



Gandhi on his famous 1931 Salt March. Image source: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Marche_sel.jpg.

In Search of Gandhi

DIRECTOR, LALIT VACHANI

CINEMA GUILD
DVD, 52 MINUTES, 2007

Reviewed by Keith Snodgrass

Statues of M. K. (Mahatma) Gandhi stand at major crossroads and other locations in almost every city and town in India. Gandhi's face appears on the Indian currency. The inspirational leader of India's independence movement from Great Britain is invoked at numerous opportunities by politicians, business people, social activists, and others, not only in India, but around the world. As many of his current admirers, and most likely he himself would say if he could, what he would have liked to leave to the world was not his image, or his name, or any of the other ephemera of his life cut short by an assassin's bullet in 1948. Rather, he and his admirers might say that his beliefs and philosophy were his most important legacies. Filmmaker Lalit Vachani takes this belief to heart in this fifty-two-minute documentary *In Search of Gandhi*.

Headlines about India in the Western press stress either violence (such as the November 2008 terrorist attacks in Mumbai) or the rise of new, high tech business pursuits, tied to foreign capital and companies in India's numerous metropolises. The Indian media focuses on these issues, as well as on celebrity, gossip, local and national politics, and sports. Political campaigns in India tend to focus on issues of economics, with promises of jobs for constituents, the growth of India's national economy via industrialization, and other pocketbook issues. In all of this commotion, Vachani visited one of India's economically fastest growing states, Gujarat, which is also the birthplace of Gandhi, and the location of his home *ashram*. Traveling the route of Gandhi's famous 1931 Salt March,

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Vachani interviews numerous people about what happened in those locales during the long ago protest movement. He also meets with a few people who knew Gandhi, and one man who claims to be a devout Gandhian, but in the end reveals that he is something quite different.

What these encounters reveal about modern India in general, and Gujarat in particular, is that Vachani's ideal of how Gandhianism should be practiced is missing almost entirely. After encountering many people who tell him that Gandhi's ideals of non-violence and "truth force" (*satyagraha*) will neither function nor allow them to succeed in today's India, Vachani at last locates a small village which seems to be living up to these ideals.

This is a fascinating journey and will be valuable for use in high school and college level courses on history, modern India, or Gandhi. The film assumes some familiarity with Gandhi's life, his work, and with his place in the modern Indian nation state. While it would be possible to usefully show it to students without such background, much of the power of the juxtapositions and contradictions revealed in the film would be lost without some understanding of Gandhi's philosophy of *satyagraha*, his belief in the need for India to remain a nation of villages, and his trust in small level economic activity to provide for the needs of Indians. Some background in Hindu nationalism and the communal riots of 2002 in Gujarat, would also be helpful to students.

The current chief minister of Gujarat, Narendra Modi, is referenced several times in the film, and some limited background about his political philosophy and career are offered, but understanding his place in Vachani's narrative will be greatly enhanced if students are familiar with the issues before viewing the film. *In Search of Gandhi* is one of ten films that make up the *Why Democracy?* series from the Cinema Guild. ■

KEITH SNODGRASS is Associate Director and Outreach Coordinator for the South Asia National Resource Center at the University of Washington. He has been engaged in the study of and teaching about South Asia for over twenty-five years. His main interest is the intersection of religion and politics in India and Pakistan.

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