



Gandhi leading his followers on the famous salt march to break the British Salt Laws, March, 1930.



Women played key role during the movement by organising salt making at multiple locations.

91 YEARS OF SALT MARCH

When Gandhi's Salt March Rattled British Colonial Rule

EVAN ANDREWS

Since the late-1910s, Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi had been at the forefront of India's quest to shake off the yoke of British colonial domination, otherwise known as the "Raj." The thin and abstemious former lawyer had led civil disobedience against colonial policies, encouraged Indians to boycott British goods, and had served two years in prison on charges of sedition.

Gandhi's philosophy of "satyagraha," which sought to reveal truth and confront injustice through nonviolence, had made him the most polarizing figure on the subcontinent. While the British regarded him with suspicion, Indians had begun calling him "Mahatma," or "great-souled."

When the Indian National Congress redoubled its efforts for independence in January 1930, many assumed Gandhi would stage his most ambitious satyagraha campaign to date. Yet rather than launching a frontal assault on more high profile injustices, Gandhi proposed to frame his protest around salt.

As with many other commodities, Britain had kept India's salt trade under its thumb since the 19th century, forbidding natives from manufacturing or selling the mineral and forcing them to buy it at high cost from British merchants. Since salt was a nutritional necessity in India's steamy climate, Gandhi saw the salt laws as an inexcusable evil.

Many of Gandhi's comrades were initially skeptical. "We were bewildered and could not fit in a national struggle with common salt," remembered Jawaharlal Nehru, later India's first prime minister. Another colleague compared the proposed protest to striking a "fly" with a "sledgehammer." Yet for Gandhi,

the salt monopoly was a stark example of the ways the Raj unfairly imposed Britain's will on even the most basic aspects of Indian life. Its effects cut across religious and class differences, harming both Hindus and Muslims, rich and poor.

On March 2, he penned a letter to British Viceroy Lord Irwin and made a series of requests, among them the repeal of the salt tax. If ignored, he promised to launch a satyagraha campaign. "My ambition," he wrote, "is no less than to convert the British people through nonviolence and thus make them see the wrong they have done to India."

Irwin offered no formal response, and at dawn on March 12, 1930, Gandhi put his plan into action. Clad in a homespun shawl and sandals and holding a wooden walking stick, he set off on foot from his ashram near Ahmedabad with several dozen companions and began an overland trek to the Arabian Sea town of Dandi. There, he planned to defy the salt tax by illegally harvesting the mineral from the beachside. The 60-year-old expected to be arrested or even beaten during the journey, but the British feared a public backlash and elected not to quash the march.

With Gandhi setting a brisk pace at its head, the column crossed the countryside at a rate of roughly 12 miles per day. Gandhi paused at dozens of villages along the route to address the masses and condemn both the Raj and the salt tax. He also encouraged government workers to embrace his philosophy of noncooperation by quitting their jobs. "What is government service worth, after all?" he asked during a stop at the city of Nadiad. "A government job gives you the power to tyrannize over others."

As Gandhi and his followers inched toward

the western coastline, thousands of Indians joined their ranks, transforming the small cadre of protestors into a miles-long procession. The New York Times and other media outlets began following the walk's progress, quoting Gandhi as he denounced the salt tax as "monstrous" and chided the British for "being ashamed to arrest me."

In addition to lambasting the Raj, Gandhi also used his speeches to lecture on the injustices of the Indian caste system, which labeled the lowest classes "untouchable" and deprived them of certain rights. Gandhi stunned onlookers by bathing at an "untouchable" well at the village of Dabhan, and during another stop in Gajera, he refused to begin his speech until the untouchables were allowed to sit with the rest of the audience.

Gandhi and his party finally arrived at Dandi on April 5, having walked 241 miles in the span of just 24 days. The following morning, thousands of journalists and supporters gathered to watch him commit his symbolic crime. After immersing himself in the sparkling waters of the Arabian Sea, he walked ashore where the beach's rich salt deposits rested. British officials had reportedly ground the salt into the sand in the hope of frustrating Gandhi's efforts, but he easily found a lump of salt-rich mud and held it aloft in triumph. "With this," he announced, "I am shaking the foundations of the British Empire."

Gandhi's transgression served as a signal for other Indians to join in what had become known as the "Salt Satyagraha." Over the next several weeks, supporters across the subcontinent flocked to the seaside to illegally harvest the mineral. Women took on a crucial role. Many boiled water to make salt, and others

sold illicit salt in city markets or led pickets in front of liquor and foreign cloth shops. "It seemed as though a spring had suddenly been released," Nehru later said. Some 80,000 people were arrested in the spree of civil disobedience, and many were beaten by police.

Gandhi was taken into custody on May 5, after he announced his intention to lead a peaceful raid on a government salt works at Dharasana. But even with their leader behind bars, his followers pressed on. On May 21, some 2,500 marchers ignored warnings from police and made an unarmed advance on the Dharasana depot.

American journalist Webb Miller was on the scene, and he later described what followed. "Suddenly," he wrote, "at a word of command, scores of native police rushed upon the advancing marchers and rained blows on their heads...Not one of the marchers even raised an arm to fend off the blows. They went down like ten-pins."

Miller's harrowing account of the beatings circulated widely in the international media, and was even read aloud in the U.S. Congress. Winston Churchill—no great fan of Gandhi—would later admit that the protests and their aftermath had "inflicted such humiliation and defiance as has not been known since the British first trod the soil of India."

Gandhi remained in lockup until early 1931, but he emerged from prison more revered than ever before. Time magazine named him its 1930 "Man of the Year," and newspapers around the globe jumped at any opportunity to quote him or report on his exploits. British Viceroy Lord Irwin finally agreed to negotiate with him, and in March 1931, the two hammered out the Gandhi-Irwin Pact, which ended the satyagraha in

exchange for several concessions including the release of thousands of political prisoners. While the agreement largely maintained the Raj's monopoly over salt, it gave Indians living on the coasts the right to produce the mineral from the sea.

Difficult days still lay ahead. Gandhi and his supporters would launch more protests in the 1930s and 40s and endure even more stints behind bars, and Indian independence would have to wait until 1947—only months before Gandhi was shot dead by a militant Hindu.

But while the immediate political results of the Salt March were relatively minor, Gandhi's satyagraha had nevertheless succeeded in his goal of "shaking the foundations of the British Empire." The trek to the sea had galvanized Indian resistance to the Raj, and its international coverage had introduced the world to Gandhi and his followers' astonishing commitment to nonviolence.

Among others, Martin Luther King, Jr. would later cite the Salt March as a crucial influence on his own philosophy of civil disobedience. Gandhi had sent a simple message by grasping a handful of salt on the beach at Dandi, and millions had answered his call.

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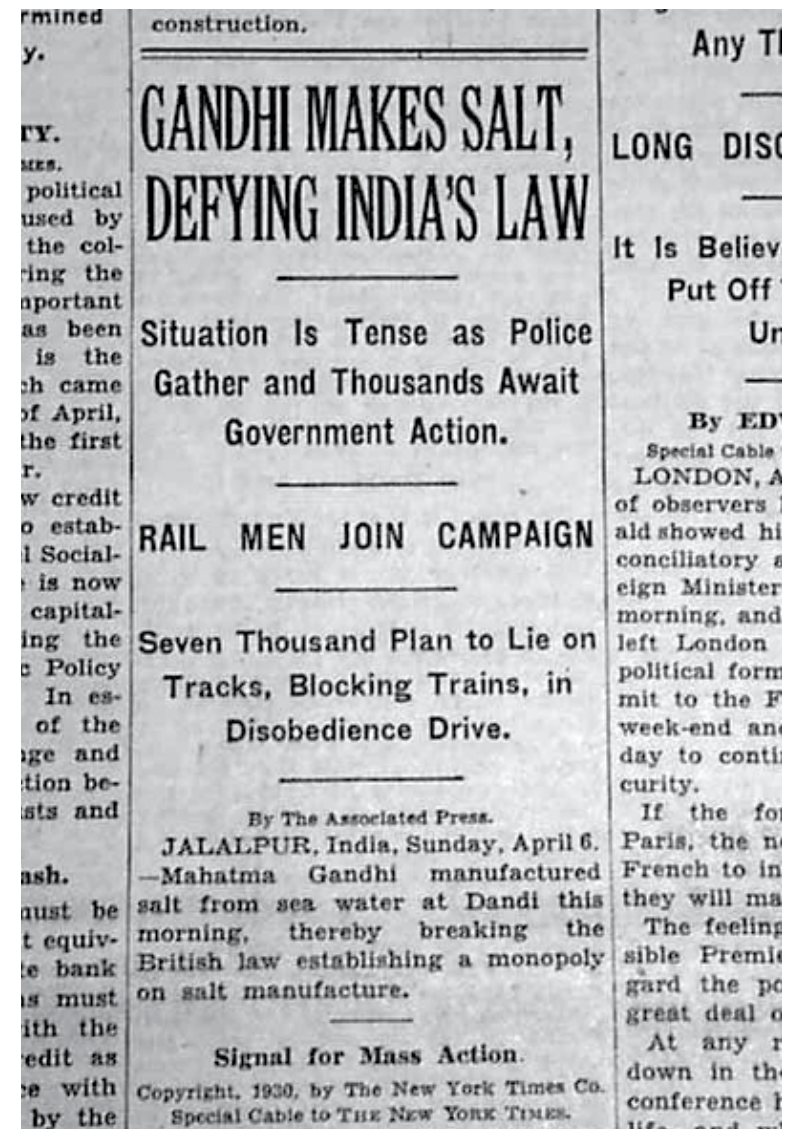
Gandhi at Dandi, South Gujarat, picking salt on the beach at the end of the Salt March, 5 April 1930. Behind him is his second son Manilal Gandhi and Mithuben Petit.



Mahatma Gandhi and Sarojini Naidu during the March.



Gandhi at a public rally during the Salt Satyagraha.



The New York Times report on the Salt March, April 6, 1930.