

Life and thoughts of mahatma gandhi assignment

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Life and thoughts of mahatma Gandhi Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi was born in 1869 in the coastal town of Porbandar, one of scores of tiny princely states and now part of the Indian state of Gujarat. Although the Gandhis, meaning grocers, were merchants by caste, they had risen to important political positions. Mohandas's father was the chief administrator and member of the court of Porbandar, and his grandfather that of the adjacent tiny state of Junagadh. Gandhi grew up in an eclectic religious environment. His parents were followers of the largely devotional Hindu cult of Vishnu (or Vaishnavites). His mother belonged to the Pranami sect, which combined Hindu and Muslim religious beliefs, gave equal honour to the sacred books of the Vaishnavites and the Koran, and preached religious harmony. Her religious fasts and vows, observed without exception all her life, left an abiding impression on her son. His father's friends included many Jains who preached a strict doctrine of nonviolence and self-discipline.

Gandhi was also exposed to Christian missionaries, but Christianity was not a significant presence in his childhood. Like many Hindus he unselfconsciously imbibed a variety of religious beliefs, but had no deep knowledge of any religious tradition including his own. Gandhi was a shy and mediocre student, and completed his school education with average results. He was married to Kasturbai when they were both 13 years of age, an experience that turned him into a bitter enemy of child marriage. Sex understandably obsessed him greatly in his early years.

One night when he was 16 years of age, he left his dying father to spend some time with his wife. His father's death during his short absence hurt him

deeply. Although many commentators have used this incident to explain his hostility to sex, there is little real evidence to support this view. In his autobiography Gandhi only said the incident created a deep sense of 'shame' in him. What is more, he continued to enjoy his wife's company for several years afterwards and went on to raise four sons.

He did not become seriously interested in celibacy until nearly 16 years after the incident and, although the sense of guilt played a part, his real reason was a desire to conserve his physical and spiritual energies for the important political struggles on which he had then embarked. Gandhi left for England in 1888 to train as a lawyer, after giving a pledge to his mother that he would avoid wine, women, and meat. In the early months he lived the life of an English gentleman, buying himself a morning suit, a top hat, and a silver-headed cane, and taking lessons in dancing, elocution, and the violin.

As the money ran out and after he had narrowly escaped a sexual temptation, better sense prevailed, and Gandhi turned to the more serious aspects of English life. Like many other colonial leaders he discovered the West and the East at more or less the same time, and one through the other. He read widely about British and European law and politics, interacted with theosophists, and studied Christianity, finding the Old Testament somewhat disagreeable but the New deeply moving.

He also read about his own religious tradition, especially the Gita and Edwin Arnold's *Light of Asia*, which respectively initiated him into the Hindu and Buddhist philosophies. Gandhi's legal career in India was disappointing. He was too shy to open his mouth in court and had to give away his first

barrister's brief to a colleague. He turned to drafting applications and managed to make ends meet. However, the work did not interest him much, and it also exposed him to court intrigues which he found tiresome. When a Muslim firm in South Africa sought his services as a lawyer and a correspondence clerk, Gandhi readily accepted the offer.

He sailed for South Africa in 1893 intending to spend a year there but instead stayed on for 21 years. South Africa was a turning point in Gandhi's life. It confronted him with many unusual experiences and challenges, and profoundly transformed him. Within a week of his arrival he had an experience that changed the course of his life. When travelling from Durban to Pretoria, he was thrown out of a train in the middle of the night for daring to travel firstclass, and spent the rest of the night shivering in the waiting room at Petermaritzburg station.

The distraught Gandhi debated whether to return to India or stay on and fight for his rights, and resolved to do the latter. The next day he travelled to Charlestown without difficulty, but the driver of the stagecoach that carried him to Johannesburg refused to let him travel inside, and asked him to sit next to him. Gandhi reluctantly agreed. Later he was asked to move and sit on a mat on the floor. Smarting under a sense of injustice, he refused, whereupon the driver started beating him and tried to push him off the coach until his fellow passengers saved him.

Some months later he was kicked into the gutter by a sentry for daring to walk past President Kruger's house in Pretoria. Indians who had begun to migrate to South Africa from the 1860s as indentured labourers to work on

sugar and coffee plantations suffered all kinds of indignities and discrimination, especially in Natal and Transvaal, where they were heavily concentrated. In April 1894, when Gandhi was about to return to India for good, the legislature of Natal was debating the Indian Franchise Bill, which would have taken away Indians' voting rights.

Gandhi's Muslim employer urged him to stay on to lead the fight, and he readily agreed. He founded the Natal Indian Congress and his campaign succeeded in partially reducing the harshness of the Bill. His similar campaigns against immigration restrictions and discriminatory licensing laws were much less successful. He increasingly began to complain that constitutional pressures, petitions, and rational persuasion were making no impact on 'prejudiced' minds, and wondered what else he should do. He found the answer a few years later.

When Transvaal passed a law in 1907 requiring the registration and fingerprinting of all Indians and giving the police the power to enter their houses to ensure that the inhabitants were registered, Gandhi hit upon his well-known method of satya? graha. It was a form of non-violent resistance and involved peaceful picketing of registration centres, burning registration cards, courting arrest, and gracefully accepting such punishment as was meted out. Gandhi's protest resulted in some concessions which, however, fell short of his original demands. It was followed by another satya? raha, this time involving Indian women and miners, against such measures as the imposition of poll tax, the refusal to recognize Indian marriages, immigration regulations, and the system of indentured labour. This had greater success and led to the passage of the Indian Relief Act in 1914. During his 21 years in <https://assignbuster.com/life-and-thoughts-of-mahatma-gandhi-assignment/>

South Africa, Gandhi's ways of thought and life underwent important changes. Indeed the two became inseparable for him. Thought came to have no meaning for him unless it was lived out, and life was shallow unless it reflected a carefully thought-out vision of life.

Every time Gandhi came across a new idea, he asked if it was worth living up to. If not, he took no further interest in it. But if the answer was in the affirmative, he integrated it into his way of life, 'experimented' with its 'truth', and explored its moral logic. This approach deeply influenced his attitude to books. He read little, and only what was practically relevant. But when a book gripped his imagination, he meditated on it, brooded over its message, put its central ideas into action, and 'grew from truth to truth'.

He mainly read religious and moral literature including Plato's Apology and William Salter's Ethical Religion (1889), the first of which he translated and the second summarized into his native Gujarati. Three books that influenced him deeply during his stay in South Africa were Henry Thoreau's On the Duty of Civil Disobedience (1847), a 'masterly treatise'; Tolstoy's The Kingdom of God Is Within You (1893), which 'overwhelmed' him and in which he claimed to have first discovered the doctrine of non-violence and love; and John Ruskin's Unto this Last (1862), whose 'magical influence' was a 'turning point' in his life (A 250).

Inspired by Ruskin, Gandhi decided to live an austere life on a commune, at first on the Phoenix Farm in Natal and then on the Tolstoy Farm just outside Johannesburg. During this period Gandhi embarked on a number of experiments involving diet, child-rearing, nature cure, and his personal and

professional life. Under the influence of a medical book that greatly impressed him, he even delivered his fourth son himself. He became convinced that a political leader must be morally pure, and embarked on a programme of personal moral development.

Constantly challenged by the ubiquitous Christian missionaries to explain and defend his religious beliefs convincingly or convert to Christianity, Gandhi often felt lost. The Hindu concepts of *atman* (soul) and *moksha* (liberation) puzzled him greatly, and he had to write to his mentor Raichandbhai in India for clarification and guidance. Since Gandhi learned about his religion in South Africa in a confrontational context and without access to a rich and living Hindu tradition, his knowledge of it was largely based on reading and reflection, and remained shallow and abstract.

Like many other things in his life, he made up his brand of Hinduism as he went along, with all the attendant advantages and disadvantages. In South Africa Gandhi made close Jewish friends, one of whom bought the 1, 100-acre Tolstoy Farm for him, and acquired considerable knowledge of the beliefs and practices of the only major religion to which he had not hitherto been exposed. He called Jews the 'untouchables of Christianity' whose persecution, like that of their Hindu counterparts, was based on a deeply corrupted and gross misreading of a great religion .

Gandhi also cultivated close Christian friends, especially the British missionary C. F. Andrews (1871-1940), of whom he said that there was no one else to whom he had a 'deeper attachment'. Under their influence Gandhi renewed his study of Christianity and integrated several aspects of it

into his brand of increasingly redefined Hinduism, particularly the idea of suffering love as exemplified in the image of crucifixion. The image haunted him all his life and became the source of some of his deepest passions.

He wept before it when he visited the Vatican in Rome in 1931; the bare walls of his Sevagram ashram made an exception in favour of it; Isaac Watts's 'When I survey the wondrous Cross', which offers a moving portrayal of Christ's sorrow and sacrifice and ends with 'love so amazing, so divine, demands my soul, my life, my all', was one of his favourite hymns; and in many dark moments of his life he articulated his suffering in the image of Christ on the Cross. In South Africa Gandhi acquired political skills and learned lessons, some of which served him well and others ill on his return to India.

He understood the value of journalism, and started and used the weekly Indian Opinion to propagate his ideas. He also saw how demoralized and incapable of concerted action his countrymen had become. Rather than fight for their rights, they expected others to do it for them and in the meantime circumvented discriminatory rules by bribing government officials. Not surprisingly he repeatedly rebuked them, urged them to 'rebel' against themselves, and warned them that 'those who behave like worms should not blame others for trampling upon them'.

Gandhi also learned the art of self-projection and political networking. He wrote about his work to influential people abroad including Tolstoy, assiduously cultivated important Indian and British leaders, and ensured that his activities were well reported in India and Britain. In South Africa he had

little difficulty uniting Hindu and Muslim traders, many of whom shared a common language and culture. He generalized this experience and both underestimated the distance between the two communities in India and exaggerated his own ability to bridge it. First Campaign in India:

Emancipation of the Untouchables

The First World War broke out when Gandhi was returning to India via London. He landed in Bombay on January 9, 1915, when he was 45. He was already a moderate, non-violent revolutionary, and destined to become still more so. He was a man of uncompromising stands and stern ideals. His search for the absolute often seemed to be a search for the impossible, yet he was always ready to seize any realistic opportunities. He was, in his own words, “ a practical idealist”. Moreover, while eschewing strictly political functions of any kind, he frequently entered the political arena.

In his eyes, religion merged imperceptibly into ethics, and ethics into social and political life, and the key to the human problems he wished to solve was often to be found in the realm of state decisions. After a voyage of reconnaissance across the length and breadth of India, Gandhi founded the Satyagraha Ashram at the gates of Ahmedabad, on May 25, 1915. Like the settlements he had started in South Africa, it was to be a place of retreat where he could teach, plan his campaign, pray, write, and study. At first the settlement housed about 25 people, men and women of all ages.

Some came from the Phoenix and Tolstoy farms in South Africa, others from different parts of India. Gandhi also took in, on an equal footing, a family of Untouchables, which caused trouble within the ashram and raised a storm

outside. But otherwise, how could India's foreign masters be required to show respect for human dignity in their dealings with Indians, if the Indians themselves denied it to certain of their own people? Gandhi thus found himself in open conflict with the traditional organization of Hindu society, the caste system.

He approached the question as a moral rather than a social problem. Gandhi was not basically opposed to the caste system as such. He was aware of the services it had rendered in the past and recognized the value of a social order based on the respective duties of its members rather than on the clash between their respective rights. But he never ceased to denounce the abuses, aberrations and harshness that had deformed it. He demanded a radical reform of its principles and practice. The contempt shown to the Untouchables was particularly abhorrent to him.

He found a new name for them: Harijans (Children of God). He desired to emancipate and rehabilitate them within the Hindu society which had wronged them. He would be satisfied with nothing less. In 1915, with the world plunged into war, Gandhi refrained from using Satyagraha as a weapon against the British Empire. The first non-violent campaigns he launched on Indian soil were directed against the indigo planters at Champaran in Bihar, for their abusive treatment of tenant farmers, and against the owners of the Ahmedabad spinning mills whose employees were underpaid and overworked.

But Gandhi co-operated with the Empire. By his loyalty and generosity, he hoped to compel the loyalty and generosity of the British people, whom he

respected, and indeed loved. Imprisonment, Fasting, Strikes, Mass Demonstration The years 1918-1919 brought a decisive reversal of Gandhi's policy: co-operation with the Imperial Government in New Delhi gave place to non-co-operation. The immediate cause of the break was the passing of emergency laws that prolonged certain wartime restrictions.

Gandhi and some of his followers denounced the laws as unjustified and incompatible with the dignity of free citizens, especially in time of peace. The new leader of the Indian nationalist movement – for without seeking in any way to be its head, Gandhi was so recognized as such – kept two aims clearly in mind: to maintain at all costs the strictly non-violent nature of his campaign, despite the wavering faith of even staunch disciples and the indiscipline among rank and file; and never to lose sight of the goal of political freedom for India, which, as was now realized, would not readily be granted.

To achieve the first aim, the most determined “civil disobedience” – refusal to bow to injustice or to co-operate with its perpetrators ??? did not, in Gandhi's view, justify the use of violence. The revindication of legitimate rights through self-sacrifice and self-purification, acceptance of blows and imprisonment, and abstention from all violence to people or property, he affirmed, alone would bring about true, unblemished national independence.

Non-violent strikes, mass demonstrations, fasts of protest took place year after year until the ultimate goal was attained. Between 1918 and 1948, Gandhi undertook at least 15 long fasts: three lasted for 21 days and two he vowed to continue indefinitely – until his death from starvation – if his

demands were not met. There were times when the situation eased, but even then Gandhi never relaxed his vigilance.

To the Indian National congress and the entire nation, Gandhi had become a respected leader to whom they gave enthusiastic support. But not everyone understood the absolute necessity of Satyagraha. Gandhi had the courage to disown and even to call a halt, on the brink of victory, to the revolutionary Clan of his followers, which was marred by serious violence, in February 1922. Gandhi's Salt March Although disappointed in his own supporters, and harshly treated by the authorities, the Mahatma never lost heart.

Two periodicals, an English language weekly, YOUNG India, and Navajivan a Gujarati weekly, placed themselves at his disposal. In articles which he wrote for each issue, he explained the true significance of his doctrine and his action: not only to do away with existing wrongs, but to build with patience and devotion a truly just society, in which he himself gave the lead by founding the Village Industries Association and two new ashrams at Wardha and Segaon.

Outstanding events not yet mentioned were the declaration of the " War of Independence" on March 12, 1930, followed immediately by the famous " salt march", and inspired protest against the government salt monopoly, regarded as a symbol of oppression; Gandhi's part in the Round Table Conference (London, 1931); his extended fasts on behalf of the Untouchables (1932-33); and his approval of the 1937 provincial elections. " Quit India! "

During the Second World War, India wished to share in the war effort, on a strictly equal footing with the Dominions. Gandhi was at first inclined, as in <https://assignbuster.com/life-and-thoughts-of-mahatma-gandhi-assignment/>

1914-18, not to oppose the arming of the country, but government policy caused him to change his views. In October 1940, he launched a campaign of civil, non-violent resistance to participation in the war. On July 14, 1942, Congress voted a resolution calling on the British to quit India.

At the end of the war, negotiations were resumed between the British authorities and the Indian nationalists, with Gandhi playing a decisive, though unofficial part. On August 15, 1947, India acceded to full independence. But the conflict between Hindus and Muslims, often stifled but always latent, flared up again at the moment with tragic consequences. An Assassin's Bullet The Moslem League would not accept the idea of the powerful Islamic minority – about a quarter of the population – being governed by the Hindu majority.

Sick at heart, Gandhi and his companions had to agree to the “vivisection” of the country, and August 15, 1947, marked both the liberation of India, vainly imagined to be “indivisible”, and its partition into two separate nations: the Indian Union and Pakistan. These hopes and disappointments were accompanied by a tragic sequence of riots, violence and brutality. Gandhi, who had always worked for understanding between the two communities, was tormented by the setback to his efforts.

He would not stand by while evil stalked the land and, although aged 77, he set out on foot across the areas ravaged by misery and hatred to act as peacemaker, well knowing that his life was a target for fanaticism. On January 30, 1948, an extremist Hindu who could not understand Gandhi's chivalrous attitude to the Muslims remaining in the Indian Union, and

regarded him as a traitor, shot him dead. Thus Gandhi paid to the cause of non-violence, which he upheld as a universal ideal within the reach of all, the supreme sacrifice of his own life.