

Module 3 : Mahatma Gandhi

Section 1 : Brief Biography

Mohan Das Karamchand Gandhi is universally known as Mahatma Gandhi. Mahatma literally connotes a great soul. He has become a universal human. He has outgrown all the boundaries of nationality and religion. Internationally he is acclaimed as one of the greatest figures of history and also a great teacher of humanity. Louis Fischer, Gandhi's eminent biographer, has concluded his biography with the following words- "his legacy is courage, his lesson truth, his weapon love. His life is his monument. He now belongs to mankind".¹ On his death Gandhi was paid respectful homage almost all over the world. Einstein while paying his tribute said, 'Generations to come, it may be will scarcely believe that such a one as – as ever in flesh and blood walked upon this earth'.² In India he is revered as the father of the nation.

Despite his stature and international respect, he is reviled by some. Some criticize him as a stooge of bourgeoisie or even a conservative Hindu revivalist. Some take him as a deeply religious man, others treat him as a crafty politician in the guise of a saint. It is because of his varied activities and conflicting views on very many issues. Gandhi calls himself as a 'Sanatani Hindu' and on a different occasion as a 'super atheist'.³ So it is difficult to categorize him in any of the numerous intellectual traditions. His writings and speeches –which are about one hundred volumes- reflect his varied interest and incoherent views. He was changing his views as his life was an experiment with truth. His varied experience and experiment helped him to change his view as he was faithful to his conscience and vision of truth. Gandhi was also unique in another way. He was the lone leader in history whose political activities were not confined to one country only. He worked in countries located in three continents such as Africa, Europe and Asia.

¹ Fischer, Louis, " Gandhi", The New American Library, 1954, p. 189

² Gandhi Memorial Peace Number, 261.

³ Gora, An Atheist with Gandhi, Atheist centre.

Any assessment of Mahatma's life indicates that he was a mediocre or average student and not very brilliant. He passed matriculation in 1888 from his hometown in Gujarat and then proceeded to Bhavnagar for higher studies. There he could not adjust. He went to England on the advice of a family friend. In London he was a shy and retiring type of student though he completed a legal course there and then returned to India. In India he planned for legal profession at Rajkot and Bombay. He was also a failure as a legal practitioner.

Much before he passed matriculation he got married at the age of twelve, as child marriage was the social practice of his time. After his return from England he was engrossed in family life. He was offered an assignment from a firm of Porbandar Muslims to fight a legal case on their behalf in South Africa. Because of family burden and financial pressure he accepted the offer and came to South Africa. That was really a turning point in his life.

In Africa he was deeply moved to see the inhuman treatment meted out to the black people and Indian settlers. He himself became a victim of racial bias. Once he was forcibly pushed out from a first class railway compartment in spite of having the ticket when a white European entered into it. This incident removed his timidity. A quality of leadership was born in him to fight against the ill-treatment. He adopted a novel way to fight out any evil and injustice. Despite all odds he achieved success and became a leader of the Indian people. His method of non-violent resistance to evil was a new experiment which brought him great confidence and also social prestige.

After spending more than two decades in South Africa he returned to India in 1914. He travelled all over the country to understand the condition of the Indian masses. The poverty and the subhuman condition of living of the masses along with many social evils like untouchability, illiteracy, exploitation of the women etc. brought a great change in his life style. He joined the Indian National Congress in 1916. His charismatic personality vision and commitment to the cause of the masses made him the undisputed leader of the congress. His openness, commitment to truth and non-violence, ascetic living and the quality of his leadership attracted millions of people in the country to join the freedom struggle. Even the imperial British government could not but recognize his leadership and held him in high esteem. By the by some Britishers, so too other Westerners, became his ardent followers and supported his

cause.

Gandhi initiated a number of non-violent measures with the help of the masses for the political freedom of India. To cite a few instances- his participation in the Second Round Table Conference in 1931 as the sole representative of the Congress, launching of the salt satyagraha in 1930, civil Disobedience movement in 1932, call for the Quit India Movement in 1942, his arrest and twenty one day fast in 1943 are some of the major events of his life which paved the way for India's political freedom. Besides he took up many constructive programmes to create awareness among the people against many evils of Indian society.

Consequent upon various political factors and socio-religious upsurge India was divided, much against his will, into two nations and granted independence. The partition of India and the outbreak of communal violence shattered his dream and with a heavy heart he tried his best to remove communal frenzy and violence. He toured extensively the affected areas. While thousands of soldiers and policemen could not bring normalcy, his presence, personal appeal and moral courage could bring a sea change in the situation, particular in Nuakhali, the worst affected region. Finally being moved by his inner voice he decided to go on a fast to death to arouse the conscience of all. He considered his death would be more glorious deliverance than witnessing the destruction of India due to communal violence. His fast had a tremendous effect on Hindu-Muslim amity. Riots stopped both in India and Pakistan.

Gandhi was assassinated by a religious fanatic on January 30, 1948 while going to attend the evening prayer meeting. A great votary of non-violence fell victim to a barbaric act. His death was mourned all over the world and rich tributes were paid to him by all world leaders. Nehru, the then Prime Minister of India, described Gandhi's death as a serious blow to the millions and millions in this country and befittingly described the event as "light has gone out". In the words of Nehru " the light that has illumined this country for these many years will illumine this country for many more years, and a thousand years later that light will still be seen in this country and the world will see it and it will give solace to innumerable hearts".⁴

Truly Gandhi has become universal human. He is recognized as a moral genius comparable with Jesus and Buddha despite all his shortcomings and human commissions. His non-violent struggle, the first of its kind in human history, has been a great ray of hope to settle all human conflicts in a turbulent world for peaceful coexistence. For Gandhi's greatest message to mankind is: conquer hate by love.

⁴Nehru J., "Light has gone out"- National broadcast on Gandhi's Death.