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## Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi

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## MOHANDAS KARAMCHAND GANDHI

As the polyglot empires of the West fill into irreversible decline after the First World War, Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi (1869-1948) came to symbolize the political aspirations of the colonial world and, for many, the superiority of eastern spirituality to western materialism.

A complex, charismatic, somewhat paradoxical figure, Gandhi shepherded the Indian nationalist movement from its early liberal reformist phase in 1919 through profound turmoil and redefinition to independence amidst vicious communal warfare in 1947. Revered by many as a saint and dismissed by others as a humbug, Gandhi virtually embodied the struggle between East and West, combining a thorough education in western law and politics with a deep veneration for traditional Hindu folkways. As a political leader he courageously organized, mobilized, and led millions of Indians in peaceful opposition to British colonial rule. As the spiritual leader known as Mahatma, or "Great Soul," he reached the hearts and minds of millions in the West upon whose support colonialism depended and upon whose growing opposition it ultimately foundered.

Gandhi, whose surname means "grocer," was born in Porbandar, India, the son of a provincial official of the shopkeeping caste. Wed at the age of thirteen, he sired four sons. After studying law in England he returned to India in 1891 but had little success in a private practice. In 1893 he moved to South Africa after accepting a temporary position with an Indian company.

Provoked by South Africa's discriminatory racial laws, Gandhi organized the

Natal Indian Congress in 1894, served as its secretary, and established a private law practice in Durban and Johannesburg. During the Boer and Zulu Wars, Gandhi organized an Indian Ambulance Corps and was decorated by the British colonial government. In 1904 he founded and began editing a weekly newspaper, Indian Opinion. Three years later he led a non-violent campaign of mass civil disobedience against an Asiatic registration law but won few concessions.

Upon returning to India in 1915 following the outbreak of the First World War, Gandhi joined the Indian National Congress, a moderate reformist organization, and urged Indians to participate in the British war effort. Despite promises to support self-governing institutions, the government dragged its heels and even passed two anti-sedition laws in 1919 for the internment of political agitators. Elected president of the Indian National Congress about the same time, Gandhi founded the Satyagraha League to resist this legislation and began a mass campaign of non-cooperation, including demonstrations, work stoppages, and a boycott of British goods. When British troops fired on an unarmed crowd at Amritsar, Gandhi fasted to protest the growing violence. Clashes between Hindus and Muslims led to further bloodshed. Following an uprising in 1922, Gandhi was arrested, charged with seditious conspiracy, and sentenced to six years in prison. Released because of illness in 1924 and criticized for his insistence on non-violence, he suspended his political activity for a time and concentrated on his writing.

In 1930 Gandhi led a march to the sea to protest the Salt Acts and joined

more radical leaders to demand full independence. This generally peaceful campaign used a variety of tactics to secure a constitution but was also marred by dissension inside the nationalist movement between radicals and moderates as well as Hindus and Muslims. Repeatedly arrested, Gandhi was imprisoned during much of the Second World War for demanding immediate independence. After the war he helped negotiate independence but condemned the partition in 1947 as a "vivisection." Bitter religious strife between Hindus and Muslims, which had already created more than ten million refugees, led Gandhi to commence a "fast unto death" in January 1948 to protest the bloodshed. Within a few days he secured a peace agreement among the major leaders but was assassinated by a Hindu extremist before the end of the month.

The bibliography of books on Gandhi runs into the hundreds of volumes. The eighty volumes of his collected works include more than ten million words. Chief among his writings is An Autobiography: The Story of My Experiments with Truth (1927), a candid and sometimes humorous account of his life originally written as a series of articles. Written in the confessional tradition, Gandhi reveals the link between his political and spiritual concerns in describing his struggle to achieve *ahimsa* (nonviolence), *satyagraha* (firmness in truth), and *brahmachari* (celibacy). Satyagraha in South Africa (1928) describes his early experiments with *satyagraha*, or nonviolent non-cooperation, which was inspired in part by his correspondence with Leo Tolstoy and which acquired its name as a result of a newspaper contest.

Gandhi's earliest book, Hind Swaraj or Indian Home Rule (1909), decried the soul sickness of modern civilization in which moral values are contradicted by materialistic standards. Thus the logic of Gandhi's spiritual politics led him to forsake the traditional symbols of authority and adopt a simple and austere lifestyle. Opposed to industrialization, Gandhi pursued a vision of economic self-reliance through his *khadi* (home-spun) movement, symbolized by the spinning wheel, in which he promoted village handicrafts. The major features of his philosophy may be gleaned from various collections of his writings, including The Mind of Mahatma Gandhi (1945) and All Men Are Brothers: Life and Thoughts of Mahatma Gandhi, as Told in His Own Words (1958).

Gandhi remains a fascinating but controversial figure whose name still evokes strong reactions and considerable ambivalence. No one better expresses this ambivalence than George Orwell, who, in "Reflections on Gandhi" (1949), laced an almost visceral disdain for the man with a grudging admiration, concluding that "regarded simply as a politician, and compared with the other leading political figures of our time, how clean a smell he has managed to leave behind!" Richard Attenborough's Oscar-winning homage, Gandhi (1982), received a book length rebuttal by Richard Grenier, who attacked the film as "straight pacifist disinformation." Many critics have complained that Gandhi was an impractical idealist whose espousal of nonviolent resistance and opposition to industrialization threatened to keep India enthralled in poverty and ignorance. Yet nothing about Gandhi's life or philosophy is as simple as his more uncritical

detractors and admirers appear to believe.

Nevertheless, his writings reveal a remarkable degree of critical self-awareness and self-deprecation. As Orwell commented, he did not "specialize in avoiding awkward questions." Whether seen as an idealist, a humbug, or an anachronism, it is evident today that his ideals are honored more in the breach than in practice. As Brian Martin remarks: "Modern India, busily industrialising and preoccupied with strengthening its industrial machine, is a negation of the mahatma's conception of what a state should be." It is his critical perspective on the modern world that may prove to be Gandhi's most important legacy.

-- Steven Alan Samson