

Gandhi's Passion, by Stanley Wolpert

reviewed by [Todd Volker](#) in the [October 17, 2001](#) issue

In a cynical and materialistic age, Gandhi will always be seen as hopelessly out of touch: a holy man who is wholly wrong, a man who lacked understanding of the way things work and the way things have to be.

Yet Gandhi's life was a strike against such bone-dry fatalism, and it's the cynics of his time who were proven to be unrealistic. Gandhi liberated India from Britain's heavy and oppressive rule, and he did so by sheer moral force, the force of truth, or "satyagraha."

This book's thesis is that "by re-creating himself, through the power of his passion, in the humble, vulnerable image of India's poorest starving naked millions, Gandhi would . . . call upon that unarmed ragged army, whose pain he mirrored and magnified in his own naked body, to follow him barefoot up India's Via Dolorosa to freedom." Through this demanding transformation, he became India Walking.

And walk he did. The historic walk in 1930 to the salt marshes of Dandi to protest the salt tax loosened the British grip on India and united the country. Thousands accompanied Gandhi. In this and in other protests throughout a long life Gandhi demonstrated the invincibility of truth.

Stanley Wolpert, distinguished professor of South Asian history emeritus at UCLA, presents a succinct account of this grand political and theological achievement. Wolpert is uniquely qualified to do this, having written previous biographies of Jawaharlal Nehru and Muslim leader Mohammad Ali Jinnah. He also joined in the walking, having taken part in the 1957 "Gift of Village" pilgrimages to advance land reform led by Gandhi's disciple Vinoba Bhave.

This accessible account of Gandhi's life is an excellent introduction to the work of the most compelling of 20th-century leaders. Wolpert capably describes all of Gandhi's public work and provides an enlightening look into the relationships between leaders of the Indian National Congress. He does not detail Gandhi's family life and religious philosophy, perhaps because to do so might have made the book ungainly.

Gandhi drew upon eclectic sources, as Wolpert makes clear by including selections of Gandhi's political journalism, which he uses to help us understand important events. They reveal Gandhi as a keen political analyst with a deep understanding of social relationships as well as religious ideas.

Satyagraha was only partly successful in India. Though the large goal of a free India was achieved in 1947, when John Bull went home the country split between Hindus and Muslims, leading to the creation of Muslim Pakistan--and a half-century of north India dispute. It was the tense politics of 1998 Indian and Pakistani nuclear detonations that prompted Wolpert to write this book.

There are signs, however, that the disputed Kashmir province may now be open to a political settlement process. The lesson of force taught by "realists" has been costly, and current political leaders want compromise. Wolpert gives us a look at Gandhi's continuing worldwide influence. Perhaps we may be able to add a pacific Kashmir to this list in the book's second edition.