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Mahatma Gandhi

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Introduction

Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, revered throughout the world as Mahatma Gandhi, remains one of the twentieth century's most iconic and influential figures. His life's journey — from a shy, unremarkable boy in coastal Gujarat to the leader who steered India to independence — is a story of profound transformation, vision, and unyielding commitment to truth and nonviolence. Gandhi's biography is much more than a chronicle of events; it is an exploration of how an individual's conscience, grounded in moral and spiritual principles, can shape the destiny of a nation and influence the course of human history.

Born in 1869 into a family of modest means but lofty values, Gandhi's early years were marked by conventional customs, family responsibilities, and a grounding in religious tradition. The values of Vaishnavism and Jainism that permeated his childhood home would later influence the bedrock of his philosophy. From his early arranged marriage to his struggles as a student, Gandhi's formative years were as ordinary as they were unremarkable — yet, within his experience of humility and limitation lay the seeds of a profound and revolutionary vision.

Gandhi's journey took him far from his homeland — first to England to study law, and then to South Africa, where a single act of racial injustice on a train set him on a new path. The two decades he spent in South Africa were a crucible that shaped his methods and ideals, forging his concept of Satyagraha — nonviolent resistance — and his commitment to justice in the face of adversity. It was here, in the fields of struggle far from India's borders, that Gandhi began to find his voice as a leader and a conscience for the oppressed.

Upon his return to India, Gandhi transformed the struggle for independence from a movement of the educated and privileged into a mass mobilization that spanned castes, religions, and regions. Through his tireless campaigns — from the fields of Champaran to the Dandi Salt March, from the jails of the British Raj to the riot-torn cities at partition — he demonstrated that social and political change could be pursued without violence or hatred. More than a tactician or politician, Gandhi became a symbol: of the power of peaceful protest, the importance of self-reliance, and the necessity of holding firm to one's ideals even in the face of overwhelming odds.

Yet Gandhi's life was also shadowed by complexity and contradiction. Deeply principled, he nevertheless made tactical retreats; a champion of unity, he witnessed the trauma of partition; a spiritual leader, he faced criticism for his views and for aspects of his personal life. His assassination, just months after India gained its long-awaited independence, underscored both the depth of division in Indian society and

the enduring resonance of his vision.

This biography seeks to illuminate the extraordinary life of Mahatma Gandhi: his origins, his struggles, his evolution, and his enduring legacy. In tracing his journey, we uncover not only the making of a leader but also the birth of an ideology that would inspire movements around the world. Gandhi's story is, at its heart, a testament to the transformative power of faith in human dignity, the resilience of the human spirit, and the unbreakable connection between means and ends in the pursuit of justice.

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CHAPTER ONE: Early Life and Family Background

The story of Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi begins not with political rallies or acts of global resistance, but in a modest home in a small, bustling town on the coast of Gujarat. Born on October 2, 1869, in Porbandar, a princely state then under British suzerainty, he arrived into a family steeped in tradition, duty, and a quiet devotion to faith. Porbandar itself was a port town, looking out onto the Arabian Sea, its history tied to trade and regional politics, a setting that provided a stable, if somewhat provincial, backdrop for his earliest years.

He was the youngest of his father Karamchand Uttamchand Gandhi's children, a fact that perhaps afforded him a certain degree of latitude and affection within the family hierarchy. Karamchand, known as Kaba to his intimates, was no ordinary figure in the local landscape. He served as the dewan, or chief minister, first in Porbandar, then in Rajkot and Vankaner. Though he lacked advanced formal education, his administrative acumen and integrity were widely recognized, earning him respect and influence within the small states he served. His political life, navigating the intricate relationships between rulers, subjects, and the overarching British authority, would have provided young Mohandas with an early, albeit perhaps unremarked, glimpse into the world of governance and public affairs.

Karamchand's personal life had seen its share of sorrow before Mohandas arrived. His first two wives had died prematurely, each leaving behind a daughter. His third marriage was childless, before he married Putlibai, Mohandas's mother. Putlibai was a woman of deep religious conviction, hailing from a family that followed the Pranami Vaishnava tradition. Her faith was expressed not just in rituals and prayers, but in rigorous personal discipline, including frequent fasting. This profound piety and moral fortitude left an indelible mark on her youngest son, instilling in him an early reverence for religious principles and an understanding of the power of self-denial and devotion. The home environment was thus a blend of practical worldly affairs, represented by Karamchand's profession, and spiritual earnestness, embodied by Putlibai.

The family belonged to the Modh Bania caste, traditionally merchants, which placed them within the complex tapestry of Hindu society. While Vaishnavism, with its focus on the worship of Vishnu and its emphasis on devotional practices, formed the primary religious framework of the household, the cultural landscape of Gujarat was also strongly influenced by Jainism. Jainism, an ancient Indian religion, holds *ahimsa* (nonviolence) as its central tenet, along with principles like asceticism, fasting, vegetarianism, and respect for all life forms. These Jain influences were palpable in the region and within the Gandhi family's wider social circle, contributing to an

atmosphere where nonviolence and vegetarianism were not just dietary choices but deeply ingrained moral values. These twin streams of Vaishnava devotion and Jain ethical principles, flowing through his home and community, would fundamentally shape Mohandas's own evolving worldview, long before they manifested as a political philosophy.

Mohandas had two older brothers, Laxmidas and Karsandas, and an older sister, Raliatbehn. While his brothers would later play supportive roles in his life, particularly Laxmidas who assisted with his education plans, their childhood interactions and individual personalities are less documented than Mohandas's own journey. The dynamics of growing up as the youngest in a relatively large family, with the responsibilities and perspectives of older siblings, would have been part of his daily experience, contributing to his formation in ways that might seem small but are integral to the picture of a developing individual.

In accordance with the prevailing social customs of the time in India, particularly within their community, young Mohandas was married at a tender age. At just 13 years old, he was wedded to Kasturba Makhanji Kapadia, who was also 13. Arranged marriages of children were a common practice, seen as securing family alliances and ensuring the proper upbringing of children within traditional structures. While the practice is viewed differently today, it was the norm then, and Mohandas's marriage was typical of his social standing and era.

Kasturba, affectionately known as "Ba" (meaning 'Mother'), would become his lifelong companion and an unwavering support, albeit sometimes a quiet or even initially resistant one, through the many trials and radical changes that marked his journey. Their early years together were, like their marriage, conventional for the time, navigating the transition from childhood partners to young adults within a joint family structure. Over the course of their long marriage, they had five children. Their first child tragically died in infancy, a shared sorrow that would have marked them deeply. They subsequently had four sons who survived: Harilal, born in 1888; Manilal, born in 1892; Ramdas, born in 1897; and Devdas, born in 1900. Their lives and relationships with their father would later become complex narratives in their own right, but in these early years, they represented the growth of a family unit formed from that child marriage.

Mohandas's formal education began in Porbandar. Like many children of his background, his early schooling would have focused on basic literacy, arithmetic, and perhaps some traditional religious texts. The setting was likely informal by modern standards, but it provided the foundational knowledge upon which all later learning would be built. His father's relocation to Rajkot, where he served as dewan, meant a change in environment for the young boy. Rajkot was a slightly larger, more central town in the Kathiawar region, offering access to better educational institutions.

It was in Rajkot that Mohandas continued his studies, enrolling in Alfred High School at the age of 11. His time in high school was, by his own later admission, rather unremarkable. He described himself as a shy and timid student, one who was perhaps more interested in avoiding the playground than excelling in the classroom. Academically, he was mediocre, neither brilliant nor particularly poor, simply a diligent student who generally followed the rules but showed no early signs of the extraordinary intellect or leadership qualities that would later define him. His studies were briefly interrupted around the time of his marriage, a common occurrence when such significant life events took precedence.

Despite his initial lack of academic distinction, Mohandas persevered. In November 1887, at the age of 18, he successfully graduated from high school in Ahmedabad. This was a significant step, marking the completion of his secondary education and opening up possibilities for further studies. The question then became: what next? The path forward was not immediately clear, and the options for higher education in the region were limited.

In January 1888, he enrolled at Samaldas College in Bhavnagar. At the time, this was the only institution in the area offering degrees. However, his stint at Samaldas College proved to be short-lived and unsatisfying. He found the subjects difficult to grasp and the teaching methods uncongenial. Perhaps the rigid structure of higher education did not suit his temperament, or perhaps he simply hadn't yet found a subject that ignited his intellectual curiosity. Whatever the reason, he felt out of place and struggled to find his footing.

His dissatisfaction with the college in Bhavnagar led him to make a decision that would prove pivotal. He dropped out of Samaldas College and returned to his family in Porbandar. Back home, the question of his future once again became pressing. He had completed high school, attempted college unsuccessfully, and was now a young man with a wife and the expectations of his family resting upon him. It was at this juncture that a suggestion was made, one that would change the entire trajectory of his life, pointing him towards distant shores and experiences far removed from the quiet rhythm of Kathiawar. But that momentous step would come only after much deliberation and a leap of faith into the unknown. His early years, marked by a conventional upbringing, family ties, religious influences, and a seemingly unremarkable educational path, had come to a close, having provided the quiet, stable foundation upon which a revolutionary life would unexpectedly be built.

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