

Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi (1869 – 1948)

(Mahatma Gandhi, the Father of the Nation or Bapuji, as he is affectionately called).

GANDHIJI'S BIRTH AND CHILDHOOD

In the early days our country was made up of a large number of small Princely Kingdoms. Porbandar in Gujarat was one such Princely Kingdom. Gandhiji's father Karamchand Gandhi, popularly known as Kaba, was a Minister there. Kaba Gandhi was an honest, upright man, a strict disciplinarian, and very hot tempered. His wife Putlibai was an extremely religious person. She would not have her meal until she had worshipped the sun. Hence sometimes in the rainy season, she would go hungry for two-three days at a stretch. She was a very loving person, and immensely hard-working.

To these parents a son was born on October 2nd, 1869. He was their youngest of their 4 children. He was called Mohandas or 'Moniya'. Gandhiji had two elder brothers – Laxmidas and Karsandas and one younger sister Raliatbehn. The strict discipline of his father, the religious bent of mind of his mother, all influenced Gandhiji greatly. He was deeply attached to his parents and siblings. The values of truthfulness, honesty, integrity were instilled in him from the very beginning.

As a child he was not very brave. He was mortally afraid of the dark, of ghosts and spirits, and also of snakes and scorpions. At night he would cry in fear. The maid who looked after

him scolded him very often. "You should be ashamed of yourself" she would say. "What will you do when you grow up?" She then told him that every time he was frightened he should take God's name. Gandhiji took her advice, and gradually he overcame his fear.



GANDHIJI'S SCHOOL DAYS

Soon it was time for him to go to school. As his father was in Rajkot at that time, he attended the school there. Being extremely shy, he did not mix with the other children. Most of the time, he kept to himself and his books. As soon as the school bell rang, he collected his books and hurried home. Other boys chatted and stopped on the way; some to play, others to eat, but Mohan always went straight home. He was afraid that the boys might stop him and make fun of him.

One day, the Inspector of Schools, Mr Giles, came to Mohan's school. He read out five English words to the class and asked the boys to write them down. Mohan wrote four words correctly, but he could not spell the fifth word 'Kettle'. Seeing Mohan's hesitation, the teacher made a sign behind the Inspector's back that he should copy the word from his neighbour's slate. But Mohan ignored his signs. The other boys wrote all the five words correctly; Mohan wrote only four. After the Inspector left, the teacher scolded him. "I told you to copy from your neighbour," he said angrily. "Couldn't you even do that correctly?" Everyone laughed. As he went home that evening, Mohan was not unhappy. He knew he had done the right thing. What made him sad was that his teacher should have asked him to cheat.



GANDHIJI'S MARRIAGE

As was the custom in those days, when he was about 13-14 years old, he got married. His wife's name was Kasturba (and she was as old as him). Kasturba was a very smart and lively girl.



GANDHIJI'S LESSONS OF LIFE: THE IMPORTANCE OF TRUTH AND HONESTY

It was at this time that Gandhiji fell into bad company and picked up many bad habits. It was because of these bad habits, that unknown to his parents, he was once forced to sell a part of his gold bracelet. However, he soon realised his mistake, and amply repented his sinful behaviour. He decided to make a clean breast of everything to his father, but he lacked the courage to face him. So instead, he wrote a letter to his father, mentioning all the sinful deeds he had done. He gave the letter to his father, and stood by his bedside, his face hanging down in shame. At that time Kaba Gandhi was seriously ill. He felt miserable when he read the letter. Tears rolled down his cheeks, but he did not say a single word to his son. It was too much for Gandhiji to bear. Right then he resolved that he would always lead a truthful and honest life, and throughout his life he stuck to his resolution.

GANDHI'S FURTHER EDUCATION IN ENGLAND

During his father's illness Gandhiji nursed him with great devotion and care, but unfortunately his father never recovered from his illness. He died soon thereafter. In 1887, two years after his father's death, Gandhiji passed his High School examination. At that time he was 18 years old. Everyone in the family decided that he should go to England and become a Barrister, so that on his return he could become a Dewan like his father.

Respecting their wishes, Gandhiji set sail for England in **1888**. Life was entirely different in England. The style of dressing, eating habits, everything was all new to him. He was totally confused and bewildered for some time. However, he soon got adjusted to the new environment.

Gandhiji concentrated on his studies thereafter, and successfully passed his Bar examination. He returned to India in 1891, after the completion of his studies. Eagerly he looked forward to meeting his mother, and giving her the good news, but he was to be sorely disappointed. For while he was away in England, his mother had passed away. The news of her death had been withheld from him because his brother thought he would be mentally disturbed, and his studies would be affected.



GANDHIJI'S WORK IN INDIA

After qualifying as a Barrister, he set up his practice as a lawyer, in Rajkot. As he did not get much work there, he came to Bombay. Even in Bombay he did not get any cases. Finally, he got one case. He prepared well for it, but in court he was unable to present it satisfactorily as he was still a very shy person. Disappointed, he felt he would never make a successful lawyer.

GANDHIJI'S WORK IN SOUTH AFRICA

Just at that time Gandhiji's elder brother managed to get him a case. He was asked to represent Mr. Abdulla, a rich businessman in South Africa. After much deliberation, Gandhiji agreed to accept the case. He left his homeland and set sail for Africa in 1895. Although there were many Indians staying in Africa at that time, all the power was in the hands of the British people. They considered themselves superior, and treated the Indians and the natives in a most insulting manner.

Gandhiji undertook Abdulla's case and handled it very well. The Indians were very much impressed, and wanted Gandhiji to stay on in Africa. In connection with his work, Gandhiji travelled a good deal. However, he was treated very badly by the British people. Wherever he went, he had to face insults and rudeness. At times, he was even physically assaulted.

One day, when he was travelling from Durban to Pretoria in the first class compartment of a train, a Britishman boarded the compartment. On seeing Gandhiji, the Britishman got furious. He called the Railway officer, and both ordered him to get out of the train. Since Gandhiji had purchased a first class ticket, he refused to do so. However, they paid no heed to him. Gandhiji also did not budge. Finally the police were summoned. They pushed him out of the compartment and threw his luggage out of the window. Gandhiji had to spend the whole night on the platform. This was only one of the many humiliating experiences Gandhiji had to face. He had decided to return to India on the completion of his work in Africa, but the plight of the Indians there disturbed him greatly. He resolved to stay, and fight the

unjust and inhuman laws that were imposed on them. For everywhere there was discrimination. There was one set of rules for the Indians and natives, and a different set for the British people.

Gandhiji gave considerable thought to the matter. He realised that to fight against injustice it was vital for the people to have unity amongst themselves. He tried very hard to bring about this unity. He organised many meetings, and made the people aware of the situation. In reply, the people appointed him as their leader, and agreed to be guided by him.

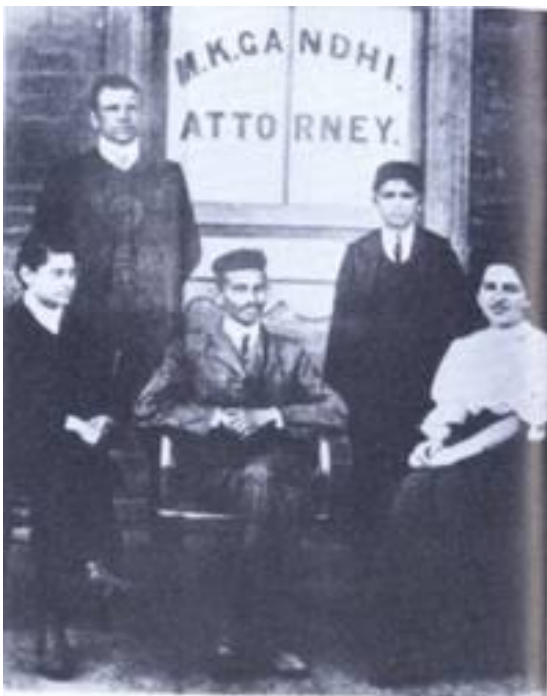
Since all the power was in the hands of the English people, Gandhiji realised that to fight them it was necessary to use an entirely different method. It was then that he thought of the novel idea of 'Satyagraha'. The word 'Satyagraha' is made up of two words 'satya' meaning 'truth' and 'agraha' meaning 'firmness'. Gandhiji believed that if we hold on to the truth firmly then, we become fearless and we can remove any injustice from the world. He believed that we need not harm anybody in order to make them stop their wrong behavior. Instead, by using 'ahinsa' or 'love' we could change people's hearts.

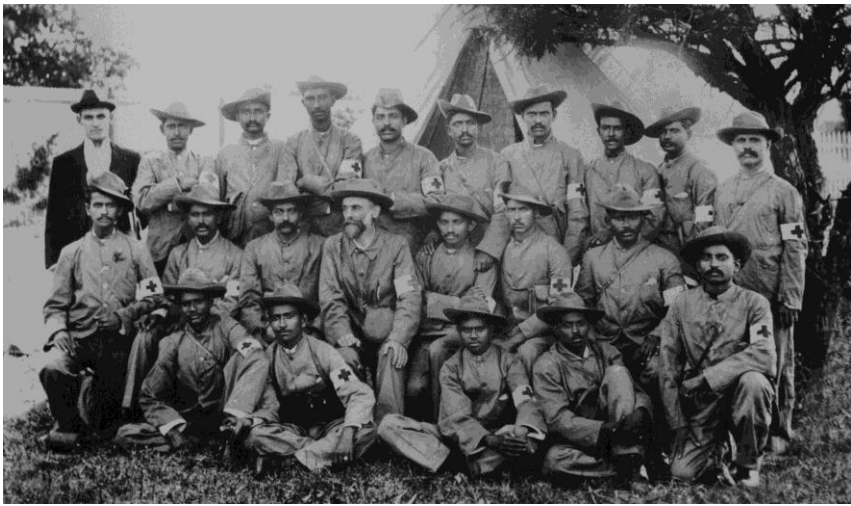
In South Africa, Gandhiji tried out the 'satyagraha' method for the first time to fight the injustice of the South African government. His movement aimed at opposing the many unjust laws that were imposed on them in a non-violent manner. For this movement to be successful, he was prepared to face all hardships and obstacles. It was no easy task. He suffered much humiliation, faced many problems, but he did not give up. He believed that because he was right – because he was saying the 'truth' or 'satya' - he does not need to be scared – and that one day the SA government will understand its mistake.

It was during this time that a war broke out between the British and the Dutch settlers in Africa. It was known as the Boer War. Gandhiji and other Indians gave whatever help they could to the British. The British won the war, and taking into consideration the help Gandhiji had rendered to them, they gave the Indians more privileges.

Thinking that his work was now over, in 1901 he decided to return to his motherland. The people were very reluctant to let him go back. They were very keen that he should settle down in Africa itself. Finally Gandhiji told them that he would go to India, but come to Africa whenever they called him. Only then did the people agree to let him go. They gave him a grand farewell, and showed him with many expensive gifts. However Gandhiji did not accept anything. He donated everything to the local organisations.

Gandhiji returned to India, but not for long. In 1904, he was called back to South Africa for his help against some unfair laws that the government was going to make which would require all Indians to carry identity badges. Gandhiji fought against this unfair law by launching another 'satyagraha'. He urged all Indians to oppose the laws peacefully even if they were arrested by the government. This protest movement went on for a long time and after a painful struggle – the South African government finally decided to remove all unjust laws against the Indians in South Africa. Gandhiji had won and so had – 'satyagraha'.





GANDHIJI'S WORK IN INDIA

By the time all these developments took place in Africa, it was 1914. Gandhiji had spent almost 20 years in that country.

During his long stay in Africa, Gandhiji visited India sometimes, where he met many important leaders and sought their advice. Gopal Krishna Gokhale was one such leader who rendered assistance to Gandhiji in many ways. Gandhiji admired him tremendously, and looked upon him as his mentor. It was largely due to him that Gandhiji joined the mainstream of Indian politics.

He returned to India, for he had made up his mind to fight for the freedom of India. He decided that he would not miss a single opportunity that would help him in serving his country and countrymen.

As such he toured the whole of India, and brought an awakening in the people living in villages and towns. North of the Ganges, near the boundary of Nepal, was a small place called Champaranya. It was noted for its cultivation of Indigo dye. Unfortunately, the British planters in Champaranya treated the local workers most cruelly. Worse still, the Government paid little heed to the workers' cries. Gandhiji heard of this and went to Champaranya to do something for them. He was unable to bear their miserable plight. He decided to use the method of '**satyagraha**' and '**ahimsa**' once again to protest against the injustice done to the workers. Finally the British were compelled to stop their inhuman treatment of the workers. This satyagraha came to be known as the '**Champaranya Satyagraha**'.

After the success of the 'Champaranya Satyagraha', Gandhiji felt that he should settle down in one place. He selected a site near the banks of the Sabarmati river in Gujarat, and established his **Ashram** there. He decided that thereafter he would devote all his time to the service of humanity, and work for the downtrodden. He preached what he practiced. Gandhi started to protest against the 'caste system' that people followed in India. Because of this caste system some people thought that they were more important than other people – and

they treated the other people very badly. Gandhiji picked up the cause of the **Harijans**. He raised his voice against the inhuman and unjust treatment meted out to them and said that we should treat all human beings with love and respect. He started two newspapers 'Harijan' and 'Young India', and through them he expressed his views and spread social awareness in the people.

In the meantime all over India agitations and uprisings against the British rule were on the increase. In 1920, Lokmanya Tilak died, and Gandhiji became the leader of the Freedom Movement. Under his guidance, the people went on Satyagraha to fight against injustice. He was arrested and imprisoned many times, but that did not deter him and his loyal followers. They continued their fight for freedom with even greater fervour.

Gandhiji was greatly respected for his simple living, high thinking, and fearless attitude. The British too were greatly impressed by him, and called him for negotiations regarding India's freedom. Since it had been decided that the freedom struggle would not stop until full freedom was granted, the negotiations did not serve any purpose.

Various forms of Satyagraha and Civil Disobedience movements took place at that time. The '**Swadeshi Movement**' (to use local made goods) was one of them. Gandhiji advised and encouraged the people to use Indian goods and use Khadi (hand spun cloth). He himself wore Khadi clothes, and would sit to spin on his Charkha (Spinning wheel). People stopped buying British made goods. Instead, they lit bonfires of these goods. The Government, with the help of the police and the army, tried its best to put an end to all these demonstrations and agitations, but these were unsuccessful. On the contrary, they became more intense.

The Government had made a law that only the government could produce salt and that the people would have to pay a very heavy tax to buy salt. This was a very unfair law and Gandhiji started the '**Salt Satyagraha**'. He marched to Dandi – a small town in Gujarat and picked up the salt on the sea coast left by the sea. He urged all Indians to peacefully break the law and make their own salt. Gandhiji and many other leaders were imprisoned, but the struggle for freedom continued with greater intensity.

While India fought for freedom, in Europe, the second world war had begun. The British looked towards India for help, but Gandhiji started the **Non-co-operation Movement**. Jawaharlal Nehru and many other Indian leaders joined the movement because they all had immense faith in Gandhiji.

The British Government thought it would please the Indians by granting them partial freedom. Once again they began negotiations with Gandhiji, but Gandhiji made it clear that he and his people wanted nothing less than complete freedom (Independence). To make this demand stronger, the Indian National Congress passed the **Quit India** resolution in 1942, wherein they demanded that the British leave India immediately. Angered by this resolution, the British again imprisoned him and his wife Kasturba. Kasturba died in jail. She was always behind him in his freedom movements and the other leaders.

Many secret organisations were formed as a result, and they put a number of obstacles in the regular functioning of the Government. The British Government realised that it was now impossible for them to continue their rule in India, They released Gandhiji and other leaders from prison, and once again began negotiations with him.

INDEPENDENCE AND PARTITION

Finally, on 15th August 1947, India attained freedom, and for the first time the Indian tri-colour National flag fluttered on the Red Fort in Delhi. However, in its fight for freedom, India had to pay a heavy price. What was once a large single geographical unit, now comprised of two new nations - India and Pakistan.

It was during this period that Hindu Muslim riots took place all over the country. Gandhiji put his life in danger, pleaded with the people and made ceaseless efforts to stop the violence.

After Independence, Gandhiji concentrated his attention on the betterment of the downtrodden people. He went from village to village and advised the people that for the good of the country it was necessary for everyone to work together in unity and harmony.

GANDHIJI'S DEATH

Although Gandhiji strived so hard for unity, there were some people who were under the misconception that Gandhiji favoured the Muslims. On 30th January 1948, in Delhi, when Gandhiji set out to attend a prayer meeting, he was shot dead by an assailant. His last words were `Hey Ram'.

People all over the world paid rich tribute to Gandhiji. The great Mahatma's life had come to an end. The news shocked everyone. Not only India, but the whole world mourned the death of the great man — a real Mahatma, who had dedicated his entire life to the service of humanity, and had taught the importance of truth, brotherhood, peace, non-violence, equality and simplicity.

The most befitting tribute that we can pay him, is to follow the path he has shown us.
