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Section 4

PRIMARY SOURCE *from Hind Swaraj (Indian Home Rule)*
by Mohandas K. Gandhi

Mohandas K. Gandhi (1869–1948) led India's movement for independence from the British. Gandhi and his followers wanted a greater voice in government and ultimately hoped to gain self-rule. To achieve these goals, Gandhi developed the principle of passive resistance or civil disobedience. The following excerpt, taken from Gandhi's 1909 booklet Hind Swaraj, was written in the form of a dialogue between an editor (Gandhi himself) and an imagined reader. What was Gandhi's passive resistance and how was it used?

Editor: Passive resistance is a method of securing rights by personal suffering; it is the reverse of resistance by arms. When I refuse to do a thing that is repugnant to my conscience, I use soul-force. For instance, the government of the day has passed a law which is applicable to me. I do not like it. If by using violence I force the government to repeal the law, I am employing what may be termed body-force. If I do not obey the law and accept the penalty for its breach, I use soul-force. It involves sacrifice of self.

Everybody admits that sacrifice of self is infinitely superior to sacrifice of others. Moreover, if this kind of force is used in a cause that is unjust, only the person using it suffers. He does not make others suffer for his mistakes. Men have before now done many things which were subsequently found to have been wrong. No man can claim that he is absolutely in the right or that a particular thing is wrong because he thinks so, but it is wrong for him so long as that is his deliberate judgment. It is therefore meet [necessary] that he should not do that which he knows to be wrong, and suffer the consequence whatever it may be. This is the key to the use of soul-force. . . .

Whether I go beyond . . . [the laws] or whether I do not is a matter of no consequence. . . . We simply want to find out what is right and to act accordingly. The real meaning of the statement that we are a law-abiding nation is that we are passive resisters. When we do not like certain laws, we do not break the heads of law-givers but we suffer and do not submit to the laws. That we should obey laws whether good or bad is a new-fangled notion. There was no such thing in former days. The people disregarded those laws they did not like and suffered the penalties for their breach. It is contrary to our manhood if we obey laws repugnant to our conscience. Such teaching is opposed to religion and means slavery. If the government were to

ask us to go about without any clothing, should we do so? If I were a passive resister, I would say to them that I would have nothing to do with their law. But we have so forgotten ourselves and become so compliant that we do not mind any degrading laws.

A man who has realized his manhood, who fears only God, will fear no one else. Man-made laws are not necessarily binding on him. Even the government does not expect any such thing from us. They do not say: "You must do such and such a thing," but they say: "If you do not do it, we will punish you." We are sunk so low that we fancy that it is our duty and our religion to do what the law lays down. If man will only realize that it is unmanly to obey laws that are unjust, no man's tyranny will enslave him. This is the key to self-rule or home-rule. . . .

Passive resistance is an all-sided sword, it can be used anyhow; it blesses him who uses it and him against whom it is used. Without drawing a drop of blood it produces far-reaching results. . . .

Passive resistance cannot proceed a step without fearlessness. Those alone can follow the path of passive resistance who are free from fear, whether as to their possessions, false honor, their relatives, the government, bodily injuries or death. . . .

from M. K. Gandhi, The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi, Vol. X (Ahmedabad: Navijivan Press, 1963), 18-21, 36-38, 48-49, 51-53. Reprinted in Peter N. Stearns, ed., Documents in World History, Vol. II (New York: Harper Collins, 1988), 154-156.

Research Option

Using Research in Writing

Research the career of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., the African-American civil rights leader whose ideas about nonviolent protest were influenced by Gandhi. What was Dr. King trying to achieve? Write a summary to report your findings to the class.