



# A Peaceful Force

by Cynthia Levinson

**D**espite his slight body and soft-spoken voice, Mohandas K. “Mahatma” Gandhi (1869–1948) was a powerful force — a leader in the practice of peaceful, nonviolent protest.

He was born and raised in India, but he developed his famous guiding principles — *ahimsa*, or nonviolence, and *satyagraha*, seeking truth through firmness — while practicing law in South Africa in the early 1900s.

Gandhi had studied the *Bhagavad Gita*, a Hindu book that teaches that

people must fight evil with love. When he saw how the white South Africans treated the native Zulus and other dark-skinned peoples as second-class citizens, he began to organize nonviolent protests against racial injustice. “Nonviolent acts exert pressure far more effective than violent acts,” Gandhi explained, “for the pressure comes from goodwill and gentleness.”

After nearly two decades in South Africa, Gandhi returned to India in 1915. He had become famous



**Gandhi's face now appears on Indian currency, and he is revered around the world as a leader of nonviolent protest.**

for adopting a spiritual, non-material life and had been given the nickname “Mahatma,” or Great Soul. He now focused his energies on freeing India from Britain’s oppressive colonial rule. He demanded rights for peasants and religious toleration; he led nonviolent strikes, boycotts, and fasts; and he willingly faced imprisonment for these actions.

His most famous act of civil disobedience, in 1930, entailed a 240-mile march to the sea, where he and his followers staged a protest against the British salt tax. The British controlled a monopoly on the salt trade and used the tax revenue they collected to support their regime in India. This march sparked numerous other acts

of civil disobedience across the country.

India won its independence in 1947, and Gandhi’s example of creating change through peaceful protest inspired millions of people around the world, including Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and other American civil rights activists of the 1950s and 1960s.

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