

## **MAHATMA GANDHI, BEYOND THE MYTH**

A 52' film by Mathilde Damoisel, written with Mira Kamdar



During his life, Mohandas Gandhi was considered to be a spiritual and political icon. He was nicknamed Mahatma, meaning “Venerable”, and Bapu, meaning “Father”. But his assassination on 30 January 1948 turned him into a martyr, sanctifying him as the sacrificed Father of the Nation. **Across the world, far beyond India’s borders, Gandhi embodies the power of nonviolence, the possibility of freeing oneself from oppression without the use of weapons, and a different kind of revolution.**

## THE PARADOX OF THE GANDHI MYTH

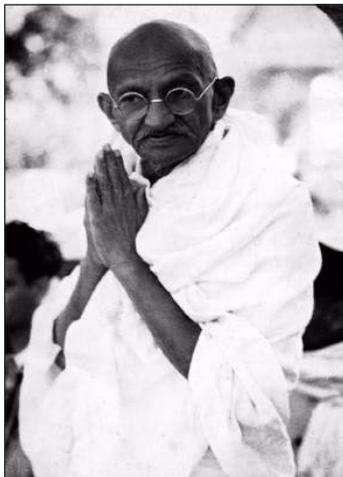
Independent India, to which Gandhi devoted his life, was born out of bloodshed and the partition of the Raj, or the Indian subcontinent, between Hindus and Muslims. Gandhi saw partition as a huge personal failure. Today, it is easy for the Hindu nationalists currently in power in India to seemingly reject the Muslim minority of the country whilst aligning themselves with Gandhi. India has also had to deal with his ambiguities: **Gandhi actively defended the rights of the Untouchables, whilst never questioning the caste system, and even protecting it to some extent.** Over the decades, inequalities have become even more profound and Untouchables are now pariahs.

## THE POWER OF SYMBOLS

The myth of Gandhi was constructed in stages and is closely bound to his commitment to Indian independence, rule of the country having been taken over by Great Britain in the 18th century. What made Gandhi's dedicating to this battle so unique was his unwavering commitment to **Satyagraha or nonviolence.** Gandhi transformed this into an incredibly efficient political strategy to shape the movement into a brand-new kind of non-revolutionary mass struggle and organized some of the most important demonstrations of the century. Each time, he was at the forefront. **He turned himself, physically and mentally, into the symbol of the hopes of a people. All the might of the British Empire could do nothing to stop him.**

## THE MAKING OF THE MYTH

In 1922, when he organized the systematic boycott of British products imported to India, and in particular, textiles produced using Indian cotton, he brought his adversary to its knees in economic terms and started to write his own story. He encouraged every Indian to wear home-spun khadi, which became the uniform of the independence movement, of Gandhi's disciples, and a unifying symbol. **Gandhi used khadi to push his strategy to its limits and to define his own character.**



**Gandhi led by example.** A former rich and westernized lawyer, he now adopted an ascetic life in ashram communities, which he established in remote villages, where he lived surrounded by his faithful followers. He always appeared holding a spinning wheel **and he transformed this simple wooden implement into a formidable political tool, the symbol of self-sufficiency and self-determination.**

## THE FIGHT FOR PUBLIC OPINION AND THE SEDUCTION OF THE WEST

In opting for a nonviolent approach, Gandhi knew that in the eyes of the world, he would be the victor. He had already mobilized Indians to his cause. **Now, all he had to do was to fight the British at home. And in the media struggle that followed, Gandhi had to export his fight.**

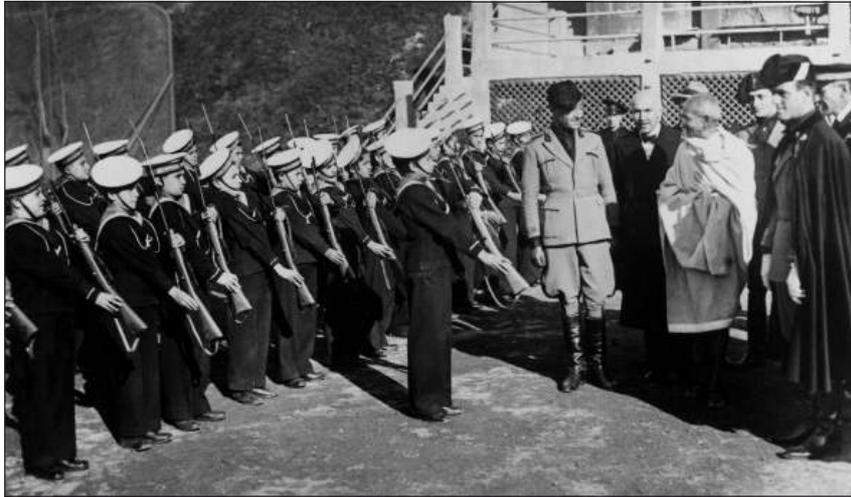
In the fall of 1931, Gandhi went on a major European tour. His motives were primarily political. He had to go to London to negotiate India's political future and its independence. The negotiations would fail, but Gandhi was unaffected. **He knew that his fight was elsewhere.** Scorned by the elites, this small man in a white cotton dhoti was welcomed triumphantly by the working classes in the East End of London and the North of England, broken by the depression that was devastating the West. His message of freedom struck a chord with them, so, in a totally improvised and somewhat chaotic manner, he decided to extend his stay and added some new stops on the route, including Paris, Geneva, and Rome.

**The world's press followed every step of his journey.** For three months, far away from his Indian homeland, Mahatma Gandhi met with the people of Europe. The political fight had been momentarily lost – Indian independence did not happen until 1947. But resolutely, **Gandhi started fighting the war of global public opinion.**



## FASCINATION AND MISUNDERSTANDINGS

Gandhi was scheduled to take a boat to India from the port of Brindisi in Italy, but instead, he headed to Rome. Archive footage shows a painful scene: **We see him visiting the Fascist Youth in their black shirts and touring the city along with dignitaries from the regime.** His pacifist supporters were in turmoil. They did all they could to dissuade him, to caution him against being used, but Gandhi didn't listen. This blinkeredness was repeated a few years later when **Gandhi tried to enter discussions with Hitler, taking the moral high ground to encourage him to renounce his bellicose and bloody projects.** In a missive addressed to German Jews, he advises them to abandon themselves nonviolently to their fate. Gandhi's Satyagraha was radical, sacrificial, and whole. It involved total self-sacrifice. But what could he do in the face of rising Fascist and Nazi threats? **This is also how the myth of Gandhi was shaped in the West, between fascinated hope and profound incomprehension.**



## **A LEGACY OF NON-VIOLENCE**

The legend of Mahatma, the providential “Great Soul,” ended up taking on its own existence, independent of Gandhi and history. Above all, Gandhi was a popular leader, but was also regularly marginalized and contested. Staying away from alliances and political scheming, he left it to others to organize the independence movement and the institutions of the new Indian state. Religious issues, his ambiguity regarding the status of Untouchables or Indian Muslims, and his procrastination regarding the Second World War are all important parts of the mixed legacy of a man whose actions continue to be examined with fascination.

But his legend has continued to inspire many activists seeking a nonviolent struggle against justice and oppression in the world. In that sense, **the myth of Gandhi has endured, beyond India, the man, and his era.**

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