

Bayard Rustin

MODULE 3: India 1948 -- Gandhi's Method, Brought Home

MODULE SNAPSHOT

Grade level	8-12 (adaptable for 6-7)
Time	45 min single class OR 90 min block
Subject fit	World History, U.S. History, Ethics, ELA, African American Studies
Companion curricula	Randolph (6 modules), Lucy (5 modules) at laboreducation.org

01

Learning Objectives -- Students Will Be Able To:

1. Identify Rustin's 1948-49 visit to India as a deliberate study of Gandhi's satyagraha method -- not just an admiration trip.
2. Distinguish satyagraha (truth-force, nonviolent persistence) from pacifism (refusal of violence) as Rustin understood them.
3. Trace what Rustin brought back: the discipline, the training methods, the willingness to be jailed.
4. Analyze how Rustin transmitted Gandhi's method to Dr. King during the Montgomery Bus Boycott (1956).
5. Evaluate whether nonviolent direct action is a UNIVERSAL strategy or one bound to specific contexts.

02

Teacher Background -- 60 Second Brief

Bayard Rustin had read Gandhi's writings since the 1930s. In 1948, six months after Gandhi's assassination, Rustin traveled to India on a six-month study trip arranged by the Fellowship of Reconciliation. He met directly with Gandhi's surviving lieutenants -- Jawaharlal Nehru, Acharya Vinoba Bhave, and others -- and studied the satyagraha movement's training centers, methods of discipline, jail solidarity practices, and the philosophy that opponents are to be persuaded, not destroyed. Rustin came back convinced that satyagraha could be TRANSLATED for the American Black freedom struggle -- not imported wholesale, but adapted. In 1956, when the Montgomery Bus Boycott was several weeks old, A. Philip Randolph dispatched Rustin to advise the young Dr. King. Rustin found a movement with great moral courage but minimal nonviolent training. He taught King the discipline. He explained how to absorb violence without returning it. He established the rules: no weapons, no threats, no retaliation. He stayed in Montgomery for weeks. Without that direct transmission, the modern American nonviolent civil rights movement does not exist as we know it. India 1948 made Memphis 1968 possible.

03

Primary Source Excerpts

Mahatma Gandhi on satyagraha (1920)

"Satyagraha is not predominantly civil disobedience, but a quiet and irresistible pursuit of truth. The satyagrahi opposes the deed, not the doer."

Rustin, reporting back from India (1949)

"I am now convinced that the methods of nonviolent direct action which Mahatma Gandhi used to free India can be used, with adaptation, to free the American Negro from the same patterns of humiliation, injustice, and second-class citizenship."

Rustin advising Dr. King in Montgomery (1956)

"Doctor, the rifle in your kitchen has to go. The bodyguards have to go. The minute they are seen, the nonviolent argument collapses. Either we are nonviolent or we are not."

Dr. King on Rustin's influence

"Bayard Rustin pulled me into the discipline of nonviolence the way a teacher pulls a student into a difficult truth. I had read Gandhi. Bayard taught me to live it."

Vinoba Bhave (Gandhi's disciple) to Rustin, India 1948

"You will not bring Gandhi home. You will bring the question home. Each people must answer it in their own tongue."

04

Discussion Questions -- 5 Essential

1. Rustin spent six months in India studying satyagraha, not just reading about it. Why does direct study matter? What can't be learned from books alone?
2. Distinguish satyagraha from pacifism. Why does that distinction matter? Can you be a satyagrahi without being a pacifist?
3. When Rustin told Dr. King 'the rifle in your kitchen has to go,' what was at stake? Why couldn't King keep the bodyguards AND be the symbol of nonviolence?
4. Bhavé told Rustin: 'You will bring the QUESTION home.' What does that mean? What's the difference between importing a method and translating one?
5. Pick one current global movement (e.g., Hong Kong protests, Sudan civil resistance, Iranian women's movement). Is satyagraha still applicable? What would Rustin advise?

05

Activity -- 'The Translation Test' (25 minutes)

Each student picks ONE specific Gandhian tactic from India's independence movement (examples: the Salt March 1930, hartal/general strikes, khadi/homespun cloth as economic protest, fasting unto death, padayatra/foot march). In 15 minutes, students must write a one-page proposal: how would this tactic be TRANSLATED (not copied) for a 2026 American labor or civil rights campaign? They must specify (a) what the U.S. version would look like, (b) what the cultural translation moves are, (c) what gets lost or has to change. Pair up and trade proposals. Each pair picks one to present in 90 seconds. Class debriefs: which translations actually work? Which are too literal?

06

Assessment -- Exit Ticket (5 minutes)

1. Define satyagraha in one sentence. How is it different from pacifism?
2. Name one specific thing Rustin learned in India and brought to Dr. King in Montgomery.
3. In one sentence: why did Rustin say nonviolence is a DISCIPLINE, not a feeling?

07

Extensions & Going Deeper

- > Read Rustin's 1949 report on his India trip (published in 'Down the Line') -- focus on the training-center descriptions.
- > Watch the documentary 'A Force More Powerful' (PBS) -- look for the U.S./India satyagraha connection.
- > Compare Gandhi's Salt March (1930) to Dr. King's Selma-to-Montgomery March (1965). What's transmitted? What's added?
- > Research a current nonviolent training program (e.g., Highlander, Selma Center for Nonviolence, Training for Change). Trace the Rustin lineage.
- > Read 'Letter from Birmingham Jail' (King, 1963) and mark every Gandhi/satyagraha reference.
- > Visit laboreducation.org/adult-library to watch the 2023 Rustin biopic for the India-trip scenes.

PART OF A 16-MODULE BLACK LABOR + CIVIL RIGHTS CURRICULUM

Rustin's life only makes sense alongside the mentors and proteges who carried his work. Companion curricula: laboreducation.org/a-philip-randolph (Randolph + APRI Memphis, 6 modules), laboreducation.org/bill-lucy (Lucy + CBTU Memphis, 5 modules). Watch the 2023 Netflix biopic 'Rustin' (Colman Domingo) -- in your Labor History Library at laboreducation.org/adult-library.

"We need, in every community, a group of angelic troublemakers." -- Bayard Rustin
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