

1. "Autobiography of Mahatma Gandhi": An Open Book

Or

Personal and Social Experiences of Mahatma Gandhi

Autobiography

Mahatma Gandhi's famous autobiography 'The Story of my Experiments with Truth' is one of the imperishable classics of our time. It unfolds the various stages of the development of a shy Kathiawad boy into one of the greatest men of modern times. It originally appeared in Gujarati in 'Navajivan' and in English in 'Young India'. It was first issued in book form in 1925. In the Introduction of this book, Gandhi explained:

"My experiments in the political field are now known, not only to India, but to a certain extent to the 'civilized' world. For me, they have not much value; and the title of 'Mahatma' that they have won for me has, therefore, even less. 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. But I should certainly like to narrate my experiments in the spiritual field which are known to myself, and from which I have derived such power as I possess for working in the political field."

In this autobiographical record the events and circumstances of his life from birth to the non-cooperation movement in India in 1920 is described in detail. In the last part of the narrative, Gandhiji wrote taking leave of his readers.

"The path of self-purification is hard and steep. To attain to perfect purity one has to become absolutely passion-free in thought, speech and action: to rise above the opposing currents of love and hatred, attachment and repulsion. I know that I have not in me as yet that triple purity, in spite of constant ceaseless striving for it. That is why the world's praise fails to move me, indeed it often stings me....."

Gandhiji did not continue the story beyond 1920 because his life became an open book, known to the public. The latter part of his life till he was assassinated on 30th January 1948 was a sort of the life of the nation as well.

The Autobiography 'The story of My Experiments with Truth' is divided into 5 parts. The first part has 25 chapters and it deals with Gandhiji's Birth, Parentage, Education, Marriage, influences, Higher Studies and life in England and his coming back to India. The Second Part has 29 chapters which depicts his struggle to start his career as a lawyer, visit to South Africa, experiences of colour discrimination, organisation of Natal Indian Congress in South Africa and thus beginning of his political career. The Third part has 23 chapters which tells about his transformation of thoughts, his attainment of Brahmacharya, his return to India for a brief period to study the Indian political situation and return to South Africa again. The Fourth part consists of 47 chapters. At this time his thoughts took a definite shape and his actions were clear to him. The birth of Satyagraha took place in these chapters and it depicts the emergence of a Mahatma with a crystalline clarity. The last fifth part contains 43 chapters which shows his arrival on the Indian political scene, with his determination to remove the social inequalities and to reform his fellowmen in thoughts, words and deeds. He took farewell from his readers in his last chapter as there was nothing more which was not known to public. In his last lines he asks his readers to join him to pray to the God of truth to grant the boon of *Ahimsa* in mind, words and deed.

PART I

Mahatma Gandhi, the Titan of the modern age, was born on 2nd October, 1869 at Porbandar, Kathiawad in Gujarat. His father, Karamchand Gandhi was the Prime Minister in Porbandar and his mother, Putlibai, was a deeply religious lady. Gandhiji passed his childhood in Porbandar but later came to Rajkot. He was a shy and mediocre student. From his early childhood he loved truth and frankness. His mother's religious nature left an indelible impression on his memory. He was greatly influenced by the two plays *Harishchandra* and *Shravana Pirtibhakti*. These plays strengthened his love for truth and obedience for his parents. The religious atmosphere at home deeply influenced him and cultivated a deep devotion to *Ramayana*, *Bhagvat Gita*, *Mahabharata*. *Jainism* and other religions also inspired him.

He was married to Kasturbai at the tender age of thirteen. His marriage became a hindrance in his own study. He passed his matriculation in 1887 and sailed for England on 4th September, 1888 to study law. Before leaving India, he vowed not to touch wine, woman and meat and he kept this vow throughout his life. In England he was infatuated by the English style of living, but this infatuation gradually subsided. He passed his examination and returned to India in 1891.

PART II

On returning to India he started practising law at Rajkot and then at Bombay. He did not prove to be a successful lawyer. In 1893 he sailed for

South Africa as counsel for an Indian firm. Here, for the first time he experienced the colour discrimination. He was insulted, humiliated, beaten, kicked and thrown out of trains and hotels. He saw the piteous condition of Indians and decided to help them. In 1894 he organised the Natal Indian Congress to give the hard pressed Indians, right political, spiritual and moral leadership.

After the expiry of one year Gandhiji made preparations for his return home. In his farewell party, he read in a newspaper that the South African Government was planning to pass the 'Indian Franchise Bill'. This Bill sought to deprive the Indians of their right to elect members of the Natal Legislative Assembly. Gandhiji gave up the idea of returning to India and offered opposition to the Franchise Bill. The Bill was however, passed, but Gandhiji and his followers continued to oppose it.

Gandhiji dedicated himself to the service of India. He opposed the indentured labour system and by his efforts and opposition the proposed £ 25 tax was reduced to £ 3.

His insatiable appetite for knowledge increased with time. He strived for self realization. Gradually the Truth of life began to dawn on him. He made the religion of service his own as he felt that God could be realized only through service.

In 1896 he came to India for six months. In India fame of his work and dedication in South Africa had reached before him. He was a well known figure at that time. In India he came in close contact with Lokmanya Tilak, Gokhale and Sir Pherozshah and was very much influenced by them. Gokhale gradually became his political mentor.

Same year in December, he received a cable from Durban to come soon. This time he took his wife, two sons and the only son of his widowed sister, with him.

PART III

Gandhiji's following increased considerably in South Africa. In order to seek complete identification with poor Indians in South Africa, he changed his style of living, gave up luxuries and comforts. He also started realizing the importance of *brahmacharya*. He took the vow of *brahmacharya* in 1906 with the consent of his wife. He wrote, "The elimination of carnal relationship with one's wife seemed then a strange thing. But I launched forth with faith in the sustaining power of God." Gradually he realized that *brahmacharya* was not a process of hard penance, but it was a matter of consolation and joy. In *brahmacharya* lies the protection of the body, mind and the soul.

In 1899 the Boer war began. Gandhiji helped the Government by organising an Ambulance Corps, which served the sick and wounded

soldiers. In 1901 he again came to India and attended the Congress session at Calcutta. It was his first experience of the Congress. He was ashamed to observe casteism in this session. Untouchability existed in a fair measure. Insanitary conditions prevailed everywhere. In this session he worked as a clerk and a bearer. He was pained to notice that the English language had the prominent place in all matters. There was little regard for economy of money and energy, and time was wasted in worthless work and discussions.

During his stay in India he spent a month with his political mentor Gokhale. He was benefited considerably with this contact and he found it, the beginning of his intimate contact with Bengal. From Calcutta, he visited Benaras and then went to Rajkot. Finally he decided to settle in Bombay. His son's illness and recovery increased his faith in earth and water treatment. His dietary experiments benefitted him.

Just when he seemed to be settling down in Bombay, he received an unexpected cable from South Africa to return soon. He returned to South Africa immediately.

PART IV

In South Africa his public work was considerably increased. His time was mostly absorbed in the public work. Also he began to realize the ideals of sacrifice and simplicity and the religious consciousness became more and more evident in his daily life. His passion for Vegetarianism as a mission and experiments in earth and water treatment steadily increased. He began to dislike medicines and he wrote, "Nine hundred and ninety-nine cases out of a thousand can be brought round by means of a well-regulated diet, water and earth treatment and similar household remedies. He who runs to the doctor, vaidya or hakim for every little ailment, and swallows all kinds of vegetable and mineral drugs, not only curtails his life, but, by becoming the slave of his body instead of remaining its master, loses self-control, and ceases to be a man."

In 1904 'Indian Opinion' was launched. Though Gandhiji was not avowedly the editor of 'Indian Opinion', he was virtually responsible for its conduct. The journal served as Gandhiji's mouthpiece and he poured out his soul in its columns.

The same year in Johannesburg the black plague broke out. Gandhiji rendered remarkable service by organizing a hospital and working day and night, serving the infected patients. This service further enhanced his influence with the poor Indians.

A chance reading of Ruskin's *Unto This Last* captured him and transformed his life. He was determined to practise these principles in his life. Under the influence of this book and its principles, Gandhiji organised the Phoenix settlement near Durban. The idea was that everyone should labour and draw the same wage and promote the common good of all.

PART V

On his return to India, Mahatma Gandhi had the prestige of a leader. As he was unfamiliar with the conditions prevailing in India, he first of all made a trip through India and acquainted himself with the conditions of India. On May, 25, 1915 he founded the Satyagraha Ashram in Sabarmati on the pattern of Phoenix Ashram. He admitted untouchables in his ashram and called them *harijans*.

In India Mahatma Gandhi applied the weapon of *Ahimsa* in Champaran in 1917 and abolished the tinkathia system which stood for the exploitation of poor planters. He also launched the *Kheda Satyagraha* struggle. A condition approaching famine has arisen in the Kheda district owing to widespread failure of crops and the patidars of Kheda were considering the question of getting the revenue assessment for the year suspended. Later this struggle had to be suspended, because the peasants who had not understood the inner meaning of *Satyagraha*, turned violent.

Gandhiji did his best for maintaining Hindu-Muslim unity and extended full support to the Khilafat Movement in 1919. The Jalianwallah Bagh tragedy very much agitated him and he wanted to go to Amritsar for introducing peace, harmony and normalcy. However, the Government had him arrested and sent him back to Bombay. Gandhiji did his best to quiet the agitation, caused by the Jallianwalla Bagh Tragedy: "We must be prepared to contemplate with equanimity not a thousand murders of innocent men and woman, but many thousands before we attain a status in the world that shall not be surpassed by any nation.....We hope, therefore,

that all concerned will take rather than lose heart and treat hanging as an ordinary affair of life."

The news of the horrors and atrocities of Amritsar was suppressed for many months. But when it did leak out, a wave of indignation swept over the entire country. The British Government was badly shaken and Hunter Commission was appointed to make an enquiry into the Jalianwalla Bagh tragedy. The Congress also formed an enquiry Committee. Gandhiji did remarkable work as its member. Being a staunch advocate of non-violence he did not ask for the punishment of General Dyer and other guilty officers. Although he denounced them. Yet he did not feel any bitterness and ill will for them. He wanted Dyer to be removed from India. Before the publication of the inquiry report of Hunter Commission an Indemnity Act to protect the government employees was passed. Dyer was removed from his post but he was rewarded with money drawn from private sources.

Mahatma Gandhi started the publication of two journals *Navjivan* and *Young India* which enabled him freely to express his views and to put heart into the people. Gandhiji at this time gave the call of Swadeshi which implied the Gandhian concept of India's economic independence. As a means for the eradication of poverty Gandhi revived the spinning wheel and gave birth to Khadi. He thought that without economic self-dependence there would be no real independence and, therefore, he exhorted the Indians to give up the use of ruinous foreign goods and to use only Swadeshi goods. Gandhiji also wanted to make India free from the curse of drink and so he appealed for the boycott of wine. Mahatma Gandhi's call for total prohibition was followed by all in India. He was so much swayed by the feeling for Swadeshi that he ordered the burning of all foreign goods in Bombay on the occasion of the visit of the Prince of Wales.

The Khilafat issue was not yet solved. The Khilafat Committee in its Bombay meeting on May 28, 1920 passed a resolution approving Mahatma Gandhi's policy of non-cooperation. This resolution was further ratified unanimously by the Muslim Conference of Allahabad on June 30, 1920. Mahatma Gandhi in his letter to the Viceroy informed that the non-cooperation movement would begin. He was convinced that the British Government would go on committing inhumanities and barbarities in order to perpetuate its rule in India. He launched the non-cooperation movement on August 1, 1920. He did his best to maintain order and discipline during the movement.

The non-cooperation movement launched by Gandhiji, included the surrender of all titles of honour and honorary offices; boycott of Government schools and colleges; suspension by lawyers of practice; non-participation in Government parties and other official functions; refusal to accept any civil or military post and the popularisation of Swadeshi. The Mahatma's call for non-cooperation was sincerely followed. Students left

schools and colleges; thousands of magistrates resigned; courts were boycotted. The adoption of non-cooperation for the sake of Khilafat was a great move towards the attainment of Hindu-Muslim unity.

Countless demonstrators were arrested. The Ali Brothers were also arrested and imprisoned. The non-cooperation movement was intensified. The Congress authorised every province to proclaim civil disobedience, beginning with a refusal to pay taxes. According to Mahatma Gandhi's direction resistance against the government was combined with discipline and self-sacrifice.

Spiritual and moral training of Indians was, according to Gandhiji, the cornerstone of India's freedom. With this aim in view Gandhiji prescribed the vows of truth, Ahimsa, brahamcharya, control of palate, non-stealing, non-possession, Swadeshi and fearlessness for the teachers, pupils and other inmates of the Satyagraha Ashram. Gandhiji also worked whole-heartedly for the emancipation of the untouchables and the regeneration of the condition of women.

In 1921 Mahatma Gandhi was at the height of power. He was looked upon as a moral leader and saint.

He was the 'Mahatma', he was also 'Bapu', everybody's friend and mentor. His life was an open book now onwards and thus he took farewell from all readers. In bidding farewell to them, he asked them to join him in prayer to the God of truth that He may grant the boon of *Ahimsa* in mind, word and deed.