

Mahatma officers in
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mother, putlibai, was



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Mahatma Gandhi Introduction Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, the preeminent leader of Indian nationalism and the prophet of nonviolence in the 20th century, was born, the youngest child of his father's fourth wife, on Oct. 2, 1869, at Porbandar, the capital of a small principality in Gujarat in western India under British suzerainty. His father, Karamchand Gandhi, who was the dewan (chief minister) of Porbandar, did not have much in the way of a formal education but was an able administrator who knew how to steer his way between the capricious princes, their long-suffering subjects, and the headstrong British political officers in power.

Gandhi's mother, Putlibai, was completely absorbed in religion, did not care much for finery and jewelry, divided her time between her home and the temple, fasted frequently, and wore herself out in days and nights of nursing whenever there was sickness in the family. Mohandas grew up in a home steeped in Vaishnavism (Vaisnavism)-worship of the Hindu god Vishnu (Visnu)-with a strong tinge of Jainism, a morally rigorous Indian religion, whose chief tenets are nonviolence and the belief that everything in the universe is eternal. Thus he took for granted ahimsa (noninjury to all living beings), vegetarianism, fasting for self-purification, and mutual tolerance between adherents of various creeds and sects. (see also Index: ahimsa, or ahimsa) Youth. The educational facilities at Porbandar were rudimentary; in the primary school that Mohandas attended, the children wrote the alphabet in the dust with their fingers. Luckily for him, his father became dewan of Rajkot, another princely state. Though he occasionally won prizes and scholarships at the local schools, his record was on the whole mediocre.

One of the terminal reports rated him as “ good at English, fair in Arithmetic and weak in Geography; conduct very good, bad handwriting.” A diffident child, he was married at the age of 13 and thus lost a year at school. He shone neither in the classroom nor on the playing field. He loved to go out on long solitary walks when he was not nursing his by now ailing father or helping his mother with her household chores. He had learned, in his words, “ to carry out the orders of the elders, not to scan them.” With such extreme passivity, it is not surprising that he should have gone through a phase of adolescent rebellion, marked by secret atheism, petty thefts, furtive smoking, and—most shocking of all for a boy born in a Vaishnava family—meat eating.

His adolescence was probably no stormier than that of most children of his age and class. What was extraordinary was the way his youthful transgressions ended. “ Never again” was his promise to himself after each escapade.

And he kept his promise. Beneath an unprepossessing exterior, he concealed a burning passion for self-improvement that led him to take even the heroes of Hindu mythology, such as Prahlada and Harishcandra—legendary embodiments of truthfulness and sacrifice—as living models. In 1887 Mohandas scraped through the matriculation examination of the University of Bombay and joined Samaldas College in Bhavnagar (Bhaunagar). As he had suddenly to switch from his native language—Gujarati—to English, he found it rather difficult to follow the lectures.

Meanwhile, his family was debating his future. Left to himself, he would have liked to be a doctor. But, besides the Vaishnava prejudice against vivisection, it was clear that, if he was to keep up the family tradition of holding high office in one of the states in Gujarat, he would have to qualify as a barrister. This meant a visit to England, and Mohandas, who was not too happy at Samaldas College, jumped at the proposal. His youthful imagination conceived England as “ a land of philosophers and poets, the very centre of civilization.” But there were several hurdles to be crossed before the visit to England could be realized. His father had left little property; moreover, his mother was reluctant to expose her youngest child to unknown temptations and dangers in a distant land. But Mohandas was determined to visit England.

One of his brothers raised the necessary money, and his mother's doubts were allayed when he took a vow that, while away from home, he would not touch wine, women, or meat. Mohandas disregarded the last obstacle—the decree of the leaders of the Modh Bania subcaste (Vaisya caste), to which the Gandhis belonged, who forbade his trip to England as a violation of the Hindu religion—and sailed in September 1888. Ten days after his arrival, he joined the Inner Temple, one of the four London law colleges. (see also Index: Inns of Court) England.

Gandhi took his studies seriously and tried to brush up on his English and Latin by taking the London University matriculation examination. But, during the three years he spent in England, his main preoccupation was with personal and moral issues rather than with academic ambitions. The

transition from the half-rural atmosphere of Rajkot to the cosmopolitan life of
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London was not easy for him. As he struggled painfully to adapt himself to Western food, dress, and etiquette, he felt awkward. His vegetarianism became a continual source of embarrassment to him; his friends warned him that it would wreck his studies as well as his health.

Fortunately for him he came across a vegetarian restaurant as well as a book providing a reasoned defense of vegetarianism, which henceforth became a matter of conviction for him, not merely a legacy of his Vaishnava background. The missionary zeal he developed for vegetarianism helped to draw the pitifully shy youth out of his shell and gave him a new poise. He became a member of the executive committee of the London Vegetarian Society, attending its conferences and contributing articles to its journal.

In the vegetarian restaurants and boarding houses of England, Gandhi met not only food faddists but some earnest men and women to whom he owed his introduction to the Bible and the Bhagavadgita, the most popular expression of Hinduism in the form of a philosophical poem, which he read for the first time in its English translation by Sir Edwin Arnold. The English vegetarians were a motley crowd. They included socialists and humanitarians like Edward Carpenter, "the British Thoreau"; Fabians like George Bernard Shaw; and Theosophists like Annie Besant.

Most of them were idealists; quite a few were rebels who rejected the prevailing values of the late Victorian Establishment, denounced the evils of the capitalist and industrial society, preached the cult of the simple life, and stressed the superiority of moral over material values and of cooperation over conflict. These ideas were to contribute substantially to the shaping of

Gandhi's personality and, eventually, to his politics. Painful surprises were in store for Gandhi when he returned to India in July 1891. His mother had died in his absence, and he discovered to his dismay that the barrister's degree was not a guarantee of a lucrative career.

The legal profession was already beginning to be overcrowded, and Gandhi was much too diffident to elbow his way into it. In the very first brief he argued in a Bombay court, he cut a sorry figure. Turned down even for the part-time job of a teacher in a Bombay high school, he returned to Rajkot to make a modest living by drafting petitions for litigants. Even this employment was closed to him when he incurred the displeasure of a local British officer. It was, therefore, with some relief that he accepted the none-too-attractive offer of a year's contract from an Indian firm in Natal, South Africa. South Africa was to present to Gandhi challenges and opportunities that he could hardly have conceived. In a Durban court, he was asked by the European magistrate to take off his turban; he refused and left the courtroom.

A few days later, while travelling to Pretoria, he was unceremoniously thrown out of a first-class railway compartment and left shivering and brooding at Pietermaritzburg Station; in the further course of the journey he was beaten up by the white driver of a stagecoach because he would not travel on the footboard to make room for a European passenger; and finally he was barred from hotels reserved "for Europeans only." These humiliations were the daily lot of Indian traders and labourers in Natal who had learned to pocket them with the same resignation with which they pocketed their meagre earnings. What was new was not Gandhi's experience but his reaction.

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He had so far not been conspicuous for self-assertion or aggressiveness. But something happened to him as he smarted under the insults heaped upon him. In retrospect the journey from Durban to Pretoria struck him as one of the most creative experiences of his life; it was his moment of truth.

Henceforth he would not accept injustice as part of the natural or unnatural order in South Africa; he would defend his dignity as an Indian and as a man. (see also Index: racial segregation) While in Pretoria, Gandhi studied the conditions in which his countrymen lived and tried to educate them on their rights and duties, but he had no intention of staying on in South Africa. Indeed, in June 1894, as his year's contract drew to a close, he was back in Durban, ready to sail for India. At a farewell party given in his honour he happened to glance through the Natal Mercury and learned that the Natal Legislative Assembly was considering a bill to deprive Indians of the right to vote.

" This is the first nail in our coffin," Gandhi told his hosts. They professed their inability to oppose the bill, and indeed their ignorance of the politics of the colony, and begged him to take up the fight on their behalf. Until the age of 18, Gandhi had hardly ever read a newspaper.

Neither as a student in England nor as a budding barrister in India had he evinced much interest in politics. Indeed, he was overcome by a terrifying stage fright whenever he stood up to read a speech at a social gathering or to defend a client in court. Nevertheless, in July 1894, when he was barely 25, he blossomed almost overnight into a proficient political campaigner. He drafted petitions to the Natal legislature and the British government and had

them signed by hundreds of his compatriots. He could not prevent the passage of the bill but succeeded in drawing the attention of the public and the press in Natal, India, and England to the Natal Indians' grievances. He was persuaded to settle down in Durban to practice law and to organize the Indian community. In 1894, he founded the Natal Indian Congress of which he himself became the indefatigable secretary.

Through this common political organization, he infused a spirit of solidarity in the heterogeneous Indian community. He flooded the government, the legislature, and the press with closely reasoned statements of Indian grievances. Finally, he exposed to the view of the outside world the skeleton in the imperial cupboard, the discrimination practiced against the Indian subjects of Queen Victoria in one of her own colonies in Africa.

It was a measure of his success as a publicist that such important newspapers as The Times of London and the Statesman and Englishman of Calcutta editorially commented on the Natal Indians' grievances. In 1896 Gandhi went to India to fetch his wife Kasturbai and their children and to canvass support for the Indians overseas. He met prominent leaders and persuaded them to address public meetings in the country's principal cities. Unfortunately for him, garbled versions of his activities and utterances reached Natal and inflamed its European population. On landing at Durban in January 1897, he was assaulted and nearly lynched by a white mob. Joseph Chamberlain, the colonial secretary in the British Cabinet, cabled the government of Natal to bring the guilty men to book, but Gandhi refused to prosecute his assailants. It was, he said, a principle with him not to seek redress of a personal wrong in a court of law. Resistance and results.
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Gandhi was not the man to nurse a grudge. On the outbreak of the South African (Boer) War in 1899, he argued that the Indians, who claimed the full rights of citizenship in the British crown colony of Natal, were in duty bound to defend it. He raised an ambulance corps of 1,100 volunteers, out of whom 300 were free Indians and the rest indentured labourers. It was a motley crowd: barristers and accountants, artisans and labourers.

It was Gandhi's task to instill in them a spirit of service to those whom they regarded as their oppressors. The editor of the Pretoria News has left a fascinating pen portrait of Gandhi in the battle zone: After a night's work which had shattered men with much bigger frames, I came across Gandhi in the early morning sitting by the roadside eating a regulation army biscuit. Every man in (General) Buller's force was dull and depressed, and damnation was heartily invoked on everything. But Gandhi was stoical in his bearing, cheerful and confident in his conversation and had a kindly eye.

The British victory in the war brought little relief to the Indians in South Africa. The new regime in South Africa was to blossom into a partnership, but only between Boers and Britons. Gandhi saw that, with the exception of a few Christian missionaries and youthful idealists, he had been unable to make a perceptible impression upon the South African Europeans. In 1906 the Transvaal government published a particularly humiliating ordinance for the registration of its Indian population. The Indians held a mass protest meeting at Johannesburg in September 1906 and, under Gandhi's leadership, took a pledge to defy the ordinance if it became law in the teeth of their opposition, and to suffer all the penalties resulting from their defiance. Thus was born satyagraha ("devotion to truth"), a new technique for redressing

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wrongs through inviting, rather than inflicting, suffering, for resisting the adversary without rancour and fighting him without violence. (see also Index: civil disobedience) The struggle in South Africa lasted for more than seven years. It had its ups and downs, but under Gandhi's leadership, the small Indian minority kept up its resistance against heavy odds.

Hundreds of Indians chose to sacrifice their livelihood and liberty rather than submit to laws repugnant to their conscience and self-respect. In the final phase of the movement in 1913, hundreds of Indians, including women, went to jail, and thousands of Indian workers who had struck work in the mines bravely faced imprisonment, flogging, and even shooting. It was a terrible ordeal for the Indians, but it was also the worst possible advertisement for the South African government, which, under pressure from the governments of Britain and India, accepted a compromise negotiated by Gandhi on the one hand and the South African statesman General Jan Christian Smuts on the other. "The saint has left our shores," Smuts wrote to a friend on Gandhi's departure from South Africa for India, in July 1914, "I hope for ever." Twenty-five years later, he wrote that it had been his "fate to be the antagonist of a man for whom even then I had the highest respect." Once, during his not infrequent stays in jail, Gandhi had prepared a pair of sandals for Smuts, who recalled that there was no hatred and personal ill-feeling between them, and when the fight was over "there was the atmosphere in which a decent peace could be concluded." As later events were to show, Gandhi's work did not provide an enduring solution for the Indian problem in South Africa. What he did to South Africa was indeed less important than what South Africa did to him.

It had not treated him kindly, but, by drawing him into the vortex of its racial problem, it had provided him with the ideal setting in which his peculiar talents could unfold themselves. The religious quest. Gandhi's religious quest dated back to his childhood, the influence of his mother and of his home at Porbandar and Rajkot, but it received a great impetus after his arrival in South Africa.

His Quaker friends in Pretoria failed to convert him to Christianity, but they quickened his appetite for religious studies. He was fascinated by Tolstoy's writings on Christianity, read the Qu'ran in translation, and delved into Hindu scriptures and philosophy. The study of comparative religion, talks with scholars, and his own reading of theological works brought him to the conclusion that all religions were true and yet every one of them was imperfect because they were " interpreted with poor intellects, sometimes with poor hearts, and more often misinterpreted." (see also Index: Qur'an) Rajchandra, a brilliant young philosopher who became Gandhi's spiritual mentor, convinced him of " the subtlety and profundity" of Hinduism, the religion of his birth.

And it was the Bhagavadgita, which Gandhi had first read in London, that became his " spiritual dictionary" and exercised probably the greatest single influence on his life. Two Sanskrit words in the Gita particularly fascinated him. One was aparigraha (nonpossession), which implied that man had to jettison the material goods that cramped the life of the spirit and to shake off the bonds of money and property. The other was samabhava (equability), which enjoined him to remain unruffled by pain or pleasure, victory or defeat, and to work without hope of success or fear of failure.

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These were not merely counsels of perfection. In the civil case that had brought him to South Africa in 1893, he had persuaded the antagonists to settle their differences out of court. The true function of a lawyer seemed to him "to unite parties riven asunder." He soon regarded his clients not as purchasers of his services but as friends; they consulted him not only on legal issues but on such matters as the best way of weaning a baby or balancing the family budget. When an associate protested that clients came even on Sundays, Gandhi replied: "A man in distress cannot have Sunday rest." Gandhi's legal earnings reached a peak figure of 5,000 a year, but he had little interest in moneymaking, and his savings were often sunk in his public activities. In Durban and later in Johannesburg, he kept an open table; his house was a virtual hostel for younger colleagues and political coworkers. This was something of an ordeal for his wife, without whose extraordinary patience, endurance, and self-effacement Gandhi could hardly have devoted himself to public causes.

As he broke through the conventional bonds of family and property, their life tended to shade into a community life. Gandhi felt an irresistible attraction to a life of simplicity, manual labour, and austerity. In 1904, after reading John Ruskin's *Unto This Last*, a critique of capitalism, he set up a farm at Phoenix near Durban where he and his friends could literally live by the sweat of their brow. Six years later another colony grew up under Gandhi's fostering care near Johannesburg; it was named Tolstoy Farm after the Russian writer and moralist, whom Gandhi admired and corresponded with. Those two settlements were the precursors of the more famous ashrams (ashramas) in

India, at Sabarmati near Ahmedabad (Ahmadabad) and at Sevagram near Wardha.

South Africa had not only prompted Gandhi to evolve a novel technique for political action but also transformed him into a leader of men by freeing him from bonds that make cowards of most men. "Persons in power," Gilbert Murray prophetically wrote about Gandhi in the Hibbert Journal in 1918, "should be very careful how they deal with a man who cares nothing for sensual pleasure, nothing for riches, nothing for comfort or praise, or promotion, but is simply determined to do what he believes to be right. He is a dangerous and uncomfortable enemy, because his body which you can always conquer gives you so little purchase upon his soul." Words/ Pages : 3, 311 / 24