

# MOHANDAS GANDHI

1869-1948

"THIS IS THE MAN," ROMAIN ROLLAND SAID OF GANDHI IN 1924, "who has stirred three hundred million people to revolt, who has shaken the foundations of the British Empire, and who has introduced into human politics the strongest religious impetus of the last two hundred years." But the most unusual tribute to Gandhi is undoubtedly George Orwell's, shortly before his death in 1950. Suspicious of pacifists and vegetarians, Orwell had to overcome most of his instincts to find anything good in a person venerated by so many: "Saints," his "Reflections on Gandhi" begins, "should always be judged guilty until they are proved innocent, but the tests that have to be applied to them are not, of course, the same in all cases."

After putting Gandhi to the test, Orwell comes down clearly on the side of the Mahatma ("great soul"), with a comment on his ability to "disinfect" the political air, as India and Great Britain settled down to decent and friendly relations. "One may feel, as I do, a sort of aesthetic distaste for Gandhi," Orwell said, and regard his basic aims "as anti-human and reactionary; but regarded simply as a politician, and compared with other leading political figures of our time, how clean a smell he has managed to leave behind!"

This rather minimalist endorsement of one of the great teachers of nonviolence is instructive, since it dramatizes the conflicting attitudes aroused by even the most consistent pacifist. It suggests as well how little is known and understood still about nonviolent approaches to social change.

In a relatively brief history, nonviolence made a great leap forward, nonetheless, during and through Gandhi's experiments with truth, and his writings, as well as the scholarship about him, provide the most extensive record available of its history. Among the items central to students are the film of Richard Attenborough, *Gandhi* (1982) and

the psychoanalytic study, *Gandhi's Truth*, by Erik Erikson.

Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi was born on October 2, 1869, in Porbandar, India, on the Kathiawar peninsula, where his father was prime minister of the region. Married, according to custom, at thirteen, Gandhi attended Samaldas College, after completing the local high school. In 1888, leaving his wife and child, he sailed for England, where he was admitted to the Inner Temple to learn the law. Completing his studies and called to the bar in 1891, he returned to India, still rather infatuated with English tradition and finery.

Unsuccessful in his practice at home, Gandhi sailed for South Africa as an adviser to a Muslim in 1893. There he became active as an organizer in various associations and served in the ambulance corps during the Boer War. In 1903, after two years in India and the birth of his fourth son, he returned with his family to South Africa. Taking a vow of chastity at this time, he became more deeply involved, through his law practice in Johannesburg, in seeking a redress of grievances for Asians in South Africa. By this time he knew the essays of John Ruskin and Thoreau's *Civil Disobedience*; he also translated Tolstoy's *Letter to a Hindu* and established Tolstoy Farm, for Indian resisters. Imprisoned on several occasions, Gandhi was nonetheless successful in campaigns against discrimination, and by the time he returned to India in 1914, he was well-known in his home country. In 1909 he had written, while in jail, that one of the inner struggles of his life was "to bring Hindus and Muslims together."

In 1915, Gandhi founded his own ashram, a retreat for communal living, near Ahmedabad, in northern India, and began a campaign on behalf of millworkers. That continued, with mass civil disobedience, through the 1920s. His goal by this time was Indian independence from Great Britain, as well as peaceful co-existence between Hindus and Muslims. In prison, he wrote *Satyagraha* in South Africa, published essays in numerous periodicals, and read daily in the *Bhagavad Gita*.

In the early 1930s, following the proclamation of the Indian Declaration of Independence, Gandhi was imprisoned on several occasions, and in 1932, he announced a fast unto death in protest

against the treatment of untouchables. His efforts for independence, which included a successful trip to England, continued through the early years of the Second World War. The struggle led to his and his wife's imprisonment, where they remained until her death in February 1944, and his release the following May. In 1947, he initiated another fast to bring an end to religious strife in India. A year later, on January 30, 1948, he was assassinated by a radical Hindu, as he moved through a crowd at Birla House, in New Delhi.

"We must widen the prison gates, and we must enter them as a bridegroom enters the bride's chamber. Freedom is to be wooed only inside prison walls and sometimes on gallows, never in council chambers, courts, or in the schoolroom," Gandhi wrote. The extent of his influence as a thinker is suggested by the frequency with which such statements serve as a source of inspiration and guidance for resisters throughout the world. This particular one provided the title for Philip Berrigan's fourth book, *Widen the Prison Gates*, written during his own imprisonment between 1970 and 1972. For almost every civil disobedient for justice in the latter 20th century, Gandhi, that "seditious Middle Temple lawyer and half-naked fakir," as Winston Churchill called him, has been a presence, a person to be contended with, either challenged or imitated.

Martin Luther King, Jr., in a famous photograph from the Civil Rights movement, is seated beneath a picture of Gandhi, and Daniel Berrigan, S. J., recorded his own reflections during his time in Danbury Federal, in *Lights on in the House of the Dead*. Numerous Americans have gone to India to learn how to appropriate Gandhi's spirit and tactics to later struggles for justice. Most recently, the Reverend Carl Kline, who initiated the peace witness of citizens from the United States on the borders of Nicaragua and Honduras, conducted such a pilgrimage as an apostle of Satyagraha (truth-seeking).

In this most violent of centuries, Gandhi's influence still manages, as Orwell said, to "disinfect" the political air; and Martin Luther King, Jr., Gandhi's principal American disciple, regarded his approach to social change as the only practical one for a nuclear age. "The choice," as King said, "is clearly between nonviolence and

nonexistence."

BY MOHANDAS GANDHI

*An Autobiography: The Story of My Experiments with Truth.* Boston: Beacon Press, 1962.

ABOUT MOHANDAS GANDHI

Erikson, Erik H. *Gandhi's Truth: On the Origins of Militant Nonviolence.* New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 1969.

Fischer, Louis. *Gandhi: His Life and Message for the World.* New York: New American Library, 1954.

Payne, Robert. *The Life and Death of Mahatma Gandhi.* New York: E.P. Dutton and Company, 1969.