Title of Lesson: Gandhi’s Salt March: Nonviolence in Action
Lesson By:
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Grade Level/ Subject Areas: 9/10 Global History/ ESL

Class Size: 28

Time/Duration of Lesson: Two lessons: 65 minutes each

Guiding Questions:
1. How have people (groups or individuals) responded to colonialism?
2. Why was Gandhi’s march to the sea important to his movement for independence?
3. Do you think Gandhi’s nonviolent protest to the Salt Tax was effective?
4. How did overcoming obstacles help Gandhi to create a philosophy?

Lesson Abstract:
This lesson offers students an opportunity to explore Gandhi’s Salt March as one example of a response to colonialism. Students will begin by familiarizing themselves with the march as an event, who was involved and how the protest was carried out. They will also explore nonviolence as a strategy for change and will analyze Gandhi’s use of this strategy.

Lesson Content:

Mohandas Gandhi was a key figure in India during the early 20th century. His influence spanned both, political and spiritual arenas. His earliest attempts at political activism took place in South Africa in the late 1800’s where he began working as a lawyer. As South Africa gained economic footing, many immigrants entered the country, specifically in large numbers from South Asia. The Afrikaners, led by Jan Smuts, aimed to limit the power of Indians. Smuts led efforts to limit employment rights, register workers with the government and establish unfair taxes. During Gandhi’s time in South Africa, he founded the Natal Indian Congress and began a campaign of nonviolence in order to obtain more rights for Indians in South Africa. He adopted a practice of satyagraha, or the pursuit of the truth. Numerous times, Smuts had Gandhi and his followers jailed. However, Gandhi’s faithfulness to nonviolence and persistence in working to change Smuts’ opinions later came to represent his ability to expect the best of his enemies. In 1914 after successfully completing the “Great March of Satyagrahis”, the Gandhi-Smuts agreement was reached, providing more rights and fewer restrictions against Indians in South Africa (most notably an annulment of a tax placed on indentured servants and a validation of non-Christian marriages.) However, biographer Louis Fischer notes that, “Above all it was a victory for the Soul Force” (Fischer 48). Gandhi defined Soul Force by explaining:

Truth (satya) implies love, and firmness (agraha) engenders and therefore serves as a synonym for force. I thus began to call the Indian movement Satyagraha, that is to say, the Force which is born of Truth and Love or non-violence, and gave up the use of the phrase “passive resistance”, in connection with it, so much so that even in English writing we often avoided it and used instead the word...
In 1915 Gandhi returned to India and turned his attention toward the struggle to liberate India from England’s colonial rule. His campaign was grounded in the use of Soul Force and Ahimsa (nonviolence). One of his first protests was in defense of the rights of indigo workers who had been coerced into growing indigo on their land and were then required to turn profits over to the British. England’s official presence in India began in 1600 with the establishment of the British East India Company. The Company drove the expansion of the British Empire into Asia, and by 1757 the Company had taken over the country. The undoing of such was a complicated task. For 15 years he led various protests, wrote for numerous newspapers, was arrested many times, established several ashrams in order to train his followers in the ways of nonviolence and put his nonviolent strategies into practice in order to address a host of concerns. From his Sabarmati Ashram he led a strike in defense of inadequately paid textile workers; he established boycotts of foreign-made goods and pursued swadeshi (homemade products); he tried to encourage cooperation between Hindus and Muslims despite a fiery relationship that had been fanned by the British in order to break down power in the country.

By 1928 the struggle for independence had escalated and India was experiencing tremendous unrest. Several new leaders such as Subhas Chandra Bose and Jawaharlal Nehru offered strategies to deal with the conflict that promised fast results despite the potential for violent action. However, Gandhi remained firm in his advocacy of civil disobedience. When asked, “What would be your attitude toward a political war of independence?” Gandhi replied, “I would decline to take part in it. Today I am teaching the people how to meet a national crisis by nonviolent means” (Fischer 94). When a Round Table Conference in 1929 produced disappointing results, Gandhi decided that it was time to take more aggressive action.

To further his cause, Gandhi decided to exploit the relationship that Indians had to salt. He decided that he would lead a march from his Sabarmati Ashram located in the interior of India to Dandi on the West coast with the intention of illegally taking salt once he arrived. This protest took place from March 12 to April 6, 1930 and became known as the Salt March or Salt Sagrayaha. This action, along with a campaign against the state monopoly on salt, served as the focal point of a national civil disobedience movement.

The history of salt production in India dates back thousands of years. Marshlands on the West coast in Gujarat that stay covered with water during rainy season become sources of salt crust when waters evaporate in the winter. Similarly, salt beds on the east coast in Orissa, create salt when they are flooded during spring tides. It is worth noting that the taxation of salt had existed for some time. The Maurya and Mughal empires both taxed salt, neither of which created a hardship on the people. As the British East India Company gained more influence and power, salt became a primary topic of concern and source of income for British colonizers. As early as the mid 18th century under the leadership of Robert Clive, the Company began meddling with the price of salt in India. Roy Moxham notes that:

In thirty years, therefore, the Company had forced up a sporadically collected minor tax into one that was ruthlessly collected at a punitive rate. The wholesale price of salt increased from 1.25 rupees to about 4 rupees a maund. To this wholesale price, of course, the profit of the retailer and the cost of transport had
to be added. All this occurred at a time when famine and unemployment swept Bengal; when hugely increased land rents were extorted by the Company; and when an agricultural labourer’s wage were, if he were employed, 1 or 2 rupees a month. (Moxham par. 20)

By the early 1800’s, it was of primary concern that British salt could no longer compete with the inexpensive and abundant Orissa salt. It was on November 1, 1804 that Orissa salt became a British monopoly by reclamation. Not only was the private sale of salt prohibited, but those who had salt in their possession were required to sell it to the government salt department immediately at a fixed price. Within ten years, it became illegal for salt to be manufactured by anyone other than the government. Indians were upset, and the clandestine production of salt became commonplace. Checkpoints and walls were built to prevent the export of contraband salt from Bengal. “The people of Orissa were forbidden from any activity connected with salt. Even scraping salt off the surface of the flats was a severely punishable offence” (Singh par. 21). In 1923 a bill was passed doubling the Salt tax. In essence, Indians were forced to buy salt that they couldn’t afford. At the time that Gandhi decided to take action, it was illegal for Indians to sell or produce salt, allowing for a complete British monopoly.

Gandhi’s reasons for choosing salt as an issue of protest were symbolic as well as practical. He pointed out that the salt tax placed a burden on peasants equal to three days’ income a year. Because of working in the fields, salt was the one thing that poor men needed more of than rich men. Additionally, salt represented the common man. Since salt is necessary in everyone’s daily diet, everyone in India was affected.

Interestingly, Gandhi began his protest by writing a letter to the Viceroy explaining his intentions. Gandhi claimed that, “any secrecy hinders the real spirit of democracy” (Fischer 96). Gandhi always placed emphasis on negotiation and, in this case, communicated with the Viceroy in one last attempt to reach an agreement prior to the march. In the letter he explains his grievances, cites various injustices within the current system and lays out his plans for the march. He goes so far as to detail his intentions to disregard the Salt Laws and acknowledges that it is within the Viceroy’s power to arrest him prior to the march. The Viceroy neither responds to the letter, nor arrests Gandhi.

On March 12, 1930 Gandhi and 78 male members of the ashram set out on foot to march toward the sea. This group of men were well-trained in the principles of Satyagraha and had entered into a joint pledge that included three parts: prayer, spinning and keeping a diary. They were also well aware of their role as propagandists and wore uniforms that included the headwear of prisoners. Thanks to the presence of numerous foreign newspaper reporters, the world watched and followed Gandhi’s journey. The men marched for 24 days, sometimes covering as much as 15 miles a day. Gandhi, 61 years old at the time, relied only on a cane for assistance and continued to spin and write every day. As they marched from village to village, people cheered in support, displayed national colors and often escorted the marchers onto the next village. By the time they reached the sea on April 5, the group had grown to several thousand. Fischer notes:

Had Gandhi gone by train or automobile to make salt, the effect would have been considerable. But to walk two hundred and forty-one miles in twenty-four
days and rivet the attention of all of India…and then to pick up a palmful of salt in publicized defiance of a mighty government, that required imagination, dignity and the sense of showmanship of a great artist. (Fischer 99)

Gandhi’s action served as a signal for others to do the same. Following the march, the peasants followed suit by collecting and producing salt illegally as well as selling it in cities. Mass arrests were made. Gandhi himself was arrested on May 4th. In total, over 50,000 people were arrested for breaking salt laws. The entire protest was carried out by using nonviolence. The English journalist Webb Miller witnessed a second incident, known as the Dhrasana Satyagraha, when thousands of protesters advanced on the Salt Works of Dhrasana. He notes, “Not one of the marchers even raised an arm to fend off the blows. They went down like ten-pins” (Fischer 101).

The Satyagraha against the salt tax continued for almost a year. While it did not result in the abolition of the Salt Acts, it did serve to achieve two important things. First, it created awareness among the British of the fact that they were acting as an oppressive force against Indians. The Dandi March and the Dharasana Satyagraha brought worldwide attention to the Indian independence movement through extensive newspaper coverage. More importantly, it energized and motivated Indians to continue the pursuit of freedom through nonviolent means. The simplicity and honesty of their actions had left the British defenseless, and Indians now knew that they had discovered a force more powerful than England’s batons and rifle butts. The rest was only a matter of time.

New York State Content Standards:
NY State Social Studies Standard 2 (World History): Students will use a variety of intellectual skills to demonstrate their understanding of major ideas, eras, themes, developments and turning points in world history and examine the broad sweep of history from a variety of perspectives.

Materials Needed:
- Journals
- Jigsaw handout
- Chart paper, markers
- Collaborative dialogue handout
- Laptop, LCD projector
- Debate handout

Suggested Teaching Activities:
Day One
- Journal write: something you would be willing to protest about today
- Read adapted story of Salt March in jigsaw format
- Create collaborative dialogues (work in groups with chunks of text)
- Optional add-on: create new ending to story
**Day Two**

- Powerpoint review (explicit presentation of facts)
- Showing of documentary: *A Force More Powerful* (Salt March segment)  
  http://www.aforcemorepowerful.org/
- Mini-debate- Was the Salt March effective?

**Bibliography:**


