

Anti-apartheid Icon: Nelson Mandela

The world lost one of the greatest figures of the 20th century in the passing of Nelson Mandela recently. Nelson Mandela has surely been venerated by more millions in his lifetime than any political figure in history. In working to free his country from racial division, he led an essentially peaceful revolution, culminating in his release from prison in 1990 and the post-apartheid election of 1994, which saw him elected as the first president of a democratic South Africa. An avowed Gandhian, Madiba, as Mandela was affectionately known around the world, he always praised Gandhi for his principles of 'Satya and Ahimsa' and followed his philosophy.

His birth, into the royal house of the Thembu people, was central to the man. When Mandela was born at Mvezo, near Umtata, 120 miles north-east of East London, in the native reserve of the Transkei in the Eastern Cape, he was an aristocrat in his small world, even if his first duty, aged five, after the family moved to nearby Qunu, was as a shepherd. At the age of seven, he went to school, the first of his family to do so. On that first day he was given the name of Nelson to answer to; each child had to have English as well as an indigenous name.

In the family tradition, he was groomed to become a counselor to the future king, Sabata. He was sent to a Methodist mission school, Clarkebury, 25 miles south-west of Umtata. At 19, he moved to another Methodist school, Healdtown, in Fort Beaufort, 175 miles south-west of Umtata, and then to nearby Fort Hare University College, at the time South Africa's only black university. Mandela greatly enjoyed university, particularly boxing and athletics, and nursed an ambition to become a civil servant and interpreter about as high a position as a black man might aspire to in those days. But his ambition seemed to be crushed when, in 1940, in his second year, as a member of the student representative council he was expelled for his part in a rebellion over poor quality food.

A cousin introduced him to the future ANC leader Walter Sisulu, then running an estate agency in central Johannesburg who took him to a local law firm. At the office and at Sisulu's home, he began mixing with more radical members of black society.

His first appearance on the political stage came in 1944, with the launch of the ANC Youth League, a ginger group determined to radicalise, or replace, the staid leadership of the ANC. Mandela was a founder executive member.

Then, in 1948, the exclusively Afrikaner Nationalist party won the whites-only general election, and began to institute its policy of apartheid across South Africa. In response, the ANC started looking for alliances with communist and Asian groups to organise civil disobedience campaigns. By then, thanks in large part to the youth league, the ANC had been rejuvenated. Chief Albert Luthuli was president, Mandela his deputy. A measure of his new prominence was that he got his first banning order.

In August of that year, Mandela, having abandoned his LLB but now qualified as an attorney, set up a law partnership with the man who would stand in for him during the long years of imprisonment, Oliver Tambo. But while the two attorneys used their legal know-how to promote their political ends, the failure of conventional campaigning to stop the removal of the black population of the Johannesburg suburb of Sophia town in February 1955 convinced Mandela that the ANC had no alternative but to take up armed resistance: "A freedom fighter

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learns the hard way that it is the oppressor who defines the nature of the struggle, and the oppressed is often left no recourse but to use methods that mirror those of the oppressor.” The political objectives of this new urgency were defined in the Freedom Charter, drawn up over two days in June 1955 by an ANC-led rainbow alliance known as the Congress of the People.

The government, however, pre-empted further action when, in December 1956, it arrested Mandela and 155 other activists for high treason, on the grounds that the charter implied communist revolution. By the time the trial ended a year later, with the remaining 29 defendants acquitted, it had become a platform for the declaration of ANC ideals. Straight after the verdict, Mandela went underground, earning himself a reputation as the “black pimpernel” as he stayed one step ahead of the authorities. In the New Year, Mandela got his first taste of the world outside South Africa, when he went on a whirlwind tour of the continent. Returning home, he was finally captured in August 1962, masquerading as a chauffeur. He was sentenced to three years for incitement, and another two years for leaving the country without a passport. Then, in October 1963, he was brought to court again as the “number one accused” in the Rivonia trial, alongside those ANC leaders arrested at the farm that July, and charged with sabotage.

Released on February 11, 1990, after spending 27 years in jail the following year he was still struggling to keep the mask on hands dug into a trench coat in the public gallery of the Rand Supreme Court, staring impassively as his wife Winnie was pilloried on kidnapping and assault charges. A six-year jail sentence was reduced on appeal to a fine.

Nelson Mandela, who was often dubbed as the 'Gandhi of South Africa', had strong Indian connections and striking similarities with India's 'Father of Nation'. The anti-apartheid icon shared a special bond for India and this was there for the world to see when he chose the land of Gandhi, whom he called his 'political guru' and a "role model", as his first destination abroad in 1990 after spending 27 years behind bars. He was conferred country's highest civilian award, the Bharat Ratna when he visited India in 1990. Madiba received an unprecedented public welcome and was felicitated in Delhi and Calcutta. Mandela was the first non-Indian recipient of Bharat Ratna. In 1995, when he visited India as the first President of post apartheid Africa, Mandela visited Gandhiji's Sabarmati Ashram and said that it was for him a homecoming, a pilgrimage.

He has received more than 250 honours, including the 1993 Nobel Peace Prize, the US Presidential Medal of freedom, the Soviet Order of Leni and the Bharat Ratna.

Mandela may have died at the age of 95 years but in his legacy and his spirit Mandela will always live.

(with inputs from various papers)

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