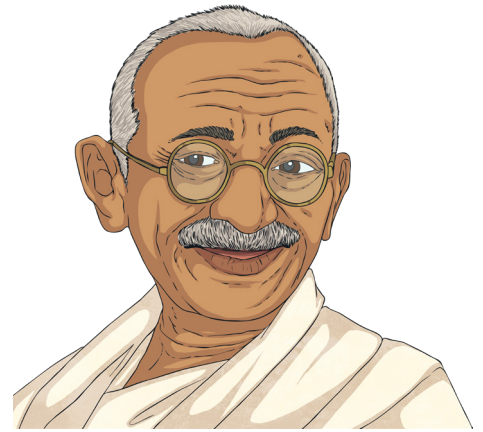


Mahatma Gandhi and Non-Violence

Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi was born in 1869 in India during the era of British colonial rule. This meant that India was governed by Britain and Indians had no choice in this matter. Gandhi campaigned throughout his life for India to gain independence as a country, which was finally realised in 1947.

Gandhi had trained as a lawyer and it was not until he experienced racism in South Africa that he started his journey towards campaigning for equal rights and then Indian independence.

He was knowledgeable about all religions. He was impressed by the Sermon on the Mount in the Bible and the idea of non-violence being a moral force, which was also the basic idea proposed by Leo Tolstoy (a Russian writer) with whom Gandhi corresponded. Tolstoy read widely on Christianity, Buddhism and Hinduism and made connections between them. He believed 'non-resistance to evil' was necessary because violence was a wrong in itself. To act violently even when one is being treated unjustly only led to two wrongs being committed.



Gandhi was a practising Hindu, this influenced his beliefs in two fundamental ways.

1. Satyagraha is the idea of discovering the truth (satya) and the need to live one's life by doing the right thing. This is a moral force not the physical force of violence. Violence gets in the way of highlighting the truth of suffering and injustice by causing more suffering and injustice.
2. Ahimsa has a long history in Indian religious thought and was explored in the Hindu Vedas. The word comes from the Sanskrit 'hims' which means to strike and 'himsa' to injure or harm. Ahimsa is the opposite of both of these and is a belief that one should not cause injury or harm.

The non-violence Gandhi encouraged included peaceful demonstrations and protests and non-cooperation with laws that discriminated against Indians. A famous example of this was the Salt March. By going to the sea and teaching people how to make their own salt, it meant that Indians did not have to buy salt and pay taxes to the British government.

Gandhi made a distinction between following 'just' and 'unjust' laws. Where laws were unjust it was acceptable to not cooperate. He thought that the British could only rule India while Indians cooperated and complied with laws that were unjust. If they stopped doing that and acted peacefully it would cause two problems. Firstly, it would be hard to rule them and secondly, it would highlight the problems faced and use moral force to push for a just outcome. If the British reacted with violence to non-violent protesters they alone would have to face the criticism that such actions bring. If those protesting also acted violently then it was easier to dismiss the wrong that was being done to them because they could be criticised over their actions.