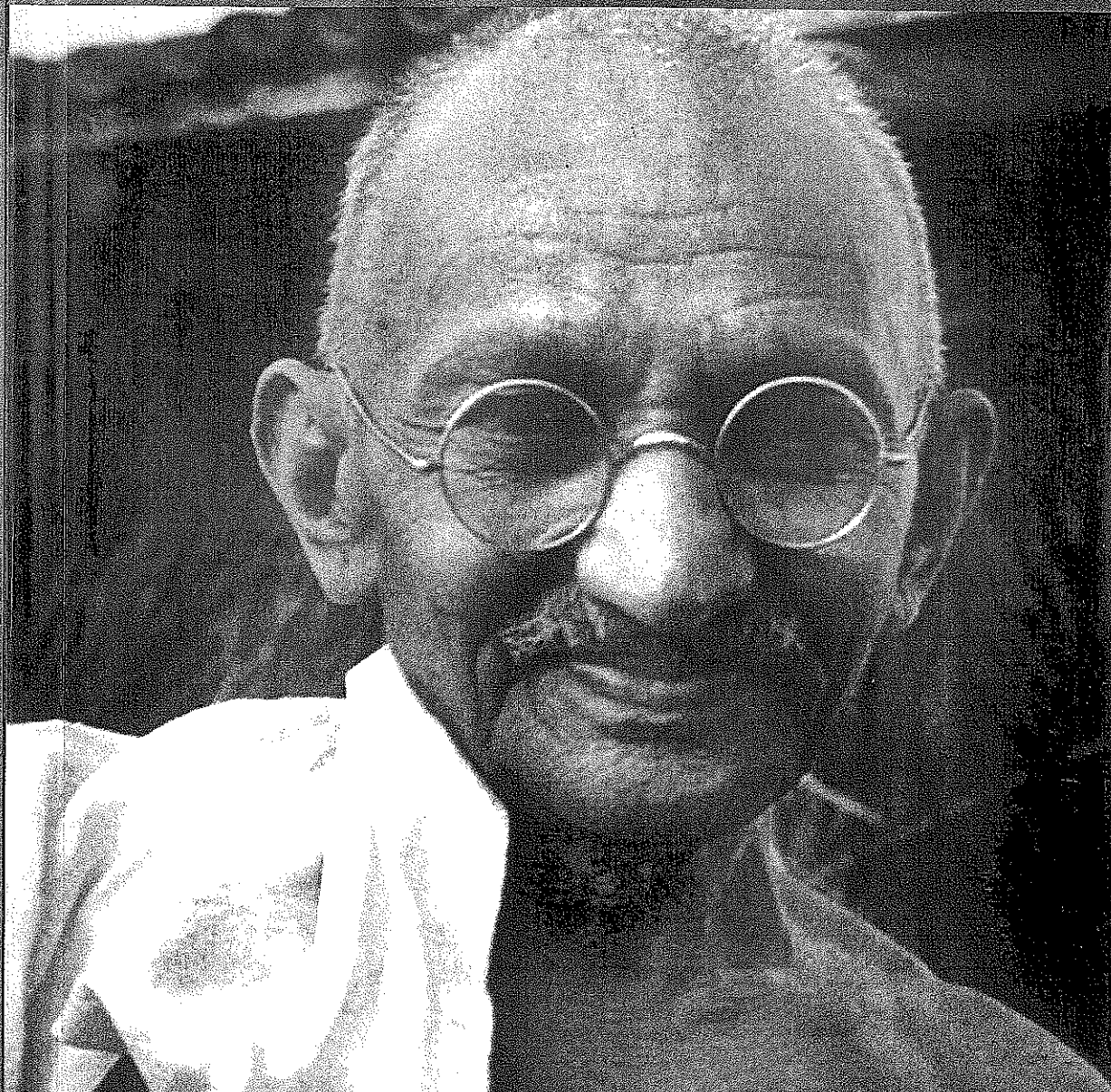


GANDHI THE MAN

How one man changed himself to change the world



EKNATH EASWARAN

"Comes closer to giving some sense of how Gandhi saw his life than any other account I have read." — Bill McKibben

Gandhi: Then & Now

Growing up in Gandhi's India

I like to say I grew up not in British India but in Gandhi's India, because he dominated my world like a colossus. I was a small boy when he returned after twenty years in South Africa and was hailed as Mahatma, "great soul," in 1915. I was too young (and my little village too isolated) to have much awareness of the tragedies that impelled him into national leadership in those early years. Only when I went to college, at the age of sixteen, did I discover his weekly "viewspaper," *Young India*. Gandhi was pouring his heart out in those pages, and despite the country's widespread illiteracy, I daresay his words reached into every one of India's villages as the paper was passed from hand to hand and read out to audiences everywhere along the way.

My college years were turbulent ones in Indian affairs. I must have been a junior on the night of December 31, 1929, when at the stroke of midnight the Indian Congress declared independence and unfurled the flag of a free India. Its motto, pure Gandhi, came from our most ancient scriptures: *Satyam eva jayate*, "Truth ever conquers." Jawaharlal Nehru said later that on that night "we made a tryst with destiny." Those were thrilling times for a village boy away at college, but they were only the beginning. Like the Americans with their Declaration of Independence, we had also made a tryst with war.

Gandhi, Jawaharlal
Nehru, and Maulana
Azad checking the
time, Wardha, August
1925



THE SALT MARCH

But this was to be a war without weapons. In March 1930, Gandhi wrote the British Viceroy that he intended to launch nonviolent resistance by marching to the sea to break a statute that made the sale and manufacture of salt a government monopoly, adding that he would accept the consequences cheerfully and that he was inviting the rest of India to do the same. That letter, the journalist Louis Fischer observed with pleasure, "was surely the strangest ever received by the head of a government." But the Salt March provided brilliant theater. Gandhi and his small band of volunteers took fourteen days to reach the sea, stopping at every village along the way and making headlines around the world. By the time he reached the ocean the procession was several thousand strong. When he picked up a handful of sea salt from the beach and raised it as a signal to the rest of India, millions of people around the world must have watched him on the newsreels. But in India nobody needed the media. The country simply exploded in utterly nonviolent disobedience of British law.

What no one dared to expect was that in the face of police charges, beatings, arrests, and worse, the nonviolence held. Everyone knew Gandhi would drop the campaign if there was any violence on our part, no matter what the provocation. We "kept the pledge" day after day, filling the jails literally to overflowing. Many veterans of those days recall their terms in prison as the high point of their lives; Gandhi had made "suffering for Truth" a badge of honor.

I can't describe the effect this had on me, on all of India. Obviously it was high drama, but most significant for me was the human alchemy being wrought. These were ordinary people, family, friends, school chums, acquaintances, men and women we saw daily in the marketplace or at temple, at work or school; all ages, high caste and low, educated and ignorant, cultured and crude, rich beyond calculation and unbelievably

poor. How had they suddenly become heroes and heroines, cheerfully stepping forward to be beaten with steel-tipped batons, hauled off to jail, stripped of their livelihoods, sometimes even shot? Called to be more than human, we looked around and saw that we were capable of it. Gandhi was right: the body might be frail but the spirit was boundless. We were much, much stronger than we had thought, capable of great things, not because we were great but because there was divinity in us all – even in those who swung the clubs and wielded the guns. For me, the burning question became: What was the secret of this alchemy?

GANDHI IN HIS ASHRAM

Graduate studies took me to a university in central India very near Gandhi's ashram, the little community he called Sevagram, "village of service." For the first time for me he was actually within reach. One weekend I decided to visit him and perhaps find answers to my question.

I had to walk the last few miles from the train station, and the sun was low on the horizon when we arrived. A crowd had gathered outside a little thatched cottage where Gandhi had been closeted in urgent national negotiations since early morning. My heart sank. He would be tired after all that, tense and irritable, with little time for guests like me.

But when the cottage door opened, out popped a lithe brown figure of about seventy with the springy step and mischievous eyes of a teenager, laughing and joking with those around him. He was striding off for his evening walk and motioned us to come along. After a while most of the crowd fell away. He didn't simply walk fast; he seemed to fly. With his white shawl flapping and his gawky bare legs he looked like a crane about to take off. I have always been a walker, but I had to keep breaking into a jog to keep up with him.

My list of questions was growing. This was a man in his seventies – the twilight of life by Indian standards of those days – burdened daily

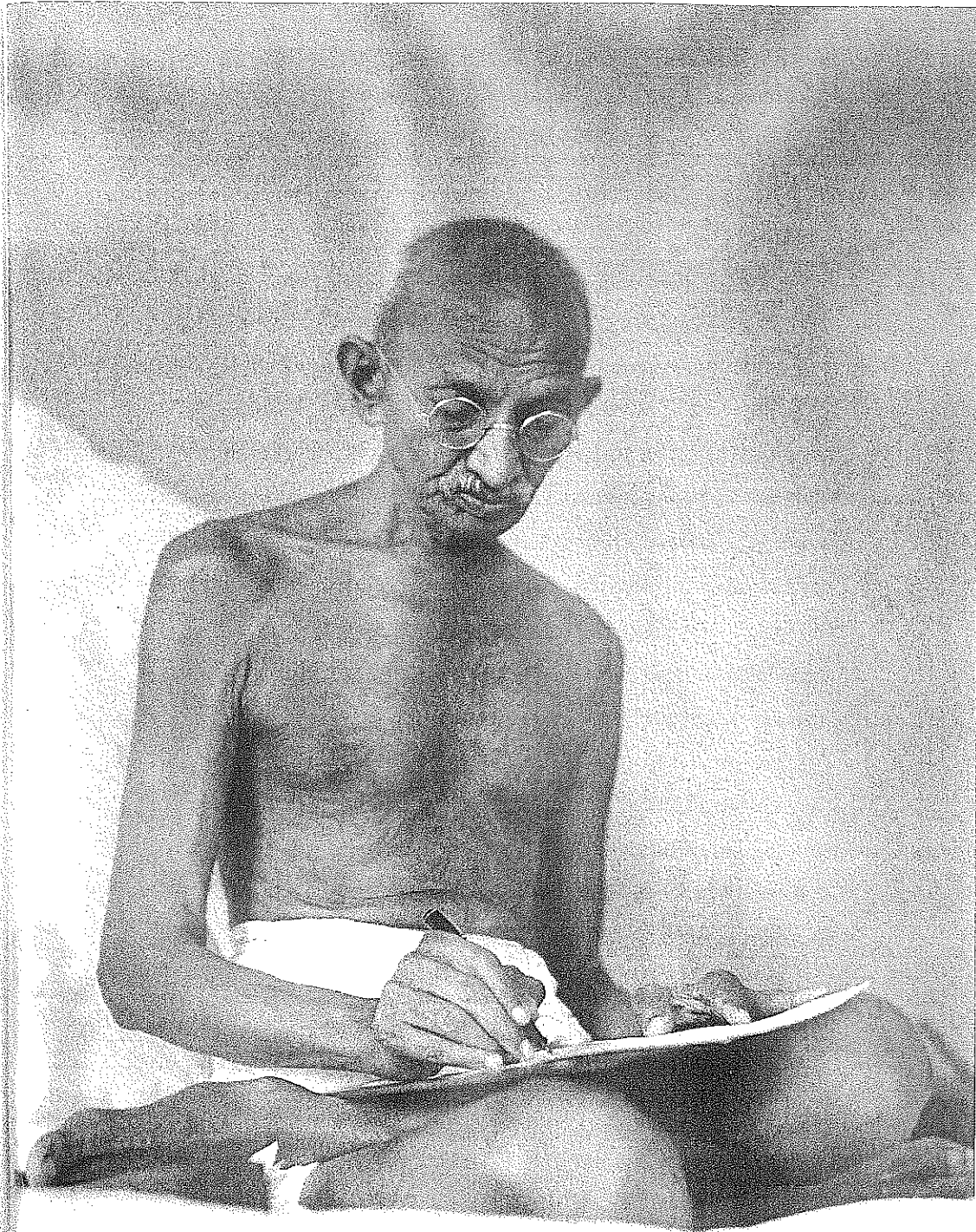
with responsibility for four hundred million people. He must have lived under intense pressure fifteen hours a day, every day, for probably fifty years. Why didn't he get burned out? How was he able to maintain this freshness? What was the source of this apparently endless vitality and good humor?

After the walk it was time for Gandhi's prayer meeting. By this time it was dark, and hurricane lanterns had been lit all around. Gandhi sat straight with his back against a tree, and I managed to get a seat close by, where I could fix my whole heart on him. A Japanese monk opened with a Buddhist chant and then a British lady began one of Gandhi's favorite hymns, John Henry Newman's "Lead, Kindly Light." Gandhi had closed his eyes in deep concentration, as if absorbed in the words.

Then his secretary, Mahadev Desai, began to recite from the Bhagavad Gita, India's best-known scripture, which is set on a battlefield which Gandhi said represents the human heart. In the verses being recited, a warrior prince named Arjuna, who represents you and me, asks Sri Krishna, the Lord within, how one can recognize a person who is aware of God every moment of his life. And Sri Krishna replies in eighteen magnificent verses unparalleled in the spiritual literature of the world:

They live in wisdom who see themselves in all and all in them, whose love for the Lord of Love has consumed every selfish desire and sense craving tormenting the heart. Not agitated by grief or hankering after pleasure, they live free from lust and fear and anger. Fettered no more by selfish attachments, they are not elated by good fortune nor depressed by bad. Such are the seers.

Sanskrit is a sonorous language, perfect for recitation. As Arjuna's opening question reverberated through the night air, Gandhi became absolutely motionless. His absorption was so profound that he scarcely



Drafting a document
at Mrla House,
Bombay, August 1942

seemed to breathe, as if he had been lifted out of time. Suddenly the Gita's question – "Tell me of those who live established in wisdom" – became a living dialogue. I wasn't just hearing the answer, I was seeing it, looking at a man who to the best of my knowledge fulfilled every condition the Gita lays down.

I had always loved the Gita for its literary beauty, and I must have read it and listened to commentaries on it many times. But seeing it illustrated by Gandhi opened its inner meaning. Not just "illustrated": he had become those words, become a living embodiment of what they meant. "Free from selfish desires" didn't mean indifference; it meant not trying to get anything for yourself, giving your best whatever comes without depending on anything except the Lord within. And the goal clearly wasn't the extinction of personality. Gandhi practically defined personality. He was truly original; the rest of us seemed bland by comparison, as if living in our sleep. He spoke of making himself zero but seemed to have become instead a kind of cosmic conduit, a channel for some tremendous universal power, an "instrument of peace."

These verses from the Gita are the key to Gandhi's life. They describe not a political leader but a man of God, in words that show this is the very height of human expression. They tell us not what to do with our lives but what to be. And they are universal. We see essentially the same portrait in all scriptures, reflected in the lives of spiritual aspirants everywhere.

NONVIOLENCE

"It was only when I had learned to reduce myself to zero," Gandhi says, "that I was able to evolve the power of satyagraha in South Africa." Satyagraha – literally "holding on to truth" – is the name he coined for this method of fighting without violence or retaliation. Gandhi had a genius for making abstruse ideas practical, and one of the best examples

comes when he explains the basis of satyagraha. In Sanskrit the word *satya*, "truth," is derived from *sat*, "that which is." Truth is; untruth merely appears to be. Gandhi brought this out of the realm of doctoral dissertations and into the middle of politics. It means, he said, that evil is real only insofar as we support it. The essence of holding on to truth is to withdraw support of what is wrong. If enough people do this – if, he maintained, even one person does it from a great enough depth – evil has to collapse from lack of support.

Gandhi was never theoretical. He learned by doing. Satyagraha continued to be refined in action all his life; he was experimenting up to the day he was assassinated. But the essentials are present from the very beginning in South Africa.

First is the heartfelt conviction that a wrong situation wrongs both sides. Europeans and Indians alike were degraded by race prejudice; a lasting solution, therefore, had to relieve this burden for all involved. In spiritual terms this follows from the unity of life, which is what Gandhi's "truth" means in practice. But it is also profoundly practical, because only a solution for everyone can actually resolve the problem and move the situation forward. More than just both sides "winning," everyone is a little nobler, a little more human, for the outcome.

Equally essential but hardest to grasp intellectually, nonviolent action means voluntary suffering. That in fact is how it works. Gandhi discovered in South Africa that reason is ultimately impotent to change the heart. Race prejudice was already causing suffering; the task of satyagraha was to make that suffering visible. Then, sooner or later, opposition had to turn to sympathy, because deep in everyone, however hidden, is embedded an awareness of our common humanity.

Clearly there is nothing passive about this kind of resistance. "The nonviolence of my conception," Gandhi says, "is a more active and a more real fighting than retaliation, whose very nature is to increase

wickedness." That is the point: violence only makes a situation worse. It cannot help but provoke a violent response. Strictly speaking, satyagraha is not "nonviolence." It is a means, a method. The word we translate as "nonviolence" is a Sanskrit word central in Buddhism as well: *ahimsa*, the complete absence of violence in word and even thought as well as action. This sounds negative, just as "nonviolence" sounds passive. But like the English word "flawless," *ahimsa* denotes perfection. Ahimsa is unconditional love; satyagraha is love in action.

GANDHI'S MESSAGE

Gandhi's mission was not really the liberation of India. That was a tremendous achievement, but India was essentially a showcase, a stage for the world to see what nonviolence can accomplish in the highly imperfect world of real life. I haven't even touched the surface of those achievements; there are miracles enough in Gandhi's story to show that human nature is much loftier than we imagine. Our future depends on making that discovery.

"There is nothing new about ahimsa," Gandhi insisted. "It is as old as the hills." Throughout history all lasting relationships, all communities and societies, even civilization itself, have been built on the renunciation of violence for the sake of some greater good. Every conflict large or small is an opportunity to advance a little in evolution or move backwards. In this sense I believe civilization has reached a crossroads. A handful of angry people today, perhaps even one angry person, can wreak destruction on the other side of the globe. Violence has ceased to surprise us even in our homes and schools. We have made a culture of violence, and unless we change direction, it can destroy a great deal of progress that has been painstakingly built up over centuries of human evolution.

In today's language, Gandhi gave us the basis for a technology of

peace. He gave us tools for resolving conflicts of all kinds, which anyone can learn to use. But it is urgent to understand his message that nonviolence is a way of thinking, a way of life, not a tactic, but a way of putting love to work in resolving problems, healing relationships, and generally raising the quality of our lives. We don't begin on the grand stage he acted on; he did not begin that way himself. He began with his personal relationships, aware that he could not expect to put out the fires of anger and hatred elsewhere if the same fires smoldered in his own home and heart. His nonviolence is not a political weapon or a technique for social change so much as it is an essential art – perhaps *the* essential art – of civilization.

In other words, nonviolence is a skill, just like learning to read. Love is a skill. Forgiveness is a skill. The transformation of anger is a skill. All these can be learned. We cannot say we aren't capable of nonviolence; all we can say is we are not willing to do what is necessary to learn.

Finally, for spiritual seekers of all persuasions, Gandhi showed us that the spiritual life need not mean retiring to a monastery or cave. It can be pursued in the midst of family, community, and a career of selfless service. Even without reference to spirituality, if we look upon the overriding purpose of life as making a lasting contribution to our family and society, Gandhi gave us a higher image for ourselves, a glorification of the innate goodness in the human being, whose joy lies in living for the welfare of all. This is Gandhi's ultimate message for us, and no sentence of his is more significant than where he says – and remember, this is a man who never let even a word stand if he did not know it to be true from his own experience – “I have not the shadow of a doubt that any man or woman can achieve what I have, if he or she would make the same effort and cultivate the same hope and faith.”



Porbandar

“I was born at Porbandar, otherwise known as Sudamapuri, on the 2nd October, 1869. I passed my childhood at Porbandar. I recollect having been put to school. It was with some difficulty that I got through the multiplication tables. The fact that I recollect nothing more of those days than having learnt, in company with other boys, to call our teacher all kinds of names, would strongly suggest that my intellect must have been sluggish, and my memory raw.”