

# Gandhi's Role in the American Farm Workers' Movement How the Indian Activist Inspired and Agricultural Revolution a World Away

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When Mohandas K. Gandhi, a small unassuming Indian man, was able to drive a revolution that finally freed India from the grip of the British Empire, the world took note. What was so unique about Gandhi's breed of rebellion, and what truly drew international attention, was the fact that this man was able to create a revolution that overtook the massive Indian subcontinent and effectively created a system of democratic rule, all without violence. This was a foreign concept to many and served as proof that large-scale political change could happen in a non-violent manner. Gandhi's responses to the abuses of the British government included peaceful marches, boycotts, and fasting and would go on to inspire many great leaders including Martin Luther King Jr., Richard Gregg, Nelson Mandela, and César Chávez.<sup>1</sup> Chávez was a Mexican-American activist who, especially inspired by the activism of King and Gandhi and by his strong Catholic religion, was able to drive significant change in the agricultural labor system of the United States. As is explained by authors Richard Jensen and John Hammerback, "Chávez could readily compare his fight with powerful agricultural, legal, and political interests to Gandhi's in India," and he used the similarities that he saw to model his own breed of activism after Gandhi's.<sup>2</sup> Chávez was exposed to Gandhi's methods and messages early in life, and this stuck with him. In Chávez's own words, "I was eleven or twelve years old, and I went to a movie. In those days, in between movies they had newsreels, and in one of the newsreels there was a report on Gandhi. It said that this half-naked man without a gun had conquered the might of the British empire. ... It really impressed me because I couldn't conceive of how that had happened without guns. Even though I had never heard the name Gandhi before. . . . since then, I have made a life project of reading about Gandhi and his message."<sup>3</sup> César Chávez was able to successfully adapt Gandhi's approach to the farm workers' movement in the U.S., taking specific influence from his use of fasting, nonviolent demonstrations, and boycotts.

Chávez drew from many aspects of Gandhi's nonviolent resistance when developing his own methods of resistance, and one method that was particularly important to both men was the practice of fasting. Gandhi is well known for his many fasts, which he used on several occasions to discourage violence and as a form of protest. One of his most well-known fasts occurred in 1947, when Hindu-Muslim violence broke out in Calcutta as the result of the split of newly-free India into India and Pakistan. It worked; the violence ceased and Gandhi ate again. He believed that fasting was an extreme act of self control and that, beyond its political power, it strengthened one's moral resolve as well if practiced regularly.<sup>4</sup> It is clear that César Chávez was inspired by Gandhi's fasting because Chávez, too, utilized fasting in similar ways. His first fast took place in 1968 and lasted for twenty-five days in an attempt to discourage violence in his movement to find justice for mistreated migrant workers and to serve penance for violence that had been committed. Just as it worked for Gandhi, Chávez's fast stopped all discussion of violence within the farm workers' movement and drew massive national attention. Chávez was fascinated with the idea of self-sacrifice for the greater good through fasting; in Anne Klejment's *Dorothy Day and César Chávez: American Catholic Lives in Nonviolence*, Klejment explains that "the Mahatma's self-discipline, such as fasting, and accepting suffering oneself without inflicting it on another, likewise resonated with Chávez's faith."<sup>5</sup> This type of suffering for a good cause, as Gandhi had done, seemed to Chávez to line up perfectly with his understanding of his Catholic religion, which emphasized self-sacrifice and non-violence. Chávez himself credited Gandhi with inspiring his several fasts, specifically his first fast. In his "Letter from Delano" to California Grape and Tree Fruit League president E.L. Barr Jr., against whom

1 Joseph Kip Kosek, "Richard Gregg, Mohandas Gandhi, and the Strategy of Nonviolence" in *The Journal of American History*, 1318; Leonard A. Gordon. "Mahatma Gandhi's Dialogues with Americans." in *Economic and Political Weekly*, 341-342 & 350

2 Richard J. Jensen, and John C. Hammerback. "From Farmworker to Cultural Icon: Cesar Chavez's Rhetorical Crusade.", 88

3 Thomas Adam. "Change Through Non-Violence: The Rationalization Of Conflict Solution.", 146

4 Mahatma Gandhi. "Hind Swaraj.", 91

5 Anne Klejment. "Dorothy Day and César Chávez: American Catholic Lives in Nonviolence.", 136

the farmworkers were striking, Chávez shed light on his motivations. “I know and accept my responsibility for preventing, if possible, the destruction of human life and property,” Chávez explained. “For these reasons, and knowing of Gandhi’s admonition that fasting is the last resort in place of the sword, during a most critical time in our movement last February 1968 I undertook a 25-day fast.”<sup>6</sup> Chávez combined Gandhi’s ideas with his own Catholic beliefs, as can be seen in the desire to fast as “penance” for violence within his movement. It is intriguing to consider religion in the cases of both men. While one was Catholic and one was Hindu, they both found that the basic tenets of their religions would support and, in fact, demand non-violent resistance. Gandhi, although he was a devout Hindu, believed in the goodness of all religions and recognized what Chávez also saw; religions of all types can be used to promote non-violence and a strong sense of morality. He saw how Gandhi had been able to keep his movement peaceful by showing his followers that he was willing to sacrifice his own life before he was willing to allow for violence and was inspired to lead in a similar way.

Another aspect of Gandhi’s resistance that inspired Chávez’s nonviolent protests against the unfair treatment of California growers was his nonviolent demonstrations, specifically marches. Gandhi was able to drive great change in India by gathering supporters en masse to peacefully demonstrate and make clear their complaints against the British Raj. His first attempt at a nonviolent demonstration was the public burning of Indian identification cards in South Africa, and he would go on to apply these methods to the movement that would eventually win freedom for India. Most famously, Gandhi protested a British tax on Indian salt by gathering a crowd, tens of thousands strong, to march to the sea and collect Indian salt. The demonstration caused large-scale unrest and ended up winning Gandhi a seat at the bargaining table in discussions about India’s future. The Salt March was a critical step towards Indian independence, and its success would famously go on to inspire Martin Luther King Jr.’s March on Washington. As César Chávez attempted to build a name for his movement, he drew inspiration from both the Salt March and King’s March on Washington. In 1966, he would lead a march from Delano to Sacramento, California to draw the eyes of state politicians, garnering national attention for the farm workers’ movement. Massive numbers of agricultural workers and their supporters rallied behind Chávez, proving that people could get behind a nonviolent movement and make large-scale change. As Chávez explained in his Letter to Delano, “Gandhi himself admitted that if his only choice were cowardice or violence, he would choose violence. Men are not angels, and time and tide wait for no man...Participation and self-determination remain the best experience of freedom, and free men instinctively prefer democratic change and even protect the rights guaranteed to seek it. Only the enslaved in despair have need of violent overthrow.”<sup>7</sup> The march ended up putting the movement on the map and playing a pivotal role in the eventual contract negotiations with farm bosses which would mandate things like fair wages, regulations on things like pesticide use, and contributions to employees’ health plans.

One of the most influential ways in which Gandhi’s nonviolent battle against British colonialism inspired the farm workers’ movement in the United States was the use of boycotts. Gandhi was of the strong belief that Indians should be self-reliant so that they could become independent, so he spearheaded large-scale boycotts of British goods, known as the Swadeshi movement. People all over India refused to purchase British products and turned instead to Indian-produced products. A December 1930 article in the *Voice of India* newspaper defined the movement; “the Indian... boycott, is not only a very effective political instrument, but it is a condition precedent to the development of Swadeshi, the manufacture of our own goods... Political independence, without economic freedom, is a farce”.<sup>8</sup> This movement certainly drew the attention of the British Raj and contributed greatly to the shift towards Britain taking Indian calls for independence seriously. As Chávez created his movement, he looked to Gandhi for inspiration. In Thomas Adam’s analysis of nonviolence, he explains that “inspired by Gandhi’s example and compelled by his Catholic faith, Chávez felt an ethical obligation and general conviction that non-violence was the only acceptable way to change society.”<sup>9</sup> One way to create great change in society without the use of violence was to boycott goods in the style of Gandhi, and this proved hugely effective; soon, large swaths of the American population were protesting against the unfair treatment of

6 César Chávez. “Letter From Delano.” Received by E.L. Barr Jr., 4 Apr. 1969, Delano, CA.

7 Chávez, Letter to Delano

8 *Manchuria, General Situation, 1930*. 1930. [Report]

9 Adam, “Change Through Non-Violence”, 146

agricultural workers by refusing to buy agricultural products from California, driving incredible change in the conditions for the struggling farm workers.

Clearly, Chávez's movement was distinctly inspired by the nonviolent work of Gandhi; he himself said so many times. He took influence from the Indian nationalist in many ways, most importantly through his use of fasting, nonviolent demonstrations, and boycotts, and like Gandhi, Chávez was able to create great and lasting change. Chávez's movement was very much his own, created not exactly in the image of Gandhi but also drawing influence from leaders like Martin Luther King Jr., his devout Catholic faith, and his cultural tradition. As Anne Klejment eloquently explains, in order to "to gain union recognition by the politically powerful growers, [Chavez] would blend Gandhian nonviolence, Mexican-American religious practices, and the home meeting technique."<sup>10</sup> It is important to note the many ways in which Gandhi's movement touched lives not only in India with his support of the Quit India movement but also in movements all over the world. Gandhi proved that nonviolence could be a very effective political tool, and the effects of this created great change beyond India by shaping movements such as the American Civil Rights movement and Chávez's fight for fair treatment of migrant workers. Had a young César Chávez not been inspired by the actions of a "little 'half-naked' man" fighting bravely and tirelessly for the freedom of his country, the condition of agricultural work might look very different today.<sup>11</sup>

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10 Klejment, "American Catholic Lives", 137

11 Adam, "Change Through Non-Violence", 146

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