

Mahatma Gandhi – A Spiritual Quest



By

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Volumes and volumes have been written already by innumerable authors of repute in India and abroad covering each and every aspect of Mahatma Gandhi's life and personality-political, religious, spiritual, leadership, social reformer, *karmayogi* and many others. A great many volumes have been written by Gandhiji himself about his own life and works as well as essays on a variety of subjects covering all walks of life; social, political, economical, industrial, religious, self- realisation, nature, health, art, music, science, war and peace, humanity etc.etc. It will not be an exaggeration to say that it is impossible to read in one life time all what has been already written about Mahatma Gandhi.

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At any rate the young generation of today may not have the time, opportunity or even an inclination to browse through all this literature to acquire some in-depth knowledge of this great son of India who truly belonged to the entire world; in whom the whole humanity can take pride that such a great soul once existed amongst them, as Albert Einstein said, "Generations to come, it may well be, will scarce believe that such a man as this one ever in flesh and blood walked upon this Earth."

Unfortunately the message of Mahatma Gandhi is completely lost on most of our political leaders today. They are found to be muttering some oft repeated clichés, merely paying lip service to him every year on his birthday. Worse still, some ill informed political pigmies often misquote Gandhi Ji (without understanding the full import of his message) to further their narrow political gains and confuse the masses.

In this paper I have made an attempt to highlight the central theme of Gandhi Ji's life and activities, analyse specific aspects of his personality and generally offer to the reader some material for enabling him to compose a clear picture of the stuff and essence that Mahatma Gandhi was made of – a picture which he may otherwise escape, not being able to study the large volume of writings about him.

Sri Aurobindo, the great poet, philosopher and Yogi has written, in his "Letters on Yoga": "The true business of man upon earth is to express in the type of humanity a growing image of the Divine; whether knowingly or unknowingly, it is to this end that Nature is working in him under the thick veil of her inner and outer processes." Swami Vivekananda expressed similar view when he said that "Each soul is potentially divine. The goal of life is to manifest this divinity within."

Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, born at Porbandar on the 2nd October, 1869 in an orthodox Hindu, well-to-do *Bania* family, was destined to manifest this divinity within him in his life time. His father was the Prime Minister in Rajkot and though not very educated, he was a man of principle and commanded a lot of respect. As a young boy Gandhi Ji revered him and sometimes feared him but he loved his mother who was a deeply religious woman and the outstanding impression that she left on Gandhi Ji's mind was that of saintliness. He was a shy boy in his school days and would avoid meeting other boys lest they made fun of him. This introvert nature worked in Gandhi Ji throughout his life allowing him to introspect and look within. He happened to see a play *Harishchandra* in his childhood days. The truthful life of the king Harishchandra made such an impression on the young mind that he saw the play several times. This play sowed the seed in Gandhi Ji for leading his life based on truth, with whatever ordeal he may have to go through for preserving it.

As a child Gandhi Ji used to be afraid of ghosts and spirits and would avoid going in the dark. Rambha, his nurse and an old servant of the family, suggested to him, as a remedy to remove the fear, repetition of the word *Rama*. The "*Ramanama*" remained with Gandhi Ji throughout his life literally till his last breath! In 1936, Gandhi Ji wrote in *Harijan*, a weekly journal he started publishing in 1933 from Yerwada Jail: "I am a stranger to yogic practices. The practice I follow is a practice I learnt in my childhood from my nurse.....*Ramanama* has

become a huge thing in my mental firmament....It is a sun that has brightened my darkest hour.” When he was 13, his father was on a sick-bed and used to listen to the recital of Ramayana every evening. The melodious singing and the discourse by the reader made an everlasting impression on Gandhi Ji who used to sit through the recital. This laid the foundation of his deep devotion to *Ramayana*. He writes in his autobiography: “Today I regard the Ramayana of Tulsidas as the greatest book in all devotional literature.”

In 1888, at the age of 19, Gandhi Ji was sent to London to study Law. Sometime in 1890 he came in contact with two theosophist brothers. The brothers once invited Gandhi Ji to read with them ‘*The Song Celestial*’, *Bhagwad Gita*’s English translation by Sir Edwin Arnold. Gandhi Ji felt quite ashamed of not having read *Gita* previously but went along to read it with them. Two verses in the second chapter (2.62, 2.63), translated in *The Song Celestial* as follows:

If one ponders on subjects of the sense, there springs attraction;

From attraction grows desire, desire flames to fierce passion,

*Passion breeds recklessness; then the memory-all betrayed-
Lets noble purpose go, and saps the mind.
Till purpose, mind and man are all undone.*

made a deep impression on his mind and kept ringing in his ears. As his interest in the *Gita* grew he started regarding it as the best book for the knowledge of Truth. Later, when he was in South Africa, he dived into it deeper and even learnt 13 chapters by heart (by practising during his morning ablutions!). Two words in *Gita*: *Aparigraha* (non-accumulation) and *Samabhaava* (equipoise) gripped him immediately and he gave up almost all material possessions and overcame his anger. He even allowed his insurance policy to lapse believing that God will look after his and his family needs. *Gita* became his lifetime companion and guide which he always consulted in his moments of gloom. He once said, “My life has been full of external tragedies and if they have not left visible and indelible effects on me, I owe it to the teachings of the *Bhagwad Gita*”².

After *Gita* he started reading about Hinduism and abandoned the idea that Hinduism was full of superstitions. At this time he also read about the life of Gautama Buddha in another Edwin Arnold’s book *The Light of Asia*. That ‘Renunciation was the highest form of religion’ appealed to him greatly.

Gandhi Ji returned to India in 1891 with a Barrister degree from London but he felt quite helpless and did not succeed in practicing law in the courts. He even tried to get an English teacher’s job in Bombay but was rejected since he was not a graduate! In 1893 he got a small job offer from a Porbandar firm which had some business in South Africa. The firm had a court case pending and they wanted Gandhi Ji to go there and help the local lawyers engaged by the firm. The case was expected to be decided in a year. However, on reaching there and studying the case, Gandhi Ji realized that the litigation would be a much more prolonged

² Natesan: Speeches and Writings of Mahatma Gandhi, Madras(4th edition) p. 1061

affair which could not be beneficial to any of the parties but only to the local lawyers. Gandhi Ji felt that it was his moral duty to reach an honourable compromise between both the parties in their own interest. He started working for it with his knowledge of law and his persuasive style using better side of human nature appealing to men's hearts. Within a year he succeeded in his efforts and both the parties were happy over the outcome.

During his stay in South Africa he had many bitter experiences as a result of the colour prejudice of white Europeans against Africans and Asians, in part supported and encouraged by the Government policies. On several occasions he was even physically assaulted. Once, while travelling by train in a first class compartment, he was pushed out and thrown on the platform because the 'white' people did not like 'coloured' men to travel first class! On another occasion, on his after dinner walk, he was pushed off a footpath by a policeman because that footpath was meant to be used only by white Europeans. On both these occasions Gandhi Ji had to pocket the insult as he realised there was little point taking up the matter to higher authorities under the prevailing conditions there. But the firmness and righteousness of his manner in dealing with these instances, wherein he displayed no bitterness against the people who insulted him, rather a resolve in him for striving against the system that allowed such injustice, had earned him a lot of respect amongst the local Indian trading community. When he was to return to India on the completion of the case for which he was sent there, the local community persuaded him to stay on in South Africa to take up their cause of protesting against a proposed bill by the Government to levy an unjust tax on Indian migrants. He agreed to this and soon founded an organization known as Natal Indian Congress and started a non-violent agitation against the unjust policies of the system that supported and promoted blatant racial discrimination. Thus, what started as one year assignment, ended up in a twenty year long crusade for Gandhi Ji in South Africa to lead a non-violent struggle against racial discrimination. During this period he had also followed his legal practice about which he wrote: "...a large part of my time during the twenty years of my practice as a lawyer was occupied in bringing about private compromises of hundreds of cases. I lost nothing thereby – not even money, certainly not my soul."

During a twenty- four hour train journey from Johannesburg to Durban once, Gandhi Ji happened to read Ruskin's *Unto This Last*. The book cast a magic spell on him as he discovered some of his deepest convictions reflected in it. He strongly believed that the good of individual contained in the good of all and he was passionate about the dignity of labour. And he found Ruskin echoing the same sentiments when he read: "...a lawyer's work has the same value as the barber's since all have the same right of earning their livelihood from their work." Gandhi Ji writes in *The Story of My Life*, "I determined to change my life in accordance with the ideals of this book." And so he did, as was evident from his later activities in establishing the Phoenix Settlement in 1904, a farm on which everyone would labour, draw the same living wage and attending to the printing press work (for printing of *Indian Opinion*, a weekly paper started by Gandhi, Ji) in spare time. The same spirit of Gandhi Ji was working when he started the Indian Ambulance Corps for nursing the wounded Zulus, a local tribe who 'rebelled' against the Government for imposing a new tax and were brutally beaten.

For opposing the Asiatic Registration Act which came to be called the Black Act, Gandhi Ji started a non-violent movement which he called *Satyagraha*. This started a prolonged struggle against a series of Government policies that were being announced to restrict Indians' freedom to carry on with their livelihood, including the one for Indians 'marriages which were held invalid if that were not celebrated according to Christian rites and were not registered. Finally, after eight years the Government yielded and the great *Satyagraha* struggle triumphed; it appeared that the Indians in South Africa were at peace, at last. Gandhi Ji returned to India from South Africa finally in 1914 about which he mentioned in his autobiography, "It was difficult for me to leave South Africa, where I had passed twenty-one years of my life sharing to the full in the sweet and bitter of human experience and where I had realized my calling in life."

On his return to India, Gopal Krishna Gokhale encouraged Gandhi Ji to join the Indian freedom movement and helped him in the establishment of the Sabarmati Ashram in Ahmedabad in 1915, from where he could conduct his activities. Based upon his experience of South Africa, Gandhi Ji used *Satyagraha* as his main weapon in various movements to fight the British Government for obtaining Independence of India. The *Satyagraha*, as stated earlier was founded on the two pillars of Truth and Non-violence, as he wrote in *Young India*³ in March, 1921: "*Satyagraha* is literally holding on to Truth and it means, therefore, Truth force. Truth is soul or spirit. It is, therefore, known as soul force. It excludes the use of violence because man is not capable of knowing the Absolute Truth and, therefore, not competent to punish."

Truth and Non-violence were Gandhi Ji's two lungs which he had naturally adopted throughout in his life and applied with precision in his spiritual quest. In his own words: "Just as a scientist will work wonders out of various applications of the laws of nature, a man who applies the laws of love with scientific precision can work wonders. Non-violence is infinitely more wonderful and subtle than forces of nature like for instance, electricity. The law of love is a far greater science than any modern science."

Paramhansa Yogananda, a highly venerated spiritual ambassador of India who met Mahatma Gandhi in his Wardha Ashram in August 1935, has written about Gandhi Ji's *Satyagraha* in his autobiography: "Epics shall someday be written on the Indian *Satyagrahis* who withstood hate with love, violence with non-violence, who allowed themselves to be mercilessly slaughtered rather than retaliate. The result on certain historic occasions was that the armed opponents threw down their guns and fled, shamed, shaken to their depths by the sight of men who valued the life of another above their own."⁴

Gandhi Ji himself regarded the entire activities of his political and social life as a process of his spiritual development which provided him sufficient impetus and strength to carry out his tremendous work in these fields. In his own words: "My experiments in the political field are now known. But I should certainly like to narrate my experiments in the spiritual field which are known only to myself, and from which I have derived such power as I possess for

³ A weekly paper started by Gandhi Ji in 1919

⁴ Autobiography of a Yogi: Jaico Publishing House, 1997, p.448

working in the political field.”⁵His ultimate objective in life was Self-realization, the realization of God, Truth and he was consciously working for this aim. He has expressed this clearly in his autobiography: “What I want to achieve – what I have been striving and pinning to achieve these thirty years – is Self-realization, to see God face to face, to attain Moksha.”⁶

He saw Truth as God and said: “This truth is not only truthfulness in word, but truthfulness in thought also, and not only the relative truth of our conception, but the Absolute Truth, the External Principle, that is God.....I worship God as Truth only. I have not yet found Him, but I am seeking after Him.”⁷

Indian scriptures hold a Guru to be indispensable for Self- realization. Gandhi Ji believed in this institution but thought that if one cannot get a real Guru, a sham substitute is not only useless but injurious. He described Gokhale as his political Guru but could not say that of anyone as a Guru in religious matters, although he said that he was greatly influenced by Tolstoy and Ruskin in religious matters. He wrote: “I have no spiritual Guru, but believing in the institution, I have been in search of one for the last thirty years. The very search is the greatest consolation for me.”⁸ When Paramhansa Yogananda visited Wardha Ashram in 1935, Gandhi Ji had expressed a wish to receive the *Kriya Yoga* from him. Yogananda initiated Gandhi Ji and a few others in the Ashram into the technique of *Kriya Yoga*. Mentioning this event in his autobiography Paramhansa Yogananda writes: “I was touched by the Mahatma’s open mindedness and spirit of enquiry. He is childlike in his divine quest, revealing that pure receptivity which Jesus praised in children, “..... of such is the kingdom of heaven.”⁹

Indeed Gandhi Ji was his own Guru in spiritual matters and he reached his goal of Self-realization by his own efforts and by himself, following the instruction of Lord Krishna given to Arjuna in *Bhagwad Gita* (6.5):

m/njsnkReukRekua ukRekueolkn;sr~ A

vkReSo fg vkReuks cU/kqjkReSo fjiqjkReu% AA

*Let man uplift the self (ego) by the self; let the self not be self-degraded (cast down). Indeed the self is its own friend; and the self is its own enemy.*¹⁰

It is generally known through the History books, although there is no known evidence of it, that Rabindranath Tagore bestowed the title of Mahatma on Gandhi Ji in 1915 after Gandhi had called him Gurudev. Gandhi Ji himself was not comfortable with the title; he said, “... with each day I realize more and more that my Mahatmaship, which is a mere adornment, depends upon others. I have shone with glory borrowed from my innumerable co-workers.”

⁵ MKG: The Story of My Life: Navajivan Publishing House, Introduction

⁶ MKG: The Story of My Experiments with Truth: Navajivan Publishing House, Introduction

⁷ Ibid

⁸ Collected Works of MKG: Vol. XXVIII p. 289

⁹ Autobiography of a Yogi: Jaico Publishing House, 1997, p.444

¹⁰ As translated in God Talks with Arjuna, The Bhagwad Gita by Sri Paramhansa Yogananda

In his autobiography he has written: “Often the title has deeply pained me and there is not a moment I can recall when it may be said to have tickled me.” Indeed, it was for this humility of the great soul that millions and millions of people all over the world adored him. The internationally known journalist and American writer John Gunther wrote about him: “He is adored as well as worshipped. He is a unique kind of dictator, one who rules by love. His photograph is enshrined in a million cottages; children, sick, are touched with his likeness to make them well. Peasants may come twenty miles simply to see his train pass, even if it does not stop and he is not visible. To the submerged masses, the “dumb half-starved millions” as he frequently calls them; he is a man of miracles. All over India I noticed how the faces of people lit up when his name was mentioned. And he is the only man in India who by a single word, by lifting his little finger could instigate a new national revolt, who could start civil disobedience again among more than 350 million people – roughly one fifth of the human race.”

Principles of his political activities throughout his life were derived from his religious instincts and he openly admitted it, even in opposition to it from certain quarters. He said, “For me politics has no existence without religion. Politics stands at a lower pedestal than religion. Without religion politics is a web of death because it kills the soul.....Those who say that politics and religion should not be mixed have no understanding of either politics or religion.” In 1934 he wrote: “The whole of my life is saturated with the religious spirit. I could not live for a single second without religion. Many of my political friends despair of me, because they say that even my politics are derived from my religion. And they are right. My politics and all other activities of mine are derived from my religion.....Religion means being bound to God. If you recognize that truth, naturally God regulates every activity of yours”¹¹ Gandhi Ji was indeed a saint who did not cease to be one when he entered politics.

In his lifetime Gandhi Ji was often accused of changing his views on certain matters of principle or being obstinate on certain occasions. He found himself facing spiritual dilemma, at times when he was not certain, whether to follow or not to follow a certain principle. He made no claims to infallibility and would let the whole world know if he was groping in the dark. He described himself as an average man with less than average ability. What he once wrote about Tolstoy was equally true of him: “Tolstoy’s so-called inconsistencies were a sign of his development and passionate regard for truth. He often seemed inconsistent because he was continually outgrowing his own doctrines. His failures were public; his struggles and triumphs private.”

Gandhi Ji was a staunch Hindu and was proud of being born as one since Hinduism allowed him to respect other faiths and imbibe good points from them. This affirmed his own conviction which he had inculcated from childhood as his father’s friends came from a variety of religions viz. Hindu, Jain, Muslim, Parsee, Christian....He laid down the rule in his Sabarmati Ashram: “The Ashram believes that the principal faiths of the world constitute a revelation of truth, but as they have all been outlined by the imperfect men, they have been affected by the imperfections and alloyed with untruth. One must therefore entertain the same

¹¹ Harijan, March 2, 1934.

respect for the religious faiths of others as one accords to one's own."¹² However, he did not blindly accept any religious tenet or practice. He applied the 'acid test of reason' to every formula of every religion e.g. he lashed out against those who supported untouchability or those against granting more freedom to women.

In his typical simple style he said that it was the way a man lived, not the recital of a verse, or the form of a prayer which made him a good Christian, a good Muslim or a good Hindu. Reflecting upon his ideas on all inclusive Hinduism he wrote in *Harijan*: It is because I am a *Sanatani Hindu* that I claim to be a Christian, a Buddhist and a Muslim. Some Muslim friends feel that I have no right to read Arabic verses from the Quran, but they do not know that true religion transcends language and scripture.....I would continue to ask God to give me the strength not to be angry with my accusers, but to be prepared even to die at their hands without wishing them ill. I claim that Hinduism is all inclusive and I am sure that if I lived up to my convictions I would have learnt not only Hinduism but also Islam."¹³

But he was against conversion from one to another religion. He once chided a correspondent who had urged him to save his soul by conversion to Christianity: "God is not encased in a safe to be approached only through a little hole in it, but He is open to be approached through billions of openings by those who are humble and pure of heart."

Gandhi Ji was a true *Karmayogi*. All his life he ceaselessly worked understanding the real worth of labour and leaving the result of his actions to God. He never hesitated to do work with his own hands and was always willing to learn and teach different skills. At different times he had found himself engaged in different activities using the acquired skills e.g. he had been a lawyer, a writer, a teacher, a correspondent, a doctor, a nurse, a farmer, a tailor, a barber, a washer man, a sweeper, a cook, a weaver, a spinner, a beggar, a dacoit, a prisoner, a priest, a servant, a shoe maker....He learnt the art of shoe making from his friend Kallenbach in South Africa. Once he sent a pair of *chappals* made by him to a prominent person who remarked that I can put these *chappals* on my head but I cannot wear them on my feet!

Gandhi Ji's participation in politics, as he explained to Montagu, the Secretary of State for India, was only an extension of his social activity which he found necessary to identify himself with the whole mankind, if he wanted to lead a religious life. He was indeed a religious man, a man of God whom the world venerated as *Mahatma* - a great soul. A great soul indeed but no one, not even his biggest adversaries, ever failed to notice his great humility, simplicity and saintliness that were the hallmarks of this great man who set himself a very harsh standard for measuring his own life, as he echoed the words of saint Surdaas, in the Introduction of his autobiography:

Where is there a wretch

So wicked and loathsome as I?

I have forsaken my Master

¹² From Satyagraha (Sabarmati) Ashram Rules

¹³ *Harijan*: April 27, 1947

So faithless have I been.

India got her Freedom on the 15th August, 1947 but it was a fractured freedom since it came with the country's partition. It is indeed a strange irony of India's destiny that the Mahatma who had brought the whole nation together; Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs alike, to win the country's freedom by fighting the British Empire with truth and non-violence as his only weapons, had to be a living witness to the widespread blood-bath in the Hindu-Muslim riots in the wake of partition, alas – a mournful celebration of the Independence! He tried very hard and wore himself out in his efforts to restore the communal harmony and peace between Hindus and Muslims but his efforts did not have much effect. They even blamed him for the division of India and said that his non-violence had been outclassed by violence. Gandhi Ji suffered great torture of mind and spirit but did not give up his efforts to bring about the communal peace. On being congratulated on his birthday that year he asked, "Where do congratulations come in? Would condolences be not more appropriate?"

Gandhi Ji may have had a premonition of the coming event as only after four months of his birthday, this apostle of non-violence met his end in a violent manner. While he was going to address an evening prayer meeting in Delhi, Nathuram Godse, suddenly appearing from the waiting crowd, fired at him three bullets in quick succession; bowing to Gandhi Ji in reverence before firing the shots from close range. Mahatma Gandhi uttered his last words "*Hey Ram*" as his mortal remains fell to the ground and the great soul rose to have an eternal tryst with his Maker!

The bullets which passed through Gandhi Ji's chest reverberated in millions of hearts across the world. Thousands of miles away in United States a farmer wondered why anybody would like to kill such a noble man; a taxi driver, on being told of his assassination, painfully remarked: "Yeh, they even had to get that little guy!"; Pearl S. Buck's ten year old son with tearful eyes told his mother: "How much better it would have been if nobody knew how to make a gun!" People all over the globe suddenly realized that he had penetrated deeply into their consciousness.

In death, Gandhi Ji's face wore a peaceful smile. His youngest son Devadas Gandhi wrote later, "So serene was the face and so mellow the halo of divine light that surrounded the body that it seemed almost sacrilegious to grieve....."

Gandhi Ji's spiritual quest was now over; he had attained his ultimate destiny of Self-realization, the *Moksha*. India's destiny of attaining Independence was linked with Gandhi Ji's destiny, just as Gandhi Ji's destiny was linked with India's Independence. While India attained her freedom from the British rule, Gandhi Ji attained his from human bondage!

Gandhi Ji's life remains a source of inspiration to millions of people. Martin Luther King, the great American leader of the twentieth Century, drew huge inspiration from Gandhi Ji's life and successfully fought for Negroes' rights in America employing Gandhi Ji's non-violent methods. He made a month long trip to India with his wife in 1959 and he said, "To other countries I may go as a tourist. But to India I come as a pilgrim." Many Indians referred to

him as ‘American Gandhi’, the ‘Black Gandhi’. Martin Luther King was awarded the Noble Prize for Peace in 1964.¹⁴

This was first published by K.N.Book House Delhi in their book "*Pad Chinha Mitatey Nahin*".

¹⁴ It is ironical that they failed to confer the Noble Prize on Gandhi Ji. Gandhi Ji was actually nominated for the Peace Prize in 1937, 1938, 1939, 1947 and finally, a few days before his assassination in 1948. The missing Noble Laureate has been publicly regretted by later members of the Noble Committee, some even saying that it was a loss of the Noble Prize rather than that of Mahatma Gandhi.

Geir Lundestad, Secretary of Norwegian Nobel Committee in 2006 said, “The greatest omission in our 106 year history is undoubtedly that Mahatma Gandhi never received the Nobel Peace Prize; whether Nobel Committee can do without Gandhi is the question.”

Later when the Dalai Lama was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1989, the Chairman of the Committee said that this was “in part a tribute to the memory of Mahatma Gandhi”