

Satyagraha

There was a time in history when the sun never set on the British Empire. One of the first countries to walk free from that ruling power was India. If she is not the only country to have gained her liberty without a war, then she was at least a model of near perfection.

It is often those who do not seek power who become the greatest leaders, and gain the devotion of their people. Mahatma Gandhi, considered the father of modern India, was both an extraordinarily humble man and greatly beloved by his people. Yet only through the effort of thousands of his followers, whose names we do not remember, did India attain her long awaited prize of freedom.

In 1919, in the Punjab province of India, 10,000 people gathered peacefully in a walled garden both to celebrate the Baisakhi Spring Festival, and to protest the British declaration that suspected dissenters would be imprisoned without trial. The British General, Reginald Dyer, led fifty soldiers through the narrow entrance into the garden, known as Jallianwalla Bagh, and without warning ordered them to open fire into the crowd. Among the nearly four hundred who died there were women and children. Following the Jallianwalla Bagh Massacre millions of Indians transferred their trust and allegiance from the British to the Indian National Congress.

Adding more spice to a dish of curry won't result in a milder taste. Following the same principle it is impossible for brutal retaliation to bring about harmony. Only by removing the spices can peaceful change be achieved. Despite the barbarianism at Jallianwalla Bagh Gandhi announced, "I will not intentionally hurt anything that lives, much less fellow human beings, even though they may do the greatest wrong to me and mine. Whilst, therefore, I hold the British rule to be a curse, I do not intend harm to a single Englishman." Holding to his belief that it was not British guns but Indian acquiescence that kept the country in bondage, Gandhi began a nonviolent, non-cooperation movement known as Satyagraha.

In 1920 thousands of Indians joined Gandhi in boycotting all British imports and institutions. Instead of buying cloth from the British textile industry the nation learned to spin by hand as Gandhi did. Often Gandhi mused how peaceful the world would be if everyone would devote his or herself to spinning. For the first time the British found themselves faced with a united Indian front of resistance. Shortly after the conclusion of the two-year Satyagraha they imprisoned Gandhi for twenty-four months.

Upon Gandhi's release he found the nation bickering among itself, from the Indian National Congress to the Hindus and Muslims in the streets. Embarking on a three-week fast, Gandhi called for unity. Such was the love that the people felt for Gandhi, that his multiple threats to fast unto death unless his wishes were met, never came to fruition.

In 1930, after a year's warning, the Indian National Congress changed their goal from gaining dominion status in the British Empire to complete independence from Britain. Accordingly Gandhi set out on a 241-mile march to the Arabian Sea on a quest for salt. After twenty-four days of walking his original group of 78 companions had grown nearly 800 percent. Why was salt important to Gandhi, and the unborn nation? It was a common necessity to all, rich and poor alike. Gladly scooping up a handful of the small crystals from

the Gujarat coast on April 6th, Gandhi broke the British law on salt tax. Thousands of hands mirrored his as they gathered the emblematic crystals from the shore. Upon their arrest 60,000 salt-gathers cheerfully prepared for jail. Within a week the jails had overflowed.

When independence was finally tasted on August 15th, 1947 Gandhi had fasted 13 times, and Nehru, India's future Prime minister, had spent a total of nine years in jail. With Gandhi carrying the torch of compassion for every human being, thousands of people trod the long road beside him, making possible what was impossible for one man to do alone. In the end India won her liberty not with bullets, but with salt and spinning wheels. She lost her ultimate war, which was fought within herself. However as the whole she was under British rule, India changed the map forever with her steadfast determination for liberty. As the sun set on that portion of the British Empire, a new form of protest was born. Gandhi called it Satyagraha.