

Introducing Gandhi

Introduction

Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi was the most prominent leader of pre-independence and post-independence India, who changed the course of history during the Indian freedom struggle. A pioneer of satyagraha, or resistance to tyranny through mass civil disobedience—a philosophy firmly founded upon ahimsa in thought, action and deed—Gandhi not only led India to independence, but also inspired movements for civil rights and freedom across the globe. Mahatma Gandhi was a most complex thinker as well as a unique personality. He was greatly admired but sometimes misunderstood. Nobel Laureate Rabindranath Tagore bestowed upon him the title 'Mahatma' and Netaji Subhash Bose addressed him as the 'Father of the Nation'. On the other hand, Winston Churchill called Gandhi 'a half-naked, seditious fakir'. Lord Wavell and Lord Willingdon called him the most dangerous enemy of the British rule. M. A. Jinnah called him a great Hindu, whereas Rightists like Vinayak Damodar Savarkar, Dr. K. B. Hedgewar and M. S. Golwalkar believed him to be a noble soul but pro-Muslim. Lord Mountbatten called him a one-man army. The *Time* magazine referred to personalities like Dalai Lama, Lech Wałęsa, Martin Luther King, Caesar Chavez, Aung San Suu Kyi, Benigno Aquino, Jr., Desmond Tutu and Nelson Mandela as the Children of Gandhi as well as his spiritual heirs to non-violence. Gandhi was a man whose concerns were contemporary but timeless.

Gandhi was a prolific writer and wrote several books, notable among them being *An Autobiography or The Story of My Experiments with Truth*; *Satyagraha in South Africa*; *Hind Swaraj or Indian Home Rule*; and *Sarvodaya* a paraphrase in Gujarati of John Ruskin's *Unto This Last*. Gandhi wrote a commentary on the *Bhagvad Gita* in Gujarati which was translated into English by Mahadev Desai and published in 1946. He wrote extensively on vegetarianism, diet and health, religion, social reforms, etc. Gandhi's writing was essentially in Gujarati.

For decades, he edited several newspapers, including *Harijan* in Gujarati, in Hindi and in the English language; *Indian Opinion* in English, *Telegu*, *Hindi and Gujarati* while in South Africa; *Young India*, in English; and *Narajivan*, a Gujarati monthly, on his return to India. Later, *Narajivan* was also published in Hindi. Gandhi wrote letters almost every day to individuals and newspapers. His complete works were published by the Indian government under the name *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi* published in a set of hundred volumes.

Family and Childhood

Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi was born on October 2, 1869 at Sudamapuri in Porbandar, a coastal town in Gujarat. His father, Karamchand Gandhi (1822–1885), who belonged to the Hindu Modh Bania community, served as the diwan of Porbander State, a small princely State in the Kathiawar region of British India. He was truthful, brave, honest and a man of principles. Karamchand Gandhi never had any ambition to accumulate wealth and had bequeathed his family very little by way of property. Mohandas' grandfather was Uttamchand Gandhi. His mother, Putlibai, who came from the Hindu Pranami Vaishnava community, was Karamchand's fourth wife, the first three wives having apparently died in childbirth. Growing up with a devout mother and the Jain traditions of the region, the young Mohandas quickly absorbed the influences that would play an important role in his life. Gandhi's mother Putlibai was an epitome of religious faith and devotion. She had strict rules about alcohol and tobacco. She was deeply religious and never took her food without offering her daily prayers. Mahatma inherited these qualities from her. The devotion of his mother in adhering to the religious rites and vows made an indelible mark on Gandhi.

Gandhi's primary and high school education was done at Rajkot. At the age of 12 he was shifted to the Alfred High School. He was a mediocre student, shy and slow to mix with others. During his school days, he was known to have never lied to his teachers or anybody else. He was influenced by an ancient play *Shravana Pitribhakti*, portraying the boundless love of Shravan for his parents. Thereafter, obedience to parents became Gandhi's motto. Further, a play about King Harischandra influenced him to lead a truthful and sincere life.

In May 1883, the 13-year-old Mohandas was married to 14-year-old Kasturbai Makhanji, the daughter of Shri Gokuldas Makan, a merchant. Later on, she came to be known as 'Kasturba', and affectionately as 'Ba'. It was an arranged child marriage, as per the custom of the region. Recalling the day of their marriage, Gandhi once said, 'As we didn't know much about marriage, for us it meant only wearing new clothes, eating sweets and playing with relatives'. However, as was also the custom of the region, the adolescent bride was to spend a lot of time at her parents' house, and away from her husband. In 1885, when Gandhi was 15, the couple's first child was born, but survived only for a few days. Also Gandhi's father Karamchand had died earlier that same year. Mohandas and Kasturba had four more children, all sons: Harilal, born in 1888; Manilal, born in 1892; Ramdas, born in 1897; and Devdas, born in 1900. Kasturba stood by Gandhi through all his struggles and proved to be his firm and stoic supporter till her death.

In Pursuit of Knowledge

Gandhi passed the matriculation exam from Samaldas College at Bhavnagar, Gujarat. On September 4, 1888, he travelled to London, England, to study law at University College, London and to train as a barrister. Gandhi took a vow to his mother in the presence of the Jain monk Becharji, upon leaving India, to observe the Hindu precepts of abstinence from meat, alcohol and promiscuity. While in London, Gandhi experimented with adopting certain 'English' customs, like taking dancing lessons. In England, he read a book titled *Plea for Vegetarianism* by Salt. This influenced him to become a vegetarian not only because of his vow taken before his mother but also by principle. From then, the spread of the message of vegetarianism became a mission for him, making him more sociable and popular. He was introduced to poet Narayan Hunachandra, who requested Gandhi to teach English. Gandhiji undertook the task of becoming an English gentleman, but maintained the disciplined life of a student.

Gandhiji came across theosophists who told him about the Bhagavad *Gita*. Later in his life, *Gita* became a book of his daily reading. The *Gita*, to Gandhiji, was the 'key to the scriptures of world'. He described the *Gita* as his 'mother', and referred to it as 'My Kamdhenu, my guide, my open sesame'. He also started reading the bible and took great interest in the New Testament, particularly the Sermon on the Mount. He was attracted by the teachings of Buddha through Edwin Arnold's *The Light of Asia*. A friend recommended Carlyle's *Heroes and Hero Worship*, which gave him the impetus to learn more about Prophet Mohammed.

Gandhi's three years in London were a time of social, moral and intellectual ferment. He was confronted not only with the academic opportunities that he was seeking, but also with a bewildering array of intellectual, religious and cultural influences, as well as moral 'temptations' from the view point of his tradition. For him, it was the first time he had the opportunity and the necessity of taking charge of his own life, of sorting out his priorities and values. Freed from the constraining if comforting continues of his family and its cultural setting, apart from the triple vow which he rigorously observed, he had to work out who and what he was and wanted to become, and what it meant to be an Indian adrift in the cultural and economic capital of the empire whose influences had only just reached the home he had left.¹

Gandhi was called to the bar on June 10, 1891. Two days later, he left London for India, where he learned that his mother had died while he was in London and that his family had kept the news from him.

In Search of Livelihood

Mohandas' attempts at establishing a law practice in Bombay failed and later, after applying and being turned down for a part-time job as a high school teacher, he returned to Rajkot to make a modest living by drafting petitions for litigants, a business he was forced to close

when he ran foul of a British officer. In his autobiography, Gandhi referred to this incident as an unsuccessful attempt to lobby on behalf of his older brother. It was in this climate that in April 1893, Gandhi accepted a year-long contract from Dada Abdulla & Co., an Indian firm, to a post in the Colony of Natal, South Africa, then part of the British Empire.

In South Africa

In April 1893, Mohandas sailed for South Africa without his family. It was in South Africa that he came face to face with racial prejudices and a racially oppressive atmosphere. Here, Indians were treated as slaves and servants. One incident in his life changed his thinking and showed the way to fight for injustice. While he was on his way to Pretoria, from Durban, at Maritzburg Railway station, he was detrained from the first class compartment even though he was holding an appropriate ticket. The train left the station without him, and he was left alone on the platform. It was a severely cold winter. That sleepless night, Gandhi determined to fight the indiscriminate and root out the social evils and suffer any amount of hardship for this cause. He decided to work on removing racial discrimination and subordinated his legal practice to public work.

Incidents in South Africa aroused Gandhi's sense of social justice and motivated him to mobilize the Indian community in South Africa to take action against such outrage. At a public meeting, he asked them to fight for their rights; to rise above the barriers of caste, creed and religion; and to form an association to look after the interests of the Indian community. Mohandas offered them his professional time and services for free. Though he completed his assignment for Dada Abdulla and Co., he stayed on for 20 years in South Africa, becoming increasingly involved in fighting for the rights of the Indian community.

It was during his stay in South Africa that Gandhi's mode of living underwent a sea change. His lifestyle became increasingly simpler. He began doing his chores himself and spent less money on his clothes. He did voluntary work in hospitals. He felt very strongly about issues that directly impacted people's lives such as apartheid, poverty and inequality.

In South Africa, Gandhi fought a case for social justice and ultimately won the defense. After reading John Ruskin's *Unto This Last*, he decided to change his lifestyle and create a commune called Phoenix Settlement. He founded the Phoenix Settlement near Durban and Tolstoy Farm. In January 1915, Gandhi finally returned to India not as a lawyer but as a well-experienced organizer in the cause of social justice and equality. He spoke at the conventions of the Indian National Congress but was introduced to Indian issues, politics and the Indian people primarily by Gopal Krishna Gokhale, a respected leader of the Congress Party at the time.

Gandhi earnestly believed that a person involved in public service should lead a simple life. He first displayed this principle when he gave up wearing Western clothes, which he associated with wealth and success. When he returned to India, he renounced the Western lifestyle he had been leading in South Africa, where he enjoyed a successful legal practice.

Satyagraha in India

After returning from South Africa, Gandhi spent the first year in India touring all over the country and studying the regions with 'his ears open but his mouth shut'. In 1917, he launched the first Satyagraha in Champaran, Bihar, where he received impressive success. This was followed by Ahmedabad Textile mill workers' strike on the bonus issue. The strike went on for 21 days. During the strike, Gandhi initiated his maiden fast for three days and his intervention had the desired effects. The problem was soon settled through arbitration between the labourers and owner. His next Satyagraha was in Kheda district of Gujarat. Owing to failure of the crops, the farmers wanted certain concessions in regard to tax. Many leaders of national eminence took part in this Satyagraha and finally the Government suspended the revenue assessment for the poor farmers. This example demonstrates Gandhi's popularity, the importance of peoples' participation in the freedom movement. 'Non-cooperation' enjoyed widespread appeal and success, increasing the feeling of excitement and participation from all strata of Indian society.

On March 11, 1930 Gandhi along with other satyagrahis started from Sabarmati Ashram to Dandi, a distance of 240 miles on foot. Gandhi and his followers broke the Salt Law on April 6, 1930. No part of India remained untouched by the Dandi March, and virtually every aspect of the campaign elicited some public response and soon the entire nation was with Gandhi. This satyagraha laid the foundation of the road to *swaraj* and the beginning of the end of British Empire not only from India but from the whole world.

I want world
sympathy in
this battle of
Right against
might.
Sardar Mahatma Gandhi
5.4.30

'I want world sympathy in this battle of right against might'.

— Dandi, April 5, 1930

The government, represented by Lord Edward Irwin, decided to negotiate with Gandhi. The Gandhi-Irwin Pact was signed on March 1931. The British Government agreed to free all political prisoners, in return for the suspension of the Civil Disobedience Movement. Also, as a result of the pact, Gandhi was invited to attend the Round Table Conference in London as the sole representative of the Indian National Congress. The conference was a disappointment to Gandhi and the other nationalists, because it focused on the Indian princes and Indian minorities rather than on transfer of power.

In 1932, the government granted the caste of untouchables separate electorates under the new constitution. In protest, Gandhi embarked on a six-day fast in September 1932. The resulting public outcry successfully forced the government to adopt an equitable arrangement through negotiations mediated by Palwankar Baloo. This was the start of a new campaign by Gandhi to improve the lives of the untouchables, whom he named Harijans, the children of god. On May 8, 1933, Gandhi began a 21-day fast of self-purification to help the Harijan movement, and continued from then on for the upliftment of the dalits.

Gandhi returned to active politics again in 1936, with the Nehru presidency and the Lucknow session of the Congress. Although Gandhi wanted to totally focus on the task of winning independence and not speculate on India's future, he did not restrain the Congress from adopting socialism as its goal. Subhash Bose was elected the president in 1938. Bose won his second term despite Gandhi's criticism, but resigned from the Congress when the All-India leaders resigned en masse in protest of his abandonment of the principles introduced by Gandhi.

Towards Freedom

World War II broke out in 1939. Gandhi favoured offering 'non-violent moral support' to the British efforts in the war, but other Congressional leaders were offended by the unilateral inclusion of India in the war, which had been done without consultation of the peoples' representatives. All Congressmen resigned from office. After long deliberations, Gandhi declared that India could not be party to a war ostensibly being fought for democratic freedom, while that very freedom was denied to India itself. As the war progressed, Gandhi intensified his demand for independence, drafting a resolution calling for the British to Quit India.

Quit India became the most forceful movement in the history of the Indian struggle, with mass arrests and violence on an unprecedented scale. Thousands of freedom fighters were killed or injured by police gunfire, and hundreds of thousands were arrested. Gandhi and his supporters made it clear they would not support the war effort unless India was granted immediate independence. He even clarified that this time the movement would not be stopped if individual acts of violence were committed, saying that the 'ordered anarchy' around him was 'worse than real anarchy'. He called on all Congressmen and Indians to maintain discipline via ahimsa, and believe in the tenet *Karo Ya Maro* ('Do or Die') in the cause of ultimate freedom.

The British arrested Gandhi and the entire Congress Working Committee in Bombay on August 9, 1942. Gandhi was held for two years in the Aga Khan Palace in Pune. It was here that he suffered two terrible blows in his personal life. His 50-year-old secretary Mahadev Desai died of a heart attack and 6 days later, Kasturba died after 18 months' imprisonment on February 22, 1944. He was released before the end of the war on May 6, 1944 because of his failing health.

One after another Gandhiji achieved success and finally, under his leadership, India got Independence on August 15, 1947.

complaint in the