government appointed a commission to investigate further, with Gandhi as one of the members. The commission ultimately called for an end to compulsory [mandatory] indigo-growing. Money payments were made to the local peasants. This was a notable victory for Gandhi and his methods.*

*Gandhi continued his campaigns. One of his most dramatic efforts came in 1930, when he led hundreds of Indian followers on a march to the sea. They were protesting a tax on salt that placed heavy burdens on the poor. By letting sea water evaporate, the marchers made their own salt—in violation of the law. Gandhi and many followers were arrested.*

*Independence finally came to India in 1947, under a plan that created two separate nations; Pakistan (mainly for Muslims) and India (mainly for Hindus). Gandhi continued to work to improve Muslim-Hindu relations. In 1948, however, at the age of 78, he was assassinated by a radical Hindu who considered him pro-Muslim.*

## **Review Questions**

1. Why did Mohandas Gandhi wish to study the complaints of the peasants of Champaran?
2. Why did Gandhi refuse to obey the British order to leave Champaran?
3. Why was Gandhi willing to go on trial and accept the penalty for disobeying the law?
4. In what way did Gandhi's actions in Champaran bring about a solution to the peasants' problems?
5. In what way did Gandhi influence leaders of the civil rights movement in the United States?