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Early life

MK Gandhi, son of Karamchand Gandhi, the diwan (Prime Minister) of Porbandar, and Putlibai, Karamchand's fourth wife, was born on 2 Oct 1869 in Porbandar, Gujarat, India.

Growing up with a devout mother and surrounded by the Jain influences of Gujarat, Gandhi learned from an early age the tenets of non-injury to living beings, vegetarianism, fasting for self-purification, and mutual tolerance between members of various creeds and sects. He was born into the vaishya, or business, caste.

In May 1883, at the age of 13, Gandhi was married through his parents' arrangement to Kasturba Makhanji. Their first child, Harilal Gandhi, was born in 1888.

Gandhi was a mediocre student in his youth at Porbandar and later Rajkot. He barely passed the matriculation exam for the University of Bombay in 1887, where he joined Samaldas College. He was also unhappy at the college, because his family wanted him to become a barrister. He leapt at the opportunity to study in England, which he viewed as "a land of philosophers and poets, the very centre of civilization."

At the age of 18 on September 4, 1888, Gandhi went to University College London to train as a barrister. Kasturbha did not accompany him as their son Harilal, was just born. His time in London, was influenced by a vow he had made to his mother to observe the Hindu precepts of abstinence from meat, alcohol, and promiscuity.

Although Gandhi experimented with adopting "English" customs — taking dancing lessons for example — he could not eat the meat his landlady provided. She pointed him towards one of London's few vegetarian restaurants. Rather than simply go along with his mother's wishes, he read about, and intellectually embraced vegetarianism. He joined the Vegetarian Society, was elected to its executive committee, and founded a local chapter. He later credited this with giving him valuable experience in organizing institutions. Some of the vegetarians he met were members of the Theosophical Society, which had been founded in 1875 to further universal brotherhood and devoted to the study of Buddhist and Hindu Brahmanistic literature. Not having shown a particular interest in religion before, he read works of and about Hinduism, Christianity, Buddhism, Islam and other religions. He returned to India after being admitted to the bar of England and Wales, but had limited success establishing a law practice in Bombay. He ended up returning to Rajkot to make a modest living drafting petitions for litigants but was forced to close down that business as well when he ran afoul of a British officer. It was in this climate that (in 1893) he accepted a year-long contract from an Indian firm to a post in Natal, South Africa.



South Africa

In South Africa, Indians were ill-treated and disgraced. They were called 'Coolies'. Very soon Gandhiji too had his share of this experience. He was travelling in a train to Pretoria, in a first class compartment. On the way, a European passenger entered the compartment and found Gandhiji in it. He complained to the station master: 'Take this coolie out and put him in a lower class!'. Gandhiji raised an objection that he had a first class ticket, but nobody heard him. A policeman pushed him out with his bag and baggages. The train left. Gandhiji spent the night shivering in cold, but he did not touch his luggage.

This incident changed the whole course of his life. He decided to fight all such injustices with the weapon of Truth. Later on, he named this weapon Satyagraha.

More trouble was still in store for him. Next morning, he went to Charlestown by train. He had now to travel by a stage-coach to Johannesburg, but he was not allowed to sit inside the coach with white passengers. To avoid confrontation Gandhiji sat outside on the coach-box behind the coachman. After some time the conductor asked him to sit on a dirty sack on the step below. Gandhiji refused. The conductor began to pull him down and gave him many blows. Some of the passengers then came to his rescue and Gandhiji was allowed to sit where he was.

These experiences inspired him to do something to end these sufferings of Indians. He called a meeting of the Indians in Pretoria and told them to form a league. This he did with the help of Tyeb Haji Khan Muhammad, an influential Indian merchant. Only a handful of Indians attended it. This was his first public speech. It caused a new awakening among Indians.

"There is too much division among us," he said. "Why should we be kept apart by differences in birth, family, caste, and religion? Let us form a league, representing every group, and keep the Government informed of our difficulties and our needs!" The audience listened to him with great interest and decided to hold regular meetings of all the Indians in Pretoria.

Gandhi was entrusted with the task of translating into English all the correspondence exchanged between Dada, Abdulla & Co. and the rival party. After studying all the facts, he was convinced that his clients' claim was just. He knew, however, that if the case was taken to court it would drag on for a long time, so he called together representatives of both parties.

"Why don't you choose a good man, whom you both trust, to arbitrate between you?" he said.

The representatives listened to him with great attention. They were astonished at this new idea he put forward. This young man was not the kind of lawyer they were familiar with, but they appreciated his stand and agreed to his suggestion. An arbitrator was appointed, and he gave his award in favour of Gandhi's clients, Dada, Abdulla & Co. thus he settled out of court the case for which he had gone to South Africa. This enhanced his reputation. His first success as a lawyer was not a crushing victory over an opponent, but the triumph of good sense and humanity.



As his case was over, he decided to go back home. While going through the newspapers that day, Gandhi was surprised to read that a bill was pending before the Natal Legislative Assembly which would deprive Indians of their right to elect members to the Assembly. Here too they would be disfranchised. He realized the impact of this on the Indians, their trade and their very existence. He explained the consequences and urged the people to protest against it.

The Natal Indians then drew up a petition to the Legislative Assembly pleading against the bill. This was followed up by another petition to Lord Ripon, the then Secretary of State for the Colonies. This was signed by more than ten thousand Indians. Copies of the petition were circulated in South Africa, England, and India. There was much sympathy for the Natal Indians' plight, but the campaign had started too late to stop the bill becoming law. However, the campaign did do some good. For the first time, the people of India came to know of the conditions in Natal. An even more important result was the new spirit that now awakened the Indians in South Africa

The Indians in Natal pleaded him to stay with them and not return home. The merchants in the community gave him enough work to keep him busy too. When Gandhi applied for enrolment as an attorney to argue cases in court, the entire bar, composed of white lawyers, strongly opposed him. The Supreme Court of Natal overruled the objection, however, and he was allowed to practice

He proposed the formation of a permanent organization to safeguard the interests of Indians and laid the foundation for the Natal Indian Congress.

Gandhi had spent three years in South Africa. He was now a well-known figure with a good practice. He realized that he was in for a long stay and decided to go home and bring his wife and children to South Africa. Besides, a visit to India would be useful in gaining more support for the Indians in South Africa. He had arranged his work well enough to be able to take six months' leave. However, the plight of his fellow Indians in South Africa troubled him so much, that he could not enjoy martial bliss in peace. He made speeches to acquaint the people of India with the real condition of the Indians in South Africa. Many newspapers published his views and strongly supported his case. Summaries of these newspaper reports and comments reached South Africa long before Gandhi returned there. From it, the whites thought that Gandhi had abused them in India, and they were furious.

At the end of November, Gandhi received an urgent message from Natal asking him to return immediately. There were some developments which required his presence there. So Gandhi set sail for South Africa once more, taking with him Kasturbai and their two sons and also the only son of his widowed sister

As soon as Gandhiji landed at the port of Durban, a mob of angry whites threw stones and bricks and rotten eggs at him. They tore off his turban and beat him and kicked him until he was almost unconscious. He was saved by the wife of the Superintendent of Police who opened her parasol to protect him, holding it between him and the crowd. She led Gandhiji to a safe place.

The South African Government wanted to punish the wrong-doers, but Gandhiji refused to file a complaint. This had a very good effect on the whites.



In 1906, the Transvaal Government issued an order that all Indians — men, women and children should register themselves with Government by giving their full finger-prints and get their permits. He who fails to do so, will be fined, imprisoned or deported from the country.

Gandhiji declared: "This is an insult to the Indian community. We must fight this 'Black Act' in a non-violent way. The Government might use force, arrest us, send us to jail, and prosecute us, but we must face all this without resistance." He called this 'Satyagraha'.

Indians gathered in large numbers and took an oath in the name of God, not to register themselves. They showed wonderful unity. Hundreds of Indians were arrested, but they didn't put up any defence in courts and went to jail. Gandhiji, too, was imprisoned. At last Government made a compromise with Gandhiji and gave a promise in writing to repeal the Black Act if the Indians registered themselves voluntarily.

All the prisoners were released. Most of the Indians supported Gandhiji, but a few rose against. They accused him of being a coward. A Pathan named Mir Alam was one of them. When Gandhiji set out for registration, Mir Alam hit him with a heavy stick, Gandhiji was knocked down unconscious. When he recovered he found himself in the house of an unknown Englishman. The first thing he did was to inquire about Mir Alam and forgive him saying, 'I don't want to prosecute him.' Then he called the registration officer, gave him his finger-prints and got himself duly registered. Thus Gandhiji fulfilled his part of the agreement at the risk of life, but Government went back from its promise and refused to repeal the Black Act.

The Government of South Africa had imposed a heavy poll-tax on Indians. Gandhiji wanted to get all these injustices removed. So again he started the satyagraha movement. A big bonfire was lit and more than two thousand permits were burnt in it. Those who called Gandhiji a coward now greeted him as a real hero.

Gandhiji and many of his colleagues were imprisoned several times in course of this struggle. he gave up his practice as a lawyer and devoted all his time in the service of the great cause that he had taken up. He renounced his European dress and put on the simple clothes of a poor Indian labourer. He walked barefoot. He took only one meal a day.

In jail, Gandhiji did hard labour for nine hours a day cheerfully. He never complained about any hardships. He suffered terrible pain of boils in hands, yet did not budge from the work given him. He was made to carry luggages, and was taken to court handcuffed. The court in South Africa declared all Hindu, Muslim and Parsee marriages illegal and the Government supported the court. Kasturba could not brook this insult of Indian womanhood. She asked Gandhiji to enlist her name as the first woman satyagrahi. Women under her leadership broke the law and courted arrest. Kasturba was also arrested and jailed.

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. By the time all these



developments took place in Africa, it was 1914. Gandhiji had spent almost 20 years in that country. 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. Now he felt that his future activity lay not in South Africa but in India. Also, friends in India were pressing him to return home.

India

On his arrival in India, Gandhi went on a tour of the country and brought an awakening in the people living in villages and towns. He had promised Gokhale that he would spend at least a year trying to understand the existing situation in the country after being away for nearly 20 years. He travelled mostly in third class railway compartments. He saw the conditions in the country first-hand. He founded the Satyagraha Ashram in May 1915 and started getting involved in the social and political life of the country. The Champaran Satyagraha was his first major struggle.

Champaran

To the North of the Ganges, near the boundary of Nepal, was a small place called Champaran. It was noted for its cultivation of Indigo dye. Unfortunately, the British planters in Champaran treated the local workers most cruelly. Worse still, the Government paid little heed to the workers' cries. Gandhiji heard of this and went to Champaran to do something for them. He was unable to bear their miserable plight and began a satyagraha 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 'Champaran Satyagraha'.

Industrial Satyagraha

After this he led the 'Ahmedabad Satyagraha' to settle a dispute between the textile mill-owners and the laborers in 1918, about the grant of bonus and dearness allowance. Thousands of laborers struck work. They took a pledge not to resume work till their demand was met or arbitration was agreed upon. They also decided to observe non-violence and maintain peace. However, after a fortnight, the workers started getting tired. It was difficult to face starvation. It was unbearable for Gandhi that they should break the vow. He then decided to undertake an indefinite fast. This strengthened the workers and brought moral pressure on the mill-owners. They consented to arbitration after three days. Gandhi broke his fast. The Satyagraha was successful. This Satyagraha was significant in many respects. It was the first Satyagraha by industrial workers. It was wholly peaceful. It showed how workers could fight non-violently. It also gave rise to a strong Gandhian Labour Union.

Peasant Struggle

Then came the Kheda Satyagraha. Kheda was a district in Gujarat where there was a crop failure due to famine. Peasants were unable to pay the land revenue. The rules permitted suspension of revenue collection when the crops were less than four annas. According to the peasants' estimate, the crops were less than four annas. Gandhi's inquiries, as well as inquiries by independent observers, showed that the peasants were right. The Government, however, thought otherwise. It even turned



down a suggestion of an impartial enquiry. It started coercing the peasants to collect revenue. Petitions etc. were of no avail.

Satyagraha was therefore started on the 22nd March 1918. Gandhi advised the peasants to withhold payment to revenue. Satyagrahis took a pledge not to pay the same and resolved to be ready to face the consequences. Volunteers went to villages to keep up the morale of the peasants. The officials started attaching the property of the peasants including cattle and even standing crops. Notices were sent for attachment of the land. As in Champaran, Gandhi's main concern was to remove the fear from the peasants' minds.

The struggle went on for about four months till July. It tested the people's patience. The Government discontinued coercive measures. It advised that if the well-to-do peasants paid up, the poor ones would be granted suspension. In one sense, the Satyagraha was thus successful. The peasants' demand was not, however, fully met. Gandhi was not satisfied. He wanted people to come out stronger after Satyagraha. However, the Satyagraha resulted in awakening the peasants and educated them politically. This was the first peasant struggle under Gandhi's leadership.

These satyagrahas marked the beginning of Gandhiji's staunch struggle for Indian Independence. The unjust Acts and Commissions by the British Government were vehemently protested against. People realised the true meaning of independence and learnt to fight for their rights and struggled to regain their lost self respect. He kindled the flame of freedom in the hearts and soul of the people.

The Non Co-operation Movement

The Jallianwala baugh massacre where 1650 rounds of bullets were fired on a crowd of nearly 10,000 unarmed, peaceful men and women. About 400 persons were killed and 1200 injured, massacre shocked the country. General Dyer did this deliberately to teach the Indians a lesson. Jallianwala Bagh It showed how brutal the British power could get. It was followed by many more atrocities. They turned Gandhi fully against the British Empire.

During the First World War, the British Government promised the Indian Muslims that the Khilafat would not be violated and favourable peace terms would be offered to Turkey (the sultan of Turkey was the Khalifa- the religious head of the Muslim world). But when Turkey was defeated in the war, the promises were forgotten. Turkish Empire was broken. This caused agitation among the Indian Muslims.

Now the fire of rebellion had consumed the whole nation - the attainment of Swaraj became the key issue. The masses were getting awakened.

Gandhi announced the inauguration of Non-violent Non-Co-operation Movement on the **1st August 1920**. A special session of Congress in September accepted the programme. The Nagpur Congress in December 1920 endorsed it enthusiastically.

The programme consisted of the following points -

1. Surrender of titles and honours given by the British Government
2. Boycott of law-courts
3. Boycott of educational institutions



4. *Boycott of councils and elections*
5. *Boycott of foreign cloth*
6. *Boycott of Government functions*
7. *Picketing of liquor shops*
8. *Refusal to get recruited in the army*

The programme was not just negative. It included the building of new institutions. National Education was encouraged. Stress was laid on Khadi. Charkha became the symbol of freedom.

The Congress was completely reorganised and a new constitution drafted by Gandhi was adopted to make it a mass organisation and a useful tool for the struggle. The movement started with hartal, fasting and prayers. It soon spread like wildfire. The freedom movement had become a mass movement. Gandhi declared the Swaraj could be won within one year if the programme was fully implemented. People showed great unity, determination and courage. Hundreds of National schools were established. Tilak Swaraj Fund was over-subscribed. About 20 lakh charkhas began to be plied in the country. The boycott shook the Government.

'Quit India' Movement

The country wanted nothing but Complete Independence. The Congress passed the historic 'Quit India' resolution on 8th August 1942. Gandhi and other leaders were arrested. The country now rose in revolt. With most of the leaders in jail, it fought in the way it thought fit. Railway lines and telegraphic communications were interfered with. Government property was burnt or destroyed in several places. The people displayed unprecedented courage and heroism. Unarmed people faced police lathis and bullets. Young boys suffered flogging without flinching. Government machinery was paralysed and parallel Government was set up at some places.

Many workers went underground. About 1000 people died in firings during the movement. About 1600 were injured and 60000 people were arrested. It was noteworthy that violence was done to Government property only. Englishmen were safe throughout the Movement. There was little personal violence. Thus, while the masses rose to great heights of heroism, they also displayed remarkable restraint. It was surely Gandhi's contribution. The rebellion was, however, gradually put down.

The Hindu-Muslim unity, forged at the time of the Khilafat agitation, collapsed thereafter. The country witnessed a wave of communal riots. The British encouraged Muslim communalism and used it to obstruct the path of the Freedom Movement. M. A. Jinnah, an erstwhile liberal leader, who had been sidelined when the Congress became a mass organisation, assumed the leadership of Muslim communalism. The Muslim League became more aggressive, unreasonable and violent. The two-nation theory—that Hindus and Muslims were two separate Muslim homeland called 'Pakistan,' consisting of the Muslim-majority provinces. The two-nation theory was an untruth. The Hindus and Muslims had lived together in India for centuries. Gandhi fought this untruth with all his might. He did everything possible, including meeting Muslim League several times. But he failed. Jinnah wanted recognition of the League as the sole representative of the Muslims. It was not acceptable to the Congress.



Communal riots reached their peak. The whole country witnessed blood bath. In the Noakhali area of East Bengal, where Muslims formed 82% of the population, a reign of terror was let loose in a planned and systematic way in October 1946. The Hindus were killed and beaten, their property was burnt, thousands of Hindus were forcibly converted and thousands of Hindu women were abducted and raped. Temples were defiled and destroyed. Noakhali had its reaction in Bihar, where Hindus resorted to violence. Gandhi went to Bihar and brought the situation under control.

The British Government laid down the terms for India's Independence- partition of the country. The country was seized by communal madness. The situation in the country was explosive. Civil War was imminent. The Congress ultimately consented to the partition of India.

While the country was celebrating the Independence. Day on 15th August 1947, Gandhi was in Bengal to fight communal madness. Partition was followed by riots, a massacre of unparalleled dimensions. It witnessed movement of about one crore persons and killing of at least six lakh persons. Calcutta was once more on the verge of riots. Gandhi under-took a fast which had a magical effect.

Lord Mountbatten described him as 'one-man peace army'. Gandhi continued to plead for sanity in those turbulent days.

Final Journey

It was January 1948. Communal feelings were high due to the partition of the country. Hindu communalists thought that Gandhi was pro-Muslim. His fast for communal amity which resulted in the Government of India honouring its obligation of giving Rs. 50 Crores. to Pakistan had further angered them. Gandhi was staying at the Birla house in New Delhi. He used to hold evening prayer meetings regularly. He used to speak on various issues. Once a bomb was thrown during his prayer meeting. Still, Gandhi did not permit security checks.

On 30th of January 1948, about 500 people had gathered for the prayer meeting on the lawns of the Birla House. Gandhi was a bit late as Sardar Patel had come to see him. At 5.10 p.m. he left the room and walked to the prayer ground. He was supporting himself on the shoulders of Abha and Manu, his grand daughter-in-law and granddaughter respectively. People rushed forward to get his darshan and to touch his feet.

Gandhi folded his hands to greet them. When he was a few yards away from the prayer platform, a young man came forward. He saluted Gandhi, suddenly took out a small pistol and fired three shots. The bullets hit Gandhi on and below the chest. He fell to the ground with the words. 'Hey Ram' on his lips. He died within minutes. The crowd was shocked. The assassin was Nathuram Godse, a worker of Hindu Mahasabha. He was caught and handed over to the Police.

Gandhi's body was taken to Birla House. People thronged the place and wept bitterly. The whole world was plunged in sorrow. The next morning, Gandhi's body was placed on a gun-carriage and taken to Rajghat. Millions of people joined the procession to have the last darshan (glimpse) of the Mahatma. His son Ramdas lit the funeral pyre. The Mahatma had become a martyr for communal unity.