

Gandhi and Indian Independence

There were many independence movements throughout the early 1900s. Many countries demanded the right to rule themselves. The most successful and the most sustained freedom movement appeared in British controlled India. The moving force here was the Indian National Congress, later known as the Congress Party founded in 1884. After WWI, the dominant figure of the independence movement was Mohandas K. Gandhi. Because India had loyally supported Britain in WWI, mobilizing 1.2 million soldiers India hope it would gain greater autonomy or self-rule after the war. They wanted to be like other British colonies that received the same status such as New Zealand, Canada and Australia. But demonstrations and protests, organized by Gandhi, led to problems and fights with the British.

In 1919, at Amritsar, British troops fired on unarmed protestors, killing 379 and wounding 1,137 people. The Amritsar Massacre led to a lot of Chaos in India. The British imposed a strict crackdown on opposition to its rule and they sent Gandhi to prison.

For the rest of the 1920's, India balanced on the brink of disaster. The British began to make concessions, such as the Government of India Act in 1921. The act allowed five million Indians to vote and created a parliament, in which two-thirds of the members would be Indian, elected by a popular vote. The Indians however, wanted more than this. India could have turned to bloodshed if it were not for Gandhi's spiritual and political guidance.

Whether free or in prison, Gandhi now known as Mahatma or "great soul", preached the policy of nonviolent resistance to British authority. The practice is based partly on Hindu religious beliefs. Another way the Indians opposed British rule was when Britain imposed a heavy tax on the salt they sold to India. Rather than protest violently, Gandhi led 50,000 people on a 200 mile march to the seashore, where they began to make salt illegally by drying out seawater. This is known as the Great Salt March. When the British arrived, Gandhi allowed himself to be arrested peacefully.

Gandhi was freed in 1931 and he continued his work in politics. The political leader now of the Congress Party was a young lawyer named Jawaharlal Nehru. The spiritual, traditional Gandhi and the modern, secular Nehru pressed the British for greater reform. In 1935, the British granted a liberal constitution that was a long step forward on the path toward self-rule. In 1937, Gandhi and Nehru began their "Quit India" campaign, trying to convince Britain to leave India altogether. The start of WWII delayed the British withdrawal, but India would gain its freedom in 1947, after the end of WWII. On January 30, 1948, on his way to a prayer meeting, Gandhi was shot dead in Birla House, New Delhi, by Nathuram Godse.

1. How did the Indians help their cry for independence after WWI?
2. What was the Amritsar Massacre?
3. What was the Government of India Act of 1921?
4. How did Gandhi want to deal with British authority?
5. What was the Great Salt March?
6. When did India gain its independence?