Ahimsa Center K-12 Teacher Institute Lesson

**Title:** Exploring India, Gandhi, and Nonviolence through the Salt March

**Lesson By:** Rosa Clara Salazar, United South High School, Laredo, Texas

**Grade Level/ Subject Areas:** 9th grade/World Geography

**Duration of Lesson:** 90-minutes/2 days

**Content Standards:**  
*Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills: World Geography*

(5) **Geography.** The student understands how political, economic, and social processes shape cultural patterns and characteristics in various places and regions. The student is expected to:
   
   (A) analyze how the character of a place is related to its political, economic, social, and cultural elements

(12) **Economics.** The student understands the economic importance of, and issues related to, the location and management of resources. The student is expected to:
   
   (B) evaluate the geographic and economic impact of policies related to the development, use, and scarcity of natural resources such as regulations of water.

(18) **Culture.** The student understands the ways in which cultures change and maintain continuity. The student is expected to:
   
   (B) assess causes, effects, and perceptions of conflicts between groups of people, including modern genocides and terrorism.

**Lesson Abstract:**  
Students will read a short biography of Gandhi and focus on the Salt March of 1930 to explore the concepts of satyagraha and ahimsa. Students will also learn about India’s physical and cultural geography by following the route taken by Gandhi and his satyagrahis on the Salt March.

**Guiding Questions:**  
- How do physical and human geography affect people, places, and regions?
- Can important changes be made using nonviolence?

**Content Essay:**  
*Discovering Gandhi and the Salt Satyagraha*

*Satyagraha means fighting injustice by voluntarily submitting oneself to suffering. - Gandhi*

He was born Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, but to many he was known as Mahatma, which, in Sanskrit, means Great Soul. Gandhiji (the suffix ji is a term denoting respect) was born on October 2, 1869 in Porbandar, India. He has become one of the most respected spiritual and political leaders of the 20th century. Gandhi helped India liberate itself from colonial
English rule through active nonviolence and is honored by his people as the Father of the Nation. But Gandhiji wanted more for his country than independence. 

When he was 13 years old, Gandhi was married to Kasturba, a girl his age. It was a marriage arranged by his parents. Gandhi and Kasturba had four children. Gandhi studied law in London and returned to India in 1891 to practice his profession. In 1893, he accepted a one year contract to work as a lawyer in South Africa. At the time, South Africa was under British rule. When he tried to claim his rights as an English citizen, he was attacked and beaten and soon he came to see that all Indians suffered the same treatment. Gandhi remained in South Africa for 21 years, fighting for Indian rights. He developed a method of social action based on the principles of courage, nonviolence (ahimsa) and truth, called satyagraha. Satyagraha promoted nonviolence and civil disobedience as the most appropriate methods to reach political and social goals. Moral strength is the major resource of nonviolence and thus it requires an incredible amount of self-control. Gandhi believed that the weapons of satyagraha are found within us.

In 1915, Gandhi returned to India. In 15 years he became the leader of the Indian nationalist movement. Using the principles of ahimsa and satyagraha, he led the campaign for Indian independence against the British. Gandhi was arrested numerous times by the British due to his activities in South Africa and India. He thought it was honorable to go to jail for a just cause. Throughout his life he spent a total of 249 days in South African jails and 2089 days in Indian jails (Sethia, p.8). All together, he spent almost seven years in prison because of his political activities. Gandhi fasted many times to move people to the need of being nonviolent. His mother’s fasts when he was a child had left a profound impression on him (Sethia, p. 12).

India gained its independence in 1947 and was divided into two countries, India and Pakistan. This led to confrontations between Hindus and Muslims. Gandhi had fought for a united India where Hindus and Muslims would be able to live in peace. On January 13, 1948, at the age of 78, he began a fast in order to end the continuous bloodshed. After 5 days, leaders of both Hindus and Muslims agreed to stop the fighting and Gandhi stopped his fast. Twelve days later, he was assassinated by a Hindu fanatic who opposed Gandhiji’s belief of tolerance towards all beliefs and religions. Albert Einstein said of Gandhi: “Generations to come will scarce believe that such a one as [Gandhi] ever in flesh and blood walked upon this earth.”

For Gandhi, nonviolence was not passivity or submission against the enemy but rather a “supreme virtue of the brave” (CW 31, 1926, p. 292). Violence equated to fear and nonviolence equated to courage, the fight against injustice and the search for Truth. Gandhi claims, “nonviolence and cowardice are contradictory terms. Nonviolence is the greatest virtue, cowardice the greatest vice. Nonviolence springs from love, cowardice from hate (CW 42, 1929, p. 73). For Gandhi, to be nonviolent requires courage and the person who is void of courage cannot be nonviolent. Gandhi was committed to non-violence. "I know only one way," he writes, "that of ahimsa" (CW 37, 1928, p. 338).

Indubitably, Gandhi’s major act of nonviolence was the Great Salt March. In December of 1929, Gandhi and the Indian National Congress passed a resolution in favor of Indian independence (Sethia, p.155). If they were not granted the status, they would proceed with a nation-wide protest against British taxes. There were many taxes imposed by the British, but Gandhi chose the salt tax which symbolized British exploitation of the poor. To understand why the salt tax was so oppressive, we need to understand a little about India’s climate and culture. India’s hot weather causes the body to sweat, thus ridding it of the necessary salt. Further, Indians do not eat much meat, which is a natural source of salt, so they must compensate by adding salt to their diet. Salt is indispensable to the human diet and used in everyday cooking.
Granting a mineral which everyone needed for survival was one way that the British kept India under their oppression (McGrath, 2009). According to British law, Indians could not produce salt; rather they were obligated to buy it from British shops. Gandhi came up with this idea between the months of March and April of 1930 in order to defy the British government. Unlike many leaders, Gandhi was extremely candid about informing his opponents of his plans in the hope of collaboration. On March 2, 1930 in a much publicized letter to the viceroy, Lord Irwin, who he addresses as “Dear Friend” (Sethia, p.157), Gandhi informs him of his plans for civil disobedience.

But if you cannot see your way to deal with those evils and my letter makes no appeal to your heart, on the eleventh day of this month [March 11], I shall proceed . . . to disregard the provisions of the salt laws. I regard this tax to be the most iniquitous of all from the poor man’s standpoint. As the independence movement is essentially for the poorest in the land, the beginning will be made with this evil. (SWMG-V5: 189)

The Great Salt March was motivated by the excessive taxes that the British placed on the Indians. Gandhi understood that he could defy the British government’s monopoly on salt. On March 12, 1930, he decided to march from Sabarmati, northern India to the city of Dandi on the Indian Ocean. Seventy-eight of his followers accompanied him. The march covered 240 miles and took 23 days. During the march, he stopped in villages to convince government officials to resign in protest and to encourage people to pledge nonviolence. Each night they slept in the open and asked people for simple food and a place to rest and wash. Many people joined him along the way. At some point, the procession reached two miles in length.

When Gandhi initially began his march with his 78 followers, there was a crowd of over 100,000. Reporters were rampant. Instead of crossing Ellis Bridge, a British-made bridge over the Sabarmati River, he waded across the river. After walking about 11km, he asked the crowd to return home (Weber, 1997).

On March 13, he reached Bareja, a city with a large Christian and Muslim population. Here he asked both Christians and Muslims to come together. As a child, Gandhi had been exposed by his father to tolerance for all faiths. On March 15, upon reaching Dabhan, he went straight to the untouchables quarters where he drew water from the well and bathed. These actions had many implications. First, the caste Hindus were caught in a predicament. Should they follow him to the untouchables’ quarters or risk being disrespectful to their distinguished guest? Secondly, the fact that he drew his own water rather than have a servant do this served to demonstrate the kind of India he envisioned. The Salt March was replete with such examples. In his speech at Dabhan, he asked the people to give up their government jobs, wear khadi and join the salt satyagraha. Similarly on March 17 in Anand, he addressed students, asking the them to postpone their studies until India had achieved its independence (Spakbacken, 1999).

On March 23, in his speech at Buva, Gandhi addressed the crowd by asking them why they were afraid of the British government. He continued by saying that although he had spoken strongly and had set out to break the law, he had not been arrested (Spakbacken, 1999). The British had not arrested Gandhi because they thought that the idea of marching and preaching along the countryside about an insignificant tax would result in an embarrassing gaffe.

When reaching Ankleshwar on March 26, he spoke to the crowd about the injustice of the salt tax. “One can understand the Government levying a tax on ghee. Liquor or cigarettes can also be taxed. But this Government levies a duty on an item which is consumed by the poorest
of the poor. We are lucky, at any rate that there is no tax on the air we breathe!” (Spakbacken, 1999).

Gandhi was 61 when he undertook the March. His rheumatism began acting up early in the March and he was under extreme pain; nonetheless, he continued using two of the youngest marchers as his support. A pattern gradually emerged from the March. Walking was done in the morning, followed by lunch and meetings in the host village. In the evening, Gandhi would continue to the next host village for dinner, more speeches and sleep. Evening prayers were said at 7pm and morning prayers at 4am, regardless of the circumstances. Villagers from the host village would accompany the marchers halfway to the next village where they were met by a welcoming party from the next village (Weber, 1997).

Gandhi realized that some of the marchers could not keep up with the pace. He decided that Mondays would be days of rest and for him this also meant a full day of silence. He also reminded his followers that they must adhere to the dietary discipline of the ashram so as not to burden their hosts with lavish meals.

On the ninth day of the March, upon reaching the village of Gajera, four to five thousand people waited to listen to Gandhi. A dais had been erected for Gandhi to speak. People waited and waited, but Gandhi would not begin. Then he said, "This meeting has not yet started.... Either you invite the untouchables and my volunteers to sit freely among you or I'll have to address you from the hill where they are sitting." (Weber, 1997, p.206-207). Eventually the untouchables were invited into the main audience and Gandhi pointed out the irony that the caste villagers were treating those literally outcasted the same way that they themselves were being treated by the British. By welcoming the untouchables into their midst, Gandhi told the listeners that they had taken the first step towards true freedom (Weber, 1997).

On April 5, Gandhi and his followers reached Dandi. They were greeted by a crowd of over 50,000 people. After saying his prayers, Gandhi picked up a handful of salt and broke British law. Others immediately followed. Mass salt gathering and production by boiling sea water had commenced, and soon had spread to much of the country. Within a year, over 70,000 people were imprisoned, including Gandhi.

Although the salt laws were not repealed and freedom did not come to India for another 17 years, the Salt March did have its success. Because of the enormous amount of press, the world came to see the moral legitimacy of India’s struggle. For the first time in history, the British government was forced to speak and negotiate on equal terms with the leader of a subject nation. Because many women could relate to the unjust salt taxes, they were inspired to join the political movement and marched alongside men. But most importantly, the Salt March was about empowerment. Thousands of Indians realized that they had an inner strength that had not been tapped into. They realized that they were stronger than they thought and the British Empire was weaker than they had imagined.

When Gandhi began his Salt March, he did not have a set of speeches ready for each village he passed through. The speeches that he delivered along the way were not about salt, the British or independence, but about social matters. It appears that what happened to him in a particular village during the day often prompted the subject matter that he would speak on, a subject more important than some distant political independence.

Gandhi’s life was characterized by courage, humility, simplicity, and most notably perseverance. He dressed in a loin cloth, or dhoti, in solidarity with the many Indians who were so poor they could not properly clothe themselves. He spent his life, fighting not just for the political transformation of India, but for a social transformation as well. He fought to eliminate
the caste of the untouchables; he fought for a united India; and he fought for swaraj, or self-rule. But his fight was a nonviolent fight. Through the force of nonviolence, he shook the foundation of the most powerful empire of Europe. Nonviolence embodies so many virtues: love, compassion, self-discipline, forgiveness. Yet, it must come from within. Ahimsa has to be internalized. Compassion must come from within us. For Gandhi, nonviolence combined truth, love, and the refusal to cause harm into a force that could overcome the most brutal violence and oppression.

As you begin a new chapter in your lives and enter high school, I would like us to reflect on our everyday life. Are there things that we do that reflect nonviolence? How could we improve? If Gandhi was able to conquer the British Empire through nonviolence, what can you conquer this first year of high school? What can I as your teacher? Can we start with ourselves? You are not alone; you will have an army of satyagrahis (peace soldiers) to help and encourage you, including myself. And in case you forget, we will have the Instructions to Satyagrahis that Gandhi provided his satyagrahis posted on our wall. Remember they received years of training! You will have at least four years of it. Are you ready to begin to change our world today? Will you be the one? Will we all?

* satya is truth, which equals love and agraaha is firmness or force. Satyagraha, therefore, means truth force or love-force. Truth and love are attributes of the soul; hence Satyagraha is another word for soul-force.

Bibliography:

‘CWMG’ refers to The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi. The number after CW refers to the volume, the following date is the year of the quotation, and the page number follows.


Teaching Activities/ Materials Needed:
1. The students will view the Digital Story, which serves as an introduction to the theme of nonviolence.
2. The teacher will then present the powerpoint Gandhi: A Pictorial Biography to introduce the students to Gandhi.
3. Students will read and discuss Discovering Gandhi and the Salt Satyagraha.
4. The teacher will project the Salt March route map and assign each student a city along the route to research. http://allinthepast.files.wordpress.com/2011/03/map-saltmarch.jpg
5. The teacher will show the following clip of the Salt March.
6. The students will sketch a physical map of India and label the cities on the route.
7. The students will research the geography of their assigned city, both now and then.
8. Using Google Earth, the students will create a Google Lit Trip, bookmarking each of the cities along the route. On the bookmark, the student must post:
   - a picture or video
   - a brief account of Gandhiji’s address to the multitudes.
9. The students will share their accounts with the class and discuss the principles of nonviolence used by Gandhi.