EARLY LIFE HISTORY OF MAHATMA GANDHI

Introduction:

It is almost like a norm to go into the details of the family background of the great men like Gandhi. To the present study it is very much essential to know the family discipline, surroundings, culture, and early lessons with which the budding Gandhi was brought up. Early life of every great person proves us with necessary background to understand his actions, his concepts, his approach and his personality as a whole. Gandhi's early life gives us a good foundation to know why he did and what he did. We can find here the roots of his views and actions, which made him the Mahatma. Therefore, we have provided this section.

Birth and Parentage:

Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi was the actual name of India's illustrious man who became well known throughout the world. When young he was known by various names: Manu, Moniya, Mohan, and Mohandas. In South Africa, his coworkers and associates used to call him "Bhai" or brother. When he returned to India, he was hailed as the "Mahatma", the great soul. Ever since, the world has honoured him as 'Mahatma Gandhi'. But to the inmates,
young and old, of his Ashram at Sabarmati, and later, at sevagram, he was dear “Bapu” or Father, as his wife Kasturba was “Ba” or Mother.¹

Most of us know Gandhi after he emerged into prominence but Gandhi was not made in a day nor was the transition from Mohan to Mahatma an easy one. “Childhood shows the man as Morning shows the day”² is a common saying and yet how true it is! Gandhi had the foundations of his greatness laid during the period of his early childhood and school days.

“Gandhi” is the name of a family of merchants called as Baniyas and seems to have been originally grocers. Mohandas Gandhi’s grandfather Uttamchand Gandhi and father Karamchand were Diwans of Kathiawad State in Gujarat.³

Putalibai, Karamchand’s wife was a religious lady. She would eat only after her daily prayers and worship. She would never miss even a day at the nearby temple.

Karamchand was truthful, charitable, and a man of great courage. He was a little short-tempered too. He did not believe in acquiring a lot of property. He also had only minimum education. He had, however, a reputation among his family and with others as an impartial, fair-minded man.

Of such noble-minded parents, Mohandas was born on October 2, 1869 at Porabandar, otherwise, known as Sudamapuri. The Porabandar was also known as “The White City” as it had the look of a rock-hewn city with houses carved out of blocks of cream coloured marble. Karamchand Gandhi married his last wife Putalibai when he was forty. He had two daughters by his first and
second marriages. Putalibai bore him a daughter and three sons – Raliatbehn, Laxmidas, Karasandas, & Mohandas. Mohandas was Putalibai’s favorite child.

Mohandas, sent to a school in Porabandar, was not very good in studies. His teacher often tweaked his ear in irritation when he could not learn his multiplication tables.

When Mohan was seven, Karamchand was appointed as Diwan (Prime Minister) of Rajkot. The family thus moved away from Porabandar. Mohandas was 12 when he was admitted to Alfred High School.

Timid and shy by nature, Mohandas would not speak with the other boys at school nor would he even mingle with them. He would be at the school precisely at the first bell and soon after the last bell, would return home. Lonely and friendless thus, his only companions were his books, his studies.

Though born in a Vaishya family, he had many occasions to visit the Haveli (A Vaishnava Temple). But the glitter and pomp there never appealed to him. The religious beliefs of his family had their stamp on his tender mind and he had developed a natural faith in Rama Nama (Name of King Rama- Hero of Ramayana). In fact repeating Ramanama was taught by old servant of the family, Rambha, who had assured little Mohan that such a repetition would drive away the ghosts and evil spirits.4

Mohan at an early age started showing signs of rational doubts. The bookish curriculum might not have afforded an adequate challenge to this boy who was influenced by the environment at home and outside. *
Influences on Young Gandhi:

A scavenger (an untouchable) Uka, used to attend the house of Gandhi for cleaning latrines. Mohan was forbidden to touch the scavenger but though hardly 12, at the time, he would tell his mother that untouchability was not sanctioned by religion. This type of questioning was not expected of a schoolboy of 12. It may be due to his cultural make-up. It is significant that during Mahatma Gandhi’s boyhood, the spirit of the revival of Hinduism was making itself evident.

Mr. Giles, the Educational Inspector, had come on a visit of inspection. Mr. Giles set the boys a spelling test. He gave them 5 words in dictation—teapot, friend, kettle, pencil, and picture. Mohandas had miss-spelt the word Kettle missing out a ‘t’. The class teacher tried to prompt him with the point of his boot, and also hissed to copy the spelling from his neighbor’s slate. Mohandas refused to do so as he thought that copying is not an act of a good student.

‘Copying’ is a common failing among students; its temptation is too great to be resisted. As a boy, he disciplined himself by carrying out the wishes of elders without seeming to question their authority. In the present case, however, he refused to appear ‘stupid’ to being charged with moral turpitude. In other words he was by nature above lying and deception.
This helped him in gaining moral strength and in his mental growth in spite of his remaining a mediocre student. It is this aspect that earned for him the remark 'very good' in his Term Certificate under column of 'conduct'.

A playbook "Shravana Pritibhakti Nataka" and the drama of Harishchandra produced a very powerful impression on his young sensitive mind. Shravana’s devotion to parents evoked in him the desire to copy his example, and that of Harishchandra so much captured his heart that day and night he asked himself the question “Why should not all be truthful like Harishchandra?” The fearlessness and determination of Harishchandra in putting up with all sufferings in the course of following Truth profoundly touched young Mohan’s heart. It haunted him for long. He literally believed the story. Times without number he acted and re-enacted Harishchandra’s role in his own mind. Thus we find that even during his student career Gandhi tried to model his life on the ideals inspired by these two of his favorite heroes.

Karamchand’s Parsee and Muslim friends, whenever they visited, would discuss with Karamchand the good points and merits of their respective religious beliefs. A sense of reverence towards all religions developed in young Mohandas who used to be nearby during these discussions.

Mohan was just 13 when talks of his marriage began. His parents had even selected a bride for him. She was a Porabandar girl, her name was Kasturbai the daughter of a Porabandar merchant called Gokuldas Nakanji. Mohan and his wife were of the same age. Their marriage has been celebrated with traditional pomp. Kasturbai came over along with her husband to their
Rajkot house. Kasturbai was smart and pretty. She and Mohan often used to play together. Mohan occasionally would encourage her to study but her mind was always on domestic chores, never on studies.8

However, the dawn of adolescence was clouded with a series of pitfalls and lapses. The joint company of his brother Karasandas and his friend Sheik Mehtab influenced Mohandas. Mehtab began to impress upon him by his physical strength and show of muscular development. Mohan began to be more and more attracted by Mehtab. Taking the two brothers to the nearby stream, Mehtab used to perform physical feats, to impress the youths. Mohan was almost dazzled by him. Mohan had heard that even some vegetarians had begun eating meat and the thought tempted Mohan too. On the days that he ate meat, however, he had to lie about it at home since he knew his parents would never forgive him this meat eating habit. He found it difficult to keep telling lies and finally, he vowed he would never again touch meat.

Friendship with Sheik created cigarette-smoking habit too. Mohan began stealing at home to pay back debts. He once stole a tiny link from his brother’s gold bracelet. Later, however, Mohan was full of remorse since he knew that stealing was a sinful act. He decided he would never borrow, would never steal. He wrote down all his offences and handed the sheet of paper to his father sick in bed.

Karamchand Gandhi read this letter of confession. Saying not a word and with a deep sigh, he tore it up. Mohan’s eyes filled with tears. The power of truth was revealed to him. From that day on, he began speaking truth alone.
Love for his father became even more. He would come home running immediately after school and would massage lovingly his father’s feet and, in as many ways as he could, would serve his father.

The incident reveals how the family discipline worked. The father is punishing himself instead of punishing the offending son! Suffering for bringing about a change of heart was a great lesson Mohan learnt from this incidence. Persuasion and change of heart later became the Mahatma’s guiding principles in dealing with men of all types.9

At the age of 16 Mohandas lost his 63-year-old father, who was then a pensioner of Rajkot State. Soon after Kasturbai bore a baby but it died within three or four days.

After high school education, Mohandas went to Samaldas College in Bhavnagar but after only a few days there, he returned home. He could not adjust himself to the coaching standards of that college. Mavji Naka Dave, known in the family circle as Joshiji proposed an idea to sent young Mohan to London for qualifying for the Bar. Laxmidas however managed to find the means to send his younger brother abroad. Securing consent and support of elders was not so easy task as it was invariably entangled with soft, silken, sentimental ties.

**Gandhi in London:**

Patalibai as a shrewd mother had her doubts. A youth in a foreign land was likely to go astray, what with temptations of meat, wine and women. In
order to make herself doubly sure and secure the blessings of a divinity, she approached Becharji Swamiji, a Jain monk. The Swami originally, Modh Baniya administered an oath to the boy and he undertook "not to touch wine, women and meat." This was an adequate protection for the mother, and she allowed the son to go to London.  

Mohandas reached London in October of 1888. Soon after his ship docked at Southampton, he looked around and was somewhat upset to see people dressed so well, so very differently. In comparison, he knew he was shabbily dressed. Dr. P. J. Mehta, the family friend of Gandhi met him on arrival spoke to Mohan about European manners, do's and don'ts.

It is known that during the first months of his arrival in London how very luxurious he wanted to live, how he had ordered new suits and hats, how he had joined the dancing school and started taking lessons in music and French. His spacious suite of rooms, his long hours before the mirrors and all that gave place to a more ascetic and simpler life. When Mr. Gandhi says that it is possible to live in London on £1/- a week, we can be sure that he has tried it and tried it perhaps for something much less. He also admits that he was sometime living on £3/- a week. In fact, he has provided details of how he was staying in both the stages: at £4/- a month and at £12/- a month. But he had come to a cheaper way after having tried the more costly life. It is not so easy to bring down the level economies by oneself, without any prompting by environment. Mr. Gandhi showed that he was out of the ordinary when he
brought down his personal expenses and lived on £1/- a week in the midst of costly London.

Gandhi’s association with the London Vegetarian Society brought him in touch with the pillars of Vegetarianism in England. His experiments in dietetics led him to reduce his wants. He could now relish only boiled vegetables and thus control his palate – a no small achievement in a youth at this prime.

It was in July 1889 when Gandhi thought of utilizing the leisure at his disposal, for securing a better command over English. At the suggestion of a friend, he decided to appear for the London Matriculation Examination that was considered fairly difficult. Gandhi appeared at the London Matriculation Examination on 13th to 17th January 1890, with a preparation of only few months. However he could pass in all the subjects except in Latin but he did not lose heart and in second trial he passed the same. It was indeed a bold venture on the part of Gandhi to get through the London Matriculation.

During his stay in London, the Vegetarian Society no doubt influenced Gandhi. But it was here that he was acquainted with the Gita, the Bible and the Buddha. His respect for the three religions, and for the founders of the two, has hardly any parallel in recent history. To be profoundly influenced by three religions, without showing any special preference for one or the other, was no easy matter. To be able to appreciate the outstanding merits of each religion was not anybody’s job. It required a mind far different than the normal type
and it seems that Mr. Gandhi was gifted with such an uncommon mental power.\textsuperscript{11}

From a simpleton that Mohan was, who had not seen electric lights, who had not seen a lift and who was shy throughout his voyage on the Clyde, that he was avoided taking food in the general dining Hall, a great change had taken place when he emerged as M. K. Gandhi, Esquire, Bar-at-law, on 10th June 1891. Gandhi was returning a richer and a far stronger man than what he was when he had landed there.

Gandhi returned to India. When the ship docked at Bombay, his brother was there to welcome him back but with a perturbed face. Gandhi was pining to see his mother. He did not know that she was no more in the flesh to receive him back into her bosom. The sad news was now given to him. Gandhi stood stock-still. Love for his mother was so deep that words failed him. He had so very much wanted to meet her to confirm that he never broke the promise he had made her before leaving for England. But, that very mother was dead and gone.

**Conclusion:**

The budding Mahatma was already seen in character that was in the making. Though at the outset he appeared like an ordinary boy, his recovery from his weaknesses was noteworthy. His adherence to truth was strengthened during these student days. Resolve not to copy, theft and repentance, impact of Shravana and others, experiments with food habits, and so on strengthened his
moral-religious belief. Perhaps during his stay in London, Gandhi was able to acknowledge his beliefs that he carried.
Reference:


