Spinning for India's Independence

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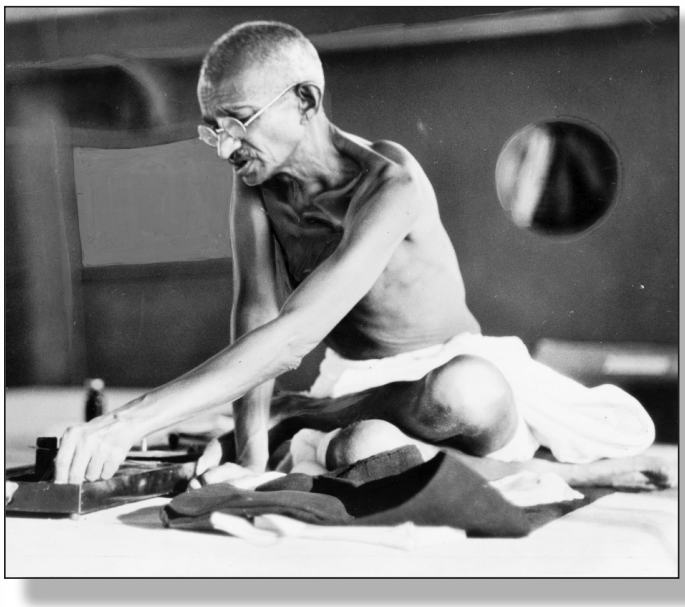

Mohandas K. Gandhi

THIS PHOTOGRAPH OF Mohandas K. Gandhi (October 2, 1869–January 30, 1948), dressed only in a loincloth and working at his spinning wheel on the deck of the SS *Rajputana*, was taken in 1931 as Gandhi traveled to London to attend a high-level roundtable conference with British officials.[1] Gandhi was leader of the Indian National Congress and the major force in its drive for independence. He had already led successful nonviolent civil disobedience and tax resistance campaigns against British rule, culminating in the 250-mile "Salt March" from Ahmedabad to the Indian Ocean at Dandi (March 12–April 6, 1930).[2] After violently assaulting the marchers, the British imprisoned Gandhi and 60 000 supporters. Because of adverse worldwide publicity, the British eventually released Gandhi and in March 1931 negotiated an agreement with him for the release of the remaining political prisoners in exchange for the suspension of civil disobedience. The British invited Gandhi to London in late 1931, supposedly to discuss the transfer of power. The conference disappointed Gandhi but provided him with opportunities to win popular support. In 1930, he had already been declared *Time*'s "Man of the Year"; in 1931, he won over such leading figures in London as George Bernard Shaw, Maria Montessori, and Charlie Chaplin. His every move was followed closely by the press, and after an audience at Buckingham Palace, he was asked if he had felt underdressed. His widely reported comment, expressed with typical Gandhian wit, was, "The king had on enough for both of us."[3(p258)]

Gandhi's manner of dress and commitment to hand spinning were essential elements of his philosophy and politics. He chose the traditional loincloth as a rejection of Western culture and a symbolic identification with the poor of India. His personal choice became a powerful political gesture as he urged his more privileged followers to copy his example and discard—or even burn—their European-style clothing and return with pride to their ancient, precolonial culture.[4] Gandhi claimed that spinning thread in the traditional manner also had material advantages, as it would create the basis for economic independence and the possibility of survival for India's impoverished rural multitudes.[5] This commitment to traditional cloth making was also part of a larger *swadeshi* movement, which aimed for the boycott of all British goods. As Gandhi explained to Charlie Chaplin in 1931, the return to spinning did not mean a rejection of all modern technology but of the exploitive and controlling economic and political system in which textile manufacture had become entangled. Gandhi said, "Machinery in the past has made us dependent on England, and the only way we can rid ourselves of the dependence is to boycott all goods made by machinery. This is why we have made it the patriotic duty of every Indian to spin his own cotton and weave his own cloth."[6(p48)]

The image of the emaciated, almost naked, and obviously nonviolent Gandhi hard at work at his spinning wheel had an electric effect on millions in India and across the world. He was hailed as the father of Indian independence, and starting in 1931, his traditional spinning wheel became the primary symbol on the flag of the Provisional Government of Free India. ■

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