CHAPTER III

THE SPIRITUAL FOUNDATION OF GANDHIJI'S EARLY YEARS AND LATER INFLUENCES

Gandhiji became inclined toward a way of life which, he thought, was the best that the world had evolved through its greatest men and on which the East and West could meet.

D.M. Dutt

Gandhiji was a man of noble, great and meaningful principles. An effort is being made in this chapter to show how he acquired those principles over the years. He actually learnt the best out of life and showed how he became inclined toward a way of life which, he thought, was the best the world had evolved, as has been described above by Dhirendra Mohun Dutta.

His childhood, student and adulthood years are full of rich experiences.

The Childhood Years in India

As a matter of fact, the most basic principles which Gandhiji developed were the direct result of the love he had for his parents and of the religious atmosphere which prevailed in his home. Both his home and his parents had, in the first instance, a tremendous influence upon him. He proved to the world at large that the home was the best and first school and the parents were the best and first teachers that could teach by precept and example.

Gandhiji spoke of his father as one who 'had earned a name for strict impartiality in his family as well as outside', and 'whose loyalty to the state was well known'. Though a diwan of Pontbandar and a member of the Rajkot court, his father, he said, 'never had any ambition to accumulate
riches', but 'was a lover of his clan, truthful, brave and generous'.

The qualities of his father had a direct influence on his early life. The basic spiritual foundation was laid when once he confessed to his father the guilt of stealing a piece of gold out of the armlet of his brother, who always contented himself to wear richly dress but never thought of settling a long outstanding debt. Instead of being punished, as would normally have been the case, great was his remorse when he saw his father shedding tears on his confession note. That was actually the first lesson he got in Ahimsa or non-violence, as he himself wrote:

> Those pearl-drops of love cleansed my heart and washed my sin away. Only he who has experienced such love can know what it is. As the hymn says 'Only he who is smitten with the arrows of love knows its power', that was, for me, an object-lesson in Ahimsa. When such Ahimsa becomes all-embracing, it transforms everything it touches. There is no limit to its power.

The qualities of his mother too had a great influence on his early life. He said that her saintliness had impressed him much, and these were the forceful words he used to describe that condition:

The outstanding impression my mother has left on my memory is that of saintliness. She was deeply religious. She would not think of taking her meals without her daily prayers. Going to Haveli - the Vaishnava temple - was one of his daily duties. As far as my memory goes back, I do not remember her having ever missed the Chaturmas. She would take the hardest vows and keep them without flinching. Illness was no excuse for relaxing them.
Gandhiji has such a respect and consideration for his mother that he did not fail to admire her commonsense as well as her intelligence. He clearly stated:

My mother had strong commonsense. She was well informed about all matters of State, and ladies of the court thought highly of her intelligence. Often I would accompany her, exercising the privilege of childhood and I still remember many lively discussions.  

It is through good influence that a young lad could become a good citizen and a good society created. Thus, good parents and good homes could work wonders in the building of any nation. In the case of Gandhiji, his obedience to his parents made of him an integrated person who could not go astray because his home was a place where the ideas of truth, goodness, beauty, care, sincerity, love, respect and consideration for others were put into practice. The three vows of 'not to touch wine, woman and meat' which he took before his departure to England for legal studies, the occasional fasting to which he resorted later during his satyagraha or truth-grasping campaigns, both in South Africa and India, and the prayer meetings which he organized in Birla House were all the direct influence of his home. It is to be noted that when he experimented with education he always wished to see the school model itself after the home. He later forcefully wrote:

The education that children naturally imbibe in a well-ordered household is impossible to obtain in hostels.  

Gandhiji was also very much inspired by his nurse. He used to say that whatever he could not get elsewhere or he could not get at the temple, the Haveli, he learnt from her. He had a fear of ghosts and it was her that
dispelled that darkness of ignorance from his mind. He himself confessed that Rambha, his nurse, wanted to eliminate the fear in a very noble way:

Rambha, for that was her name, suggested as a remedy for his fear, the repetition of Ramanama (the word of God). I had more faith in her remedy, and so at a tender age I began repeating Ramanama to cure my fear of ghosts and spirits. This was of course short-lived, but the good seed sown in childhood was not sown in vain. I think it is due to the seed sown by that good woman Rambha that to-day Ramanama is an infallible remedy for me.8

It was fascinating how, when he was in England, he stuck to his principles and once he argued with a friend that vows were so sacred that they could not be broken.9 He further reflected that many people would 'turn and twist' them to satisfy their own selfish ends but, in the long run, they would go to the extent of deceiving not only themselves but also 'the world and God'.10 When temptations were faced by him, he was not only true to himself and to his parents' advice but was also helped by the teachings of his nurse. Referring to the friend with whom he had an argument, he could not help quoting his good nurse:

The more he argued, the more uncompromising I became. Daily I would pray for God's protection and get it. Not that I had any idea of God. It was faith that was at work - faith of which the seed had been sown by the good nurse Rambha.11

Besides the home, the family and the nurse, the school too contributed much to the spiritual foundation of his thought. Experience regarding Truth started at school. Once it happened that he skipped a physical training class because he had to go and help his ailing father. In spite of his telling the truth, his teacher refused to believe in him and he was con-
sequently fined. Something remarkable was that, even at the tender age, he was courageous enough to bear the consequence of his brave act. This is what he said in connection with this wonderful experience:

I was convinced of lying - that deeply pained me. How was I to prove my innocence? There was no way. I cried in deep anguish. I saw that a man of truth must also be a man of care. This was the first and last instance of my carelessness in school. I have a faint recollection that I finally succeeded in getting the fine remitted. The exemption from exercise was of course obtained, as my father wrote himself to the headmaster saying that he wanted me at home after school. 12

Another incident that happened during his first year at school was when, at a spelling examination, in presence of a school Inspector, he mis-spelt the word 'kettle'. To get the word correctly written on his slate, his teacher tried to prompt him but, as he was not willing to become a prey to falsehood, he refused to cheat. This is what he stated:

The teacher tried to prompt me with the point of his boot, but I would not be prompted. It was beyond me to see that he wanted me to copy the spelling from my neighbour's slate, for I had thought that the teacher was there to supervise us against copying. The result was that all the boys, except myself, were found to have spelt every word correctly. Only I had been stupid. The teacher tried later to bring this stupidity home to me, but without effect. I never could learn the art of copying. 13

In fact, Gandhiji never tried to copy anything out of cunningness. He ever tried to be sincere to himself by imitating or discovering the right thing and I would agree with Thomas Carlyle who once said that 'the essence of originality is not novelty but sincerity.' Throughout his life,
he worked sincerely and selflessly. Greatness was for him a virtue which he achieved through constant effort to become better and better, day in and day out. Perhaps he would not have become a mahatma - a great soul - had he remained an ordinary lawyer practising merely for his own selfish ends. The qualities, constituting his spiritual foundation, which unmistakably distinguished him right from his childhood years were his undaunted courage to tell the truth, his fearlessness and his sincerity.

I talked about the school, as a society in miniature, the influence of which contributed to the formation of Gandhiji. It is to be noted that the actual society itself, in which he was brought up, also played a great part in building up his spiritual foundation. As he had his upbringing in a region principally dominated by an ascetic culture, he knew how to take advantage of it. Vegetarianism which was a trait of the people among whom he lived contributed much to his deep reverence for life and his doctrine of non-violence, and this was something remarkable specially in an age where people have the habit of killing animals for food and killing people for ideologies.

Two plays, which were staged in his locality during his early childhood, had a great impact on his thinking: one was Shravana Pitribhakti Natake and the other was Harishchandra. The former was a drama about Shravana's devotion to his parents, and referring to it Gandhiji could not help saying:

Here is an example to copy.
The agonised lament of the parents over Shravana's death is still fresh in my memory. The melting tune moved me deeply, and I played it on a concertina which my father had purchased for me.14
The latter was a play about the truthfulness of a king called Harishchandra, and referring to this one, Gandhiji made the following reflection:

Why should not all be truthful like Harishchandra was the question I asked day and night. To follow truth and to go through all the ordeals Harishchandra went through was the one ideal it inspired me.\textsuperscript{18}

In sum, the early years of Gandhiji's childhood were very rich in experience of the spiritual kind. They contributed much to the spiritual foundation of his line of thought and action in his later years, when he had to take serious decisions regarding the enhancement of the quality of life and education.

The student years in England

During his stay in England, young Gandhi learnt the best he could from the Western culture. No doubt, he went there to study law but, besides learning how to observe facts and figures, the legal studies gave him an insight of trusteeship 'sic utere tuo alienum non laedes - use your property in such a way as not to damage that of others.'\textsuperscript{16} He saw the spirit of non-violence even in law. The remarkable thing in him was that merely legal studies did not satisfy his search for truth, for, it was he who once observed:

\begin{quote}
I had read all the leading cases on this maxim, but they gave me no confidence in the application of it in the practice of law.\textsuperscript{17}
\end{quote}

Something still more noteworthy in the life of Gandhiji was that, during those student years, God or religion, as visualized by laymen,
did not have great intellectual significance to him in his daily practical life. It was simply his abiding faith in God and his observance of spiritual disciplines that gave him the courage to face the ups and downs of practical life. He himself did not hesitate to confess the following:

I did not then know the essence of religion or of God, and how he works in us. Only vaguely I understand that God had saved me... I know that the phrase 'God saved me' has a deeper meaning for me to-day, and still I feel that I have not yet grasped its entire meaning. Only richer experience can help me to a fuller understanding. But in all my trials - of a spiritual nature, as a lawyer, in conducting institutions and in politics - I can say that God saved me. When every hope is gone, when helpers fail and comforts flee, I find that help arrives somehow, from I know not where. Supplication, worship, prayer are not superstition; they are acts more real than the acts of eating, drinking, sitting or walking.

Being far away from his motherland, he felt lonely at times as most people do. In that condition of loneliness worship or prayer gave him great solace. For him it was a part of education. It helped him to calm the mind and to purify the heart, thus contributing to the building up of a spiritual force which could control a person in certain odd moments. In fact, he later confessed that he could not conceive of anything being done properly without worship or prayer:

Such worship or prayer is no flight of eloquence; it is no lip-homage. It springs from the heart. If, therefore, we achieve that purity of the heart when it is emptied of all but love, if we keep all the chords in proper tune they 'trembling pass in music out of sight.' Prayer needs no speech. It is in itself independent of any sensuous effort. I have not the slightest doubt that prayer is an unfailing means of cleaning the heart of passions. But it must be combined with the utmost humility.
As his legal studies were not time-consuming, he also made a study of religion and philosophy without which life and education were, for him, but empty words unworthy of investigation. He made many friends with the ultimate aim of learning from them. Upon the recommendation of two theosophists, he started the reading of the Bhagavadgita in Sir Edwin Arnold's translation - *The Song Celestial*. Referring to the book he said that it made a deep impression on him. These are his words:

> The book struck me as one of priceless worth. The impression has ever since been growing on me with the result that I regard it to-day as the book par excellence for the knowledge of Truth. It has afforded me invaluable help in my moments of gloom.

He also studied other books such as Edwin Arnold's *The Light of Asia*, Madame Blavatsky's *Key to Theosophy*, and Thomas Carlyle's *Heroes and Hero-worship*. His thirst for wisdom, that is, for knowledge—that, knowledge-how and knowledge-self was out of the ordinary. He believed that wisdom in action meant that these three parts of knowledge must be one and the same and they should all contribute to selfless activities leading to accomplishment, achievement, fulfilment, self-realization and, ultimately, to God-realization.

It is to be noted that he did not rely on the teachings of Hinduism. He also learnt much from Christianism. Once he met a Christian friend from Manchester at a vegetarian boarding house. At a request from his friend, he started to study the Bible. As a Hindu, therefore, he was broadminded and open to conviction. The New Testament, especially the *Sermon on the Mount*, touched his heart so much that he compared it with the teachings of the Bhagavadgita. He once said:
The New Testament produced a different impression, specially the Sermon on the Mount which went straight to my heart. I compared it with the Gita. A person could not grow and develop intellectually, merely by studying his school or college subjects or by integrating them. He should himself be integrated just as the painter or the artist who puts his hand, heart and head into his work. Gandhiji was just like a painter or an artist who worked hard to be an integrated person in all walks of life. This could be seen in his student days in London where he made it a point to meet people and learn from them and do things for self-development, without ignoring the two-fold virtue of respect and consideration for others seen through his practice of love and non-violence in his daily activities. An Englishmen by the name of Frederick Pincutt whom he contacted had a great influence on him because he appreciated the warmth and affection he gave him at an interview. On his return to India, after becoming a full-fledged lawyer, he was ever grateful to Pincutt who taught him the first lesson in appreciating a good natured person. In his autobiography, he recalled the words which Pincutt told him:

A Vakil should know human nature.
He should be able to read a man's character from his face.

In fact, Gandhiji's study of human nature started in his student years. In the words of Dhirendra Mohun Datta, I would say that when he left England in 1891 'all his basic principles of his life were set and habits accordingly formed'. He was ready to face life and live it fully in the pursuit of self-realization as well as God-realization, as he himself had put it. And something remarkable was that, at the very beginning of his public service, he proved himself to be a selfless practical idealist who could combine spiritual principles with material advancement by serving
people in South Africa first and then his own people in India.

Satyagraha years in South Africa

Gandhiji's religious and spiritual principles directed both his legal practice and his daily life activities. They became a living force when he decided to serve and educate the down-trodden in South Africa. He clearly declared:

Here it was that I had opportunities of learning public work and acquired some measure of my capacity for it.
Here it was that the religious spirit within me became a living force and here too I acquired a true knowledge of legal practice.

His way of life was not an extraordinary one removed from the natural setting or the bustle and stir of everyday living. He had a zeal to know more about the good, simple and religious life and how such a life could be put into practice. Anyway, he always tried to enrich his spiritual nature with noble thoughts, ideas and ideals coming from every quarter and worked incessantly. He did not confine himself to one set of teachings and consequently his attitude towards life made him pose these two important questions.

What was the meaning of saying the Vedas were the inspired word of God? If they were inspired why not also the Bible and the Koran?

Unlike other people, he was not satisfied with knowing part of a body of knowledge. In his discussion, he used to make comparisons. He used to analyse and see for himself the various phases in the life of great souls. Once he did not hesitate to state:
Once we began to compare the life of Jesus with that of Buddha,
'Look at Gautama's compassion',
said I. It was not confined to mankind, it was extended to all living beings. Does not one's heart overflow with love to think of the lamb joyously parched on his shoulders? One fails to notice this love for all living beings in the life of Jesus.

What Gandhiji wanted to stress was a reverence for the whole of animal life. In other words, he wanted to say that man ought to be a vegetarian and that it was a bad habit with man to kill animals for food, specially when man has a faculty to judge and know what cruelty is. If a man is really an intellectual, he should be able to use his intellect to preserve animal life and not to destroy it and that ought to be the sign of an educated person. Gandhiji's views therefore were that man ought to have compassion, without which he would not be able to do good, to be good and to see good.

Spiritual and moral principles found in sacred literature, according to Gandhiji, could actually be followed in real life if man is sincere to himself and wants to serve mankind selflessly through love and compassion. He was very much impressed by Raychand Bhai who, though a merchant by profession with large commercial trasaction, was still a man of spiritual principles. It was fascinating how Gandhiji expressed his admiration for him:

The man who, immediately on finishing his talk about weighty business transactions, began to write about the hidden things of the spirit could evidently not be a businessman at all, but a real seeker after Truth. And I saw him thus absorbed in godly pursuits in the midst of business, not once or twice, but very often. I never saw him lose his state of equitose. There was no business or other selfish tie that bound him to me, and yet I enjoyed the closest association with him.
a briefless barrister then, and yet
whenever I saw him he would engage me
in conversation of a religious nature.

It is true that he could not place Raychand Bhai in his heart
by accepting the man as a Guru, that is, a spiritual guide who led
him from the darkness of ignorance to the light of wisdom but he avowed
the spiritual influence which that man made on him. The following
forceful words used in praise of Raychand are worthy of note:

I have tried to meet the heads of various
faiths, and I must say that no one else
has ever made on me the impression that
Raychand Bhai did. His words went straight
home to me. His intellect compelled as
great a regard from me as his moral earnest­
ness, and deep down in me was the conviction
that he would never willingly lead me astray
and would always confide to me his innermost
thoughts. In my moments of spiritual crisis,
therefore, he was my refuge.

Two other personalities that actually influenced Gandhiji were
Leo Tolstoy and John Ruskin, not through their living contact but through
their books. "Tolstoy's The Kingdom of God is within you overwhelmed me",
he said. A few other books of the same author had interested him so much
that he could not help saying:

I made an intensive study of Tolstoy's
books. The Gospels in brief — what to
do? and other books made a deep impression
on me. I began to realize more and more
the infinite possibilities of universal
love.

Some of Gandhiji's deepest convictions of a spiritual nature
found support in Ruskin's book Unto his last which, he said, "captured
me and made me transform my life." He could not refrain from summarizing
the lesson he learnt from Ruskin:

1. That the good of the individual
   is contained in the good of all.

2. That a lawyer's work has the same
   value as the barber's in as much as
   all have the same right of earning
   their livelihood from their work.
That a life of labour, i.e., the life of tiller of the soil and the handi-
craftsman is the life worth living.\textsuperscript{34}

With Tolstoy, Gandhiji learnt the importance of profound spirituality and how one could easily practise the search within in order to develop healthy attitudes towards life. With Ruskin, he was convinced that one could live a simple life and find true happiness in the welfare of one and all by working selflessly. And, last but not least, with Raychand, he saw that even a businessman could be sincere and lead a spiritual life in tune with material advancement, contrary to what people usually say.

During his Satyagraha years in South Africa, it is beyond doubt that Gandhiji reinforced his spiritual foundation and had more faith in spiritual things than in material ones, believing firmly that a civilization could not be prosperous materially unless it be redeemed spiritually and, furthermore, such a civilization could really survive if persons could cultivate the science of human relationship which is a spiritual science. Being a practical idealist to the core, he founded two ashrams, that is, community centres where people could come and work together for the welfare of one and all and practise the science. The first one was called the Phoenix settlement and the second one the Tolstoy Farm. Each and every activity in these centres had a spiritual foundation, as love, non-violence, truth, self-reliance and dignity of labour were spiritual elements that were at the very basis of life and education practised there.\textsuperscript{35}

The Practicability of Gandhiji's spiritual principles

The influence of the spiritual principles acquired through his experiences were very fruitful in that his life became an embodiment of practicability based on a spiritual foundation which made his conduct simple, productive and worth living. He did not become an exponent of
idealism but one of humanism with a harmonious blending of all other
isms such as realism, naturalism, existentialism and pragmatism. In
truth, I would say that he was rather an exponent of Karmayogism, a
concept of performing one’s duty selflessly for the good of one and all,
banishing all selfish motives through the two-fold means of Love and
Non-violence to arrive at the Truth which to him, was self and God-
realization. No doubt, finding a great meaning in the sloka from the
Bhagavadgita which says 'perform action without attachment, man shall
attain the supreme', he become a real devotee of selfless activity and
wanted to be very practical in his approach to worldly situations, events
and crises.

While being practical himself, Gandhiji worked continuously and
showed his enthusiasm with sincerity of purpose so that the world could
see that there was always an element of practicability in what he was
doing. He could not be taxed as being an armchair theorist but should
rather be praised as a practical idealist of selfless action who practised
whatever he preached. Nothing could really prosper in life if spiritual
principles were not applied was the great lesson that one could learn
from him to make life become complete, harmonious and productive.
References to Chapter III

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11 M.K. Gandhi, Ibid., p 34.
17 M.K. Gandhi, Ibid., p 58.