

Human Rights Day Balloon Debate: who is the greatest of the 20th century?

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Peter Townsend

Mahatma Gandhi

Mahatma Gandhi was the originator and most influential exponent of human rights in the 20th Century.

He was born in 1869 into a relatively privileged family – 8 years before Queen Victoria assumed the title of Empress of India. Married off at 13 (he later denounced the “cruel system of child marriage”) he came to question the hierarchical caste structure of Indian society. In 1898, aged 19, he came to study law in London and after being called to the Bar in 1891, returned briefly to India. He found he was clumsy in court and had stage-fright. He retreated into drafting applications and memorials to earn a living. But the chance arose of becoming a legal assistant for a year in South Africa in 1893.

That year marked him for life. Despite having a first class ticket to attend the legal case in Pretoria he was thrown off the train and later thrown out of a horse-drawn coach. He was a coloured “coolie.” He investigated the social and economic conditions of the Indian community and worked to organise and represent them. He helped Hindus, Muslims and Parsis to oppose disenfranchisement in South Africa. He set up the Natal Indian Congress. The nervous Indian barrister turned into the champion of the rights of the downtrodden and oppressed. He quickly became a public figure. He acquired confidence in legal representation, was admitted as an Advocate in the Supreme Court and brought his family to South Africa in 1896. There were hostile and even violent objections for several weeks at the quayside to his return, along with 800 indentured Indian labourers.

In 1899, when the Boer war started, he raised an Indian ambulance corps of over 1000 men and led them in marches and field operations to rescue injured and dead. He pushed through the Indian National Congress a resolution in support of equal rights for 100,000 Indians in South Africa. In the Transvaal, he urged Indians to oppose a new law requiring them to carry permits.

“Satyagraha”, passive resistance or non-violent non-cooperation, became his most powerful weapon. As a consequence he endured further acts of personal violence and periods in prison. He started to call attention to the gifts of low-paid craftsmen. He bought land to set up an agrarian commune.

After leaving South Africa in 1914 he became a pre-eminent political figure. He took initiatives – to seek equality for Harijans or “untouchables,” to argue for the rights of indigo farmers in Bihar, to fast when a wage claim for textile workers in Ahmedabad was unjustly rejected, and to suspend payments of land revenue in areas where peasants were experiencing famine because of the failure of crops in Kheda.

After 1918 he went public about the need for Britain to confer self-rule. But a day of non-violent national strike and demonstrations led to official opposition and the catastrophic Amritsar massacre of 400. India was now set on a collision course against imperial Government. He was jailed for 2 years. Afterwards he set a personal example by touring the country and adopting the spinning wheel and the use of Khadi (hand-spun and hand-woven cloth) as powerful symbols of the revival of cottage industries in India as well as opposition to exploitative industrial Britain.

In 1930, as a test case, Gandhi had the imaginative idea to lead a march for 250 miles to collect sea water to evaporate and turn into salt at Dandi in open defiance of the law imposing a salt tax, widely perceived as a tax on the poor. This symbolic march fired the imagination of the entire nation and 100,000 people went to jail for collecting sea salt and admitting their guilt.

He condemned the oppression of women and of the very poor. He wanted people of different religions to live together. He worked tirelessly against the communal riots and fratricide of 1947, when independence was granted and partition, contrary to his arguments, finally became the reality. A million died in the panic and aggression of migration between Hindu and Moslem areas. Hindu extremists wanted the revival of ancient Hindu India, and objected to Gandhi's advocacy of a single state and his protection of the life and honour of Muslims.

He was assassinated on 30th January 1948. At the end of that year the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was signed by 48 states at the General Assembly of the United Nations. It stands as a memorial to his life's struggle.

Martin Luther King found Gandhi's message about non-violence “electrifying” and used it to good effect in boycotting city buses in Montgomery, Alabama. Nelson Mandela was influenced by Gandhi's achievements for Indians as well as his advocacy of reconciliation and forgiveness between whites and blacks in South Africa. The Roosevelts were deeply influenced by his example in the late 1930s and 1940s. Towards the end of World war II Eleanor was engaged in the preparation of drafts of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

He had a sharp sense of humour. When asked in 1931 in London why he wore a loin cloth only, he said “You wear plus fours, mine are minus fours.” And when asked by a reporter at Buckingham Palace why he dared go to Buckingham Palace in his informal dress to meet the King and Queen he replied with a smile “ The King was wearing enough for both of us.”

Indian independence lit the fuse that prompted the dissolution of the British Empire and the retreat of imperialism from over 60 countries within 20 years.

Gandhi practised human rights as no man or woman has before or since. On the scores of advocacy of the rights of gender, race, religion, age and disability he is unique.

On one occasion he said "I will open the windows of my house to all the religions of the world but I do not intend to be blown down by any one of them."