

MAHATMA GANDHI: A LIFE IN THE SERVICE OF HUMANITY

By Pradip Jain FRPSL

This October will mark the 150th birth anniversary of Mahatma Gandhi, the Indian lawyer turned social activist who championed the cause of liberty and freedom through the means of non-violence. Pradip Jain looks back on the life of a man who, through the practice of *satyagraha* or non-violent resistance, would lead India into independence and be named *Bapu* – the Father of the Nation.

The year 2019 marks the 150th birth anniversary of Mahatma Gandhi (1869–1948), the civil rights activist who led India into independence and set an example for others to walk on the path of non-violence and passive resistance to reach their ends. Postal administrations from all over the world are honouring this great personality, revered in India as *Bapu* – the Father of the nation, by issuing commemorative postage stamps to celebrate the anniversary (Fig 1).

A man of enormous courage, principle, faith and determination, Mahatma Gandhi became one of the most important and recognisable figure of the 20th century, thanks to his peaceful yet powerful philosophy of *ahimsa* (non-violence). Today, when violence is spreading in the name of religion, caste and community, Gandhi's ideology of non-violence has probably never been more relevant.

The importance of Gandhi's ideology of non-violence has been celebrated by numerous institutions, not least the United Nation, which represents more than 200 countries of the world. In 2007, the UN declared 2 October, Gandhi's birthday, to be observed as International Day of Non-violence. The UN issued its first commemorative cachet for the day in 2007 and its first stamp in 2009 – featuring non-other than Gandhi himself (Fig 2). Since then many other countries have joined hands to honour this day.

Early life

Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi was born on 2 October 1869 in the small coastal town of Porbandar in the erstwhile state of Gujrat, India (Fig 3). His father, Karamchand, was *deewan* (prime minister) of Porbandar and his mother, Putlibai, was a religious woman who was well informed with matters of

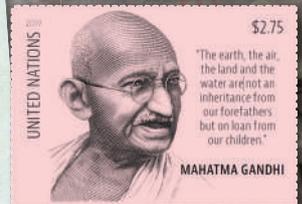
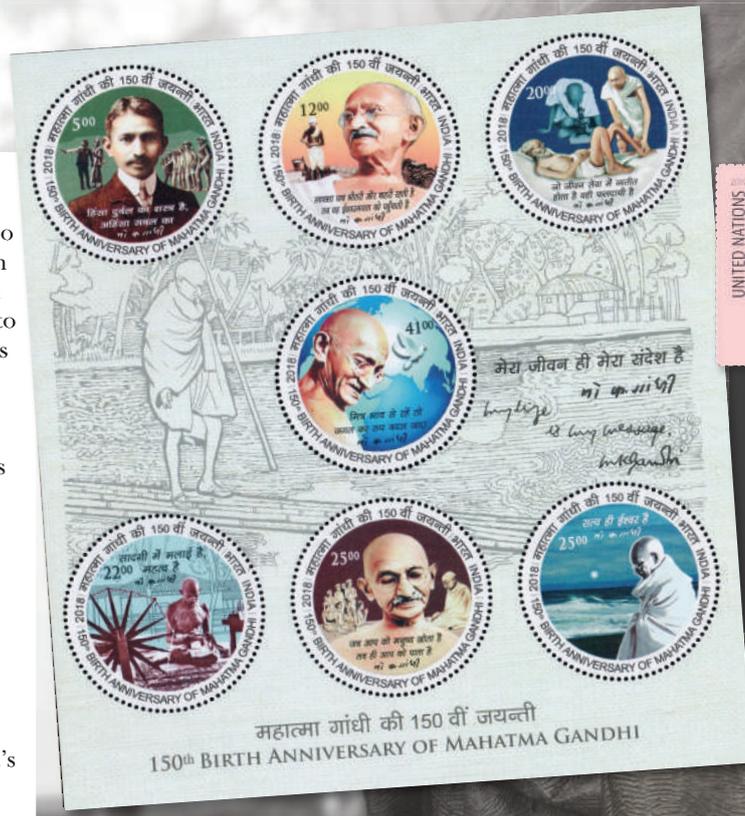


Fig 1 Postal administrations from all over the world will be marking the 150th anniversary of Mahatma Gandhi, which takes place in October

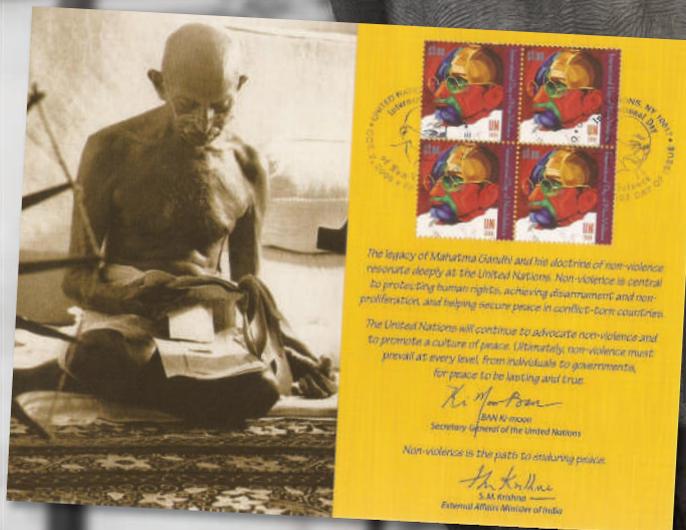


Fig 2 An f.d.c. featuring the UN's first International Day of Non-violence commemorative stamp issue released in 2009 (Reduced)

state. At the age of seven, the family moved to Rajkot where Mohandas completed his primary and high school education (Fig 4).

As was then normal in Indian society, in 1882, at the age of 13, Mohandas entered into an arranged marriage with Kasturba, who was of the same age. For both of them,



Fig 3 A commemorative postmark from Porbandar, the birthplace of Mohandas Gandhi



Fig 4 A 1998 issue from Antigua showing Mohandas Gandhi as a seven-year-old schoolboy in Rajkot and a cancel produced by the philatelic bureau in Rajkot in 1995 depicting the high school attended by Gandhi

marriage was nothing more than wearing new clothes, a round of feasts and a strange new companion. This long-lasting relationship only ended with the death of Kasturba in 1944 (Fig 5).

Gandhi was deeply influenced with the doctrines of Jainism, in particular the teachings of Lord Mahavir (599–527 BC), the last spiritual teacher of the Jain religion (Fig 6 and Fig 7). Gandhi was to follow these beliefs throughout his life. Shrimad Rajchandra (Fig 8), a Jain scholar, became both Gandhi's mentor and refuge in times of crisis.

Gandhi the barrister

After completing high school, Gandhi moved to England to study law. During his time in London, he adhered to western culture of lifestyle, such as English food and clothing (Fig 9), and other mannerisms.

After his graduation, he returned to India and started a practice in Bombay, but this was not very successful. In 1893, he sailed to South Africa in response to an offer from an Indian firm, Dada Abdullah & Co., to work as their legal advisor. This was to be the turning point in Gandhi's life and the start of his transformation from Mohandas to Mahatma (Great Soul). Although only contracted to work for one year in South Africa, Gandhi would spend the next 21 years in the country, fighting for the civil rights of Africans and Asians.

Life in South Africa

Gandhi had a difficult start to his life in South Africa. Within two days of arriving he was chastised in a Durban court for his refusal to remove his turban (Fig 10) and was ordered to leave the building. When he complained about his treatment to the local press, a newspaper story referred to him as 'an unwelcome visitor'.

Just a week later, in June 1893, while on his way to Pretoria from



Fig 5 A 1969 issue from India marking the centenary of Gandhi's birth. It depicts Gandhi alongside his wife, Kasturba



Fig 6 A German stamp from 1979 showing a 15th century painting, held in the Berlin State Museum, depicting the Jain teacher Lord Mahavira



Fig 7 A 1986 Indian postmark depicting the five doctrines of Jainism: Truth, Non-Violence, Non-Stealing, Non-Accumulation and Celibacy



Fig 8 Shrimad Rajchandra, a Jain scholar who became both Gandhi's mentor and friend



Fig 10 The 1r. value from the same Mauritius set shows Gandhi wearing a turban. In 1893, shortly after his arrival in South Africa, he was thrown out of a Durban courtroom for refusing to remove his turban



Johannesburg for a court case, Gandhi was forcibly removed from a first-class coach for being a coloured passenger. After objecting, he was thrown off the train at Pietermaritzburg, Natal, where he spent the night in a cold waiting room (Fig 11). This incident was to change the course of Gandhi's life. From that moment, he vowed to fight against racial oppression.



Fig 11 A 1995 South African maximum card (Reduced) showing the railway station at Pietermaritzburg where Gandhi was thrown off a train after refusing to leave a first class carriage. This Indian stamp from 2007 depicts the moment Gandhi was left on the platform

The fight begins

In April 1894, after concluding his work for Dada Abdullah, Gandhi planned to return to India. However, during his farewell party he read about a new law that would deprive Asians of representation in the legislature. The party quickly turned into a working committee and Gandhi decided to extend his stay in South Africa in order to fight against this law alongside other local Indians.

In a petition drive led by Gandhi, over 10,000 signatures were collected in a fortnight. Gandhi took his grievances to Lord Ripon, secretary of state for the colonies, who had the bill temporarily set aside. Unfortunately, this was only a short deferment and the law was later passed.

Determined to keep up the fight, in September 1894 Gandhi applied for permission to practice law in the Natal Supreme Court. The Natal Law Society objected his application based on his race and colour, but his application was later accepted by the chief justice. Later that year, Gandhi founded the Natal Indian Congress to carry on the work against discriminatory legislation.

In this period, Gandhi worked hard on behalf of Indian settlers, many of whom were illiterate and knew little about the few rights they had. He battled for labour rights and immigration issues for indentured workers across South Africa, organising walkouts and strikes in mines (Fig 12). By now, Gandhi had become a renowned Indian figure in South Africa.



Fig 12 A 1997 stamp from the Marshall Islands depicting Gandhi with Indian protesters in South Africa



Fig 13 The 15c. value from the 1969 Mauritius set showing Gandhi as a Stretcher Bearer in the Indian Ambulance Corps, which he founded

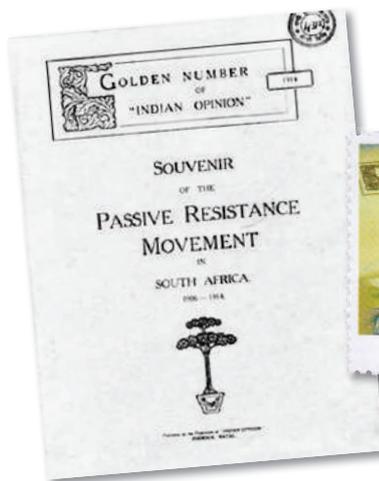


Fig 15 A 1913 postal stationery cover (Reduced) addressed to M K Gandhi, Manager of the *Indian Opinion*, which was now based in Phoenix, Natal. The cover bears a 1d. Transvaal Postage Due and 1d. additional tax mark. This is the only recorded cover addressed to Gandhi during his stay in Phoenix, Natal, as the manager of the *Indian Opinion*



Fig 14 A front page of the weekly *Indian Opinion* newspaper, which was established by Gandhi in 1903. A copy of the paper is also shown in a 2015 issue from India



Military service

During the Second Boer War (1899–1902), Gandhi organised and led the Natal Indian Ambulance Corps (Fig 13). He served in Estcourt from 19 December 1899 until the Indian Ambulance Corps was disbanded on 28 January 1900, following the arrival of the British Red Cross. For his service Gandhi was awarded the Queen's South Africa campaign medal.

Later in 1900, Gandhi temporarily returned to India to take care of his family. While there, in 1901 he attended the session of the Indian National Congress to highlight the plight of Indian people in South Africa.

He returned to Natal in 1903 where he established the weekly newspaper, the *Indian Opinion* (Fig 14). The publication was an important tool for the political movement led by Gandhi and the Natal Indian Congress to fight racial discrimination and win civil rights for the Indian immigrant community in South Africa. In 1904 Gandhi founded the Phoenix communal settlement near Durban and the publishing office was relocated there (Figs 15).

Insistence of truth

In 1907, Gandhi led a passive resistance movement against the compulsory registration of Indians in Transvaal. This was the beginning of *satyagraha* (insistence of truth), which

took the form of peaceful protest through civil resistance (Fig 16). Gandhi travelled over large parts of Africa, gathering Asians for *satyagraha* (Fig 17). Those who took part in the protests were prepared to go to prison rather than to submit to unjust laws. Gandhi himself was imprisoned several times for his part in the protests.

Gandhi's main antagonist in South Africa was General Smuts (Fig 18), Transvaal's colonial secretary. Gandhi was imprisoned three times by Smuts, but did not abandon his principles. The continued protests forced Smuts to set up a commission to investigate Indian grievances. This would ultimately lead to the passing of the Indian Relief Act and in 1914 Gandhi suspended his passive resistance movement. This major victory paved the way for Gandhi to return to India.

Whilst a prisoner in a Johannesburg jail, Gandhi had made a pair of sandals with his own hands. He gifted those sandals to Smuts before sailing to India. Smuts admitted on an occasion – 'I have worn these sandals for many a summer, even though I may feel that I am not worthy to stand in the shoes of so great a man'.

Return to India

Gandhi finally returned to India in 1915 (Fig 19). Initially he stayed at Kochrab Ashram (Fig 20), which belonged to Jivanlal Desai, a fellow barrister and friend. Initially, he refrained from politics, taking a vow of silence while taking time to understand the present India. By now, Gandhi started living a life as an ascetic. He spent his time taking daily prayer and reading books. He was deeply influenced by Henry David Thoreau's *Civil Disobedience*, an argument for disobedience to an unjust estate. He also exchanged letters with the Russian writer Leo Tolstoy and was greatly influenced by his book *The Kingdom of God is Within You* and his essay *Christianity and Patriotism*. Tolstoy's ideal of 'simplicity of life and purity of purpose' reflected Gandhi's own personal philosophies (Fig 21).

Gandhi eventually joined the Indian National Congress (Fig 22) and in 1916, during the foundation stone laying ceremony of the Benares Hindu University (Fig 23), he gave his first public address in India. During his speech to the gathered students and dignitaries, which included the British Viceroy, he expressed his grief as being compelled to address the crowd in a foreign language.

Join me next month as we continue Gandhi's story, beginning with the first civil disobedience movement launched in India, which is considered to be a vital moment in the history of India's freedom struggle.



Fig 16 Gandhi as a *satyagrahi* protester in South Africa

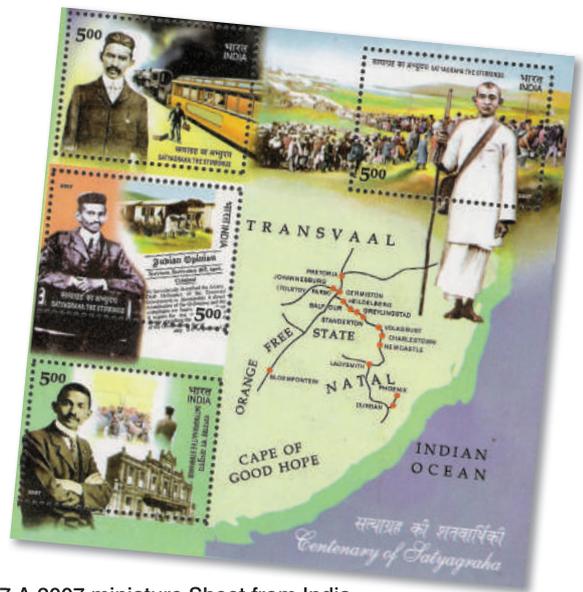


Fig 17 A 2007 miniature Sheet from India marking the centenary of Gandhi's *satyagraha* in South Africa (Reduced)



Fig 18 A 1975 South African stamp depicting Transvaal's colonial secretary, General Smuts, who was Gandhi's main antagonist in South Africa



Fig 19 A 2015 stamp from India marking the centenary of Gandhi's return to his homeland



Fig 20 A pictorial postmark from 1998 depicting the Kochrab Ashram where Gandhi stayed following his return to India

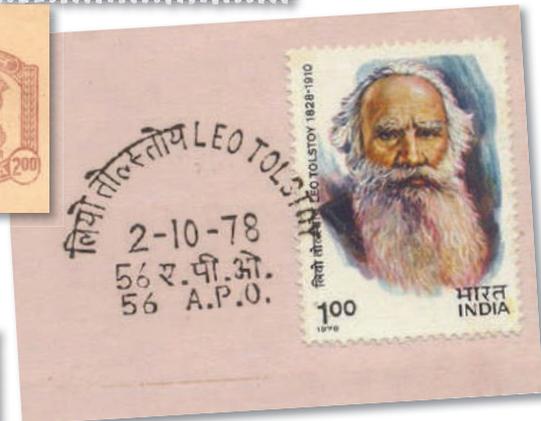


Fig 21 An Indian stamp issued in 1978 to mark the 150th birth anniversary of Leo Tolstoy. The author was a great influence of Gandhi's philosophies

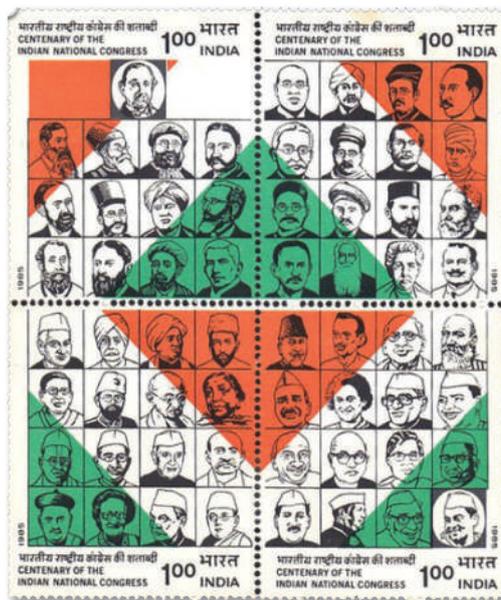


Fig 22 The 1995 issue from India marking the centenary of the Indian National Congress

I believe in Truth and, therefore, I have no doubt in the future... of humanity – Mahatma Gandhi

Fig 23 The Benares Hindu University where Gandhi gave his first public speech in India

