

The Salt March and the Indian Struggle for Independence

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The struggle for Indian independence against the forces of British imperialism is one of the most important mass movements of the 20th century. It is set apart from many other anti-colonial struggles by the non-violent creed of Mohandas Gandhi. For Gandhi, non-violent civil disobedience represented a philosophy rooted in the Hindu beliefs of the majority of the Indian people, as well as a strategy to defeat a powerful enemy. Gandhi was born in Gujarat, India in 1869. As a young man he was educated in London and later move to South Africa to practice law. While in South Africa, Gandhi became involved in the struggle against racial discrimination against non-Europeans and an advocate for fundamental human rights and social and political equality. In 1915, Gandhi returned to India, where he began helping poverty stricken Indians who were victimized by the caste system and developed a large following. The movement for national independence in India received a boost in the spring of 1919 when British General Edward Dryer ordered troops to open fire on a crowd of 10,000 people at a peaceful, but illegal demonstration at Amristar in the Punjab province. As a result of the massacre, 379 Indians were killed, over 1,000 were wounded and public opinion in Britain and India started to question colonization.

Gandhi proposed achieving independence through a non-violent campaign of passive resistance to weakened British authority and economic power. He called



Gandhi makes salt. “With this I am shaking the foundations of the British Empire.”

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on Indians to boycott British goods and defy government orders. In 1930, Gandhi organized a mass demonstration in opposition to the British monopoly on the production of salt and the salt tax. Gandhi led his followers on a 165 mile march to the coastal city of Dandhi where they made salt from the waters of the Indian Ocean. The salt was distributed by the Congress Party to all the major cities of India where it was sold in defiance of the law. Gandhi and most of the leadership were arrested, however a group of demonstrators attempted to shut down the British owned Dharasana Saltworks Factory. Police officers and British soldiers attacked the demonstrators with clubs, severely injuring hundreds. Demonstrators, following Gandhi’s policy of non-violence, refused to fight back. The attack was covered by newspapers around the world, embarrassing the British and securing global support for Gandhi’s non-violent movement. India finally achieved independence in 1947 after 200 years of British rule. A year later Gandhi was assassinated by a Hindu nationalist upset about the partition of India into Hindu and Muslim countries.

British Colonization of India and the Struggle for Independence

1610. British East India Company creates a trading post in India.

1763. In the Treaty of Paris, France recognizes English control over India.

1784. India Act places British East India Company under government control.

1857. Indian soldiers in the British Army (known as sepoys) rebel against British authority in India.

1858. Great Britain formally annexes India.

1876. Queen Victoria of England declared "Empress of India."

1885. Nationalists form the Indian National Congress, a predecessor of the Congress party.

1906. Congress Party demands "self-rule" for India. Muslims form the All-India Muslim League.

1919. British soldiers open fire on a mass demonstration in Amritsar and massacre 379 unarmed people.

1920. Congress Party begins non-violent resistance campaign to achieve independence from Britain.

1928. Congress Party demands dominion status within British Empire.

1930. Congress Party declares India's independence. Gandhi launches a campaign against the tax on salt.

1937. Provincial autonomy begins with Congress winning power in many states.

1947. India declares independence and is divided in a predominately Hindu India and Islamic Pakistan.

New York Times Reports on the Salt March in India

Arrest of Gandhi is Held Imminent

London, March 15, 1930. *The Sunday Times* says that well-informed quarters in London regard the arrest of Mahatma Gandhi as "imminent." "The action of the headmen," says *The Sunday Times*, "is in direct response to Mr. Gandhi's appeal and is regarded as a defiance of law which not even the greatest sense of official tolerance can countenance."

Bombay Takes Action

New Delhi, India, March 15, 1930. With a view to counteracting the Gandhi movement against the salt tax, . . . the Central Board of Revenue plans to invest every police officer above the rank of constable in the presidency of Bombay . . . with all the powers of a salt revenue officer. That would enable him to order confiscation of salt made otherwise than under the government monopoly, or to take any other necessary action.

Government to Check Illegal Salt Making

Ahmadabad, India, March 15, 1930. Mahatma Gandhi, beginning the fourth day of the march to Jalalpur . . . where his party plans to manufacture salt in violation of the British monopoly. . . . There are still sixteen days before the pilgrims reach the coast and begin in earnest the civil disobedience campaign by which they hope to gain independence for India.

Gandhi Urges India to Extend Boycott

Kareli, India, March 20, 1930. Mahatma Gandhi arriving here with his volunteer marchers in the civil disobedience campaign, today gave further instructions for carrying out his policy of non-violent resistance to the Indian Government.

Gandhi Commences Last Lap of March

Surat, India, April 2. Mahatma Gandhi today started on what is virtually the last lap on his long march to the sea when he walked under the Navsari Gate in the city wall bound for the village of Dinloi. Gandhi was greeted by the most enthusiastic welcome since he left his seminary in Ahmedabad, April 12. A huge crowd gathered last night on the bank of the River Tapty outside the city to hear Gandhi, who in the flickering light of kerosene lamps, jibed at the government for "being ashamed to arrest me."

Signal for Mass Action

Jalalpur, India, April 5, 1930. Mahatma Gandhi today ended his 200-mile march from Ahmedabad at this desolate village on the shores of the Arabian Sea, and tomorrow morning he will wade into the water to begin the forbidden manufacture of salt. His action will be a signal for a campaign of mass civil disobedience in other parts of India, which Mr. Gandhi believes will start a revolt against British rule.

Gandhi Makes Salt, Defying India's Law

Jalalpur, India, April 6, 1930. Mahatma Gandhi manufactured salt from sea water at Dandi this morning, thereby breaking the British law establishing a monopoly on salt manufacture.

Viceroy and Gandhi Agree on Truce in India

New Delhi, India, March 4, 1931 - The Congress party's campaign of civil disobedience, which included defiance of the salt laws, non-payment of taxes, holding of illegal assemblies and mass picketing of factories and shops selling British goods, will forthwith be called off. It is understood that the India [British] Government made concessions regarding the salt laws and that henceforth the natives will be permitted to manufacture salt by the process of evaporation on the seacoasts, the government monopoly, however, maintaining control of its manufacture and distribution in inland areas. As a result of the compromise, many political prisoners are expected to be released and . . . property confiscation from Congress members found guilty of law-breaking will be restored with their release from jail.

Hopes Truce Will Lead to Independence for India

New Delhi, India, March 5, 1931. Mahatma Gandhi . . . served notice anew on British that complete independence is the goal of India. "That is the birthright of India as it is of every nation worthy of the name," he said. "England's statesmen will have to be willing to let India wander away into the woods through errors. Freedom is not worth having if it does not connote freedom to err and even to sin." "I venture to suggest that if India reached her goal of liberty through truth and non-violence she will have made no small contribution to the world of peace for which all the nations are thirsting."

Question: In your opinion, why did a symbolic act such as the Salt March have such a major impact?