CHAPTER III

EARLY LIFE AND INFLUENCE OF MAHATMA GANDHI
3.1 Introduction

In this chapter an attempt is made to analyse the Early life and Influence of Mahatma Gandhi.

Gandhiji’s entire life was devoted to social, moral and religious activities both in India and abroad. He took up all problems of life with great commitment and tried to solve them with the purest possible means. He was an apostle of non-violence and peace. Gandhiji’s life and actions were continually part of experimentation with truth. There was never any dichotomy between what he said and what he acted upon. He did not want to project himself or his ideas as a school of thought or ideology. Gandhiji was a moral man. And moreover, he was a man of action whose entire social actions were based on morality and it is the basic cause of the success of his life. The success of morality was his life. The place of morality in his life has been caused by various influences. His family influenced him very much, especially his mother played an important role in his moral life. She made a strong impression upon young Mohandas with her piety.

Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi was born on 2nd October 1869, in Porbandar, Gujarat in Western India. He belonged to the Bania sub caste
(subdivision of Vaisya) and to the Vaishnava sect of Hindu religion. Their name signified grocer but for generations, the leading members of the family had flourished in politics, serving as high officials. Gandhiji’s father Karamchand became prime (chief) minister in Kathiawar district. Mohandas was the youngest child of his father’s fourth wife, Putlibai.

As a boy, Gandhiji admired the “practicability of his father” but he loved his mother Putlibai and was greatly influenced by her ‘saintliness’ and her “deeply religious” nature, which later helped him to possess an unquenchable faith in God and made his life a lesson for all ages to come.

As a child, Gandhiji’s family affectionately called him Mohandas. He was timid and diffident. And moreover, he was not a brilliant student and his record in school was on the whole mediocre. But all the same, he was highly truthful. Truth and non-violence for which Mohandas stood was inherited to a considerable degree from his father. He never spoke a lie either to his teacher or to his schoolmates. When he was at the high school, an interesting incident occurred. An educational inspector paid a visit to that school and asked the students to spell five words. One of the words asked by the inspector was ‘kettle’. Gandhiji had mis-spelt it. The teacher tried to prompt him with
the point of his boot but young Gandhiji would not be prompted. He was quite opposed to learning the art of copying. The result was that all the students except Gandhiji spelt all the five words correctly. But that did not in any way diminish his reverence for his teacher. During his high school years he came in contact with some boys of different faiths. Muslims, Parsees, Christians, and Jews became his fellow-brothers. Meat eating was taboo in his family tradition. Seeing some Englishmen eating meat and beef; Gandhiji questioned himself as to why meat eating was prohibited in Hindu families only and not in those belonging to other faiths? He strongly criticized his family tradition and thus under the influence of some of his Mohammedan friends, decided to experiment upon it himself. This experiment did not last long, because he virtually ate little and it was very hard to eat. But later he felt that this was unethical and immoral and should not be allowed to continue. During his school days, he did not show any exemplary activity. According to Ashe Geoffrey: “In almost nineteen years of education and wedlock, he had shown no outward signs of any distinctive ideas, outstanding virtues, or special talents”.

Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi was married at the age of thirteen, just when he was studying at the high school. However, his studies continued. Molan’s bride, Kasturbai, was the daughter of Gokuldas Makanji, a merchant of Porbandar and friend of the Gandhi family. The marriage lasted sixty-two years. At the age of 18 he matriculated from Allahabad and he went to college at Bhavanagar for one year and in 1887, proceeded to England for studies in Law. His outstanding achievement in England was the consequence of his vegetarianism. He tried to convince the world with regard to the benefits of vegetarianism which was very uncommon in England. The vow of vegetarianism became a continual source of embarrassment to him and moreover it became a mission for him and the starting point of a unique discipline of body and mind, which transformed his life. He was admitted as a student at the Inner Temple on November 6, 1888 and matriculated at London University in June 1890. He learned French and Latin, Physics and common and Roman law. He was called to the bar on June 10, 1891 and enrolled in the high court on June 11, and sailed for India on June 12. At the time of leaving England, he remarked, “During my nearly three years stay in England, I have left many things undone, and have done many things which
perhaps I might better have left undone, yet I carry one great consolation with me that I shall go back without having taken meat or wine, and that I knew from personal experience that there are so many vegetarians in England". In 1891, Gandhiji returned to India and after a brief stay in India, left for South Africa in 1893 to advocate the cases against the Memen firm, the firm of the Indian businessmen in South Africa. Gandhiji’s activities in South Africa can be regarded as unparalleled and unequalled in the history of the world. The twenty one years he spent in South Africa offered him valuable insights in familiarizing himself with the inhuman and highly deplorable situations that existed outside as well as helping him develop appropriate concepts and techniques of nonviolent defence. He resisted non-violently any oppression and exhorted the Indians to take part in public activities. For Gandhiji South Africa was the place where he first time tried his method of Non-violence, and after twenty years of relentless struggle against the whites he finally won. And moreover, Gandhiji adopted the method of non-violence against the whites because he believed that this was the method of self-realization. South Africa, for Gandhiji, was like a laboratory where he evolved the new weapon of non-violent resistance.
In 1914, Gandhiji returned to India after successfully leading the Indians in South Africa. Soon after his return from South Africa, Gandhiji would not take part in any political activity in India for a year because he thought he might first get acquainted with the national issues. He abstained from active politics till 1919 and after that he became active in India’s national movement and the problem of India’s freedom. Gandhiji’s criteria were not the usual criteria of politics. He had certain principles of his own. And he was always working according to it. Gandhiji did not make any compromise with regard to his principles. His standards of success were moral and religious. He was a moral man by all means with regard to his entire public action. Gandhiji with his principle of non-cooperation, raised India’s prestige very high and with the help of this powerful weapon he won India’s freedom. Right from 1919 to 1914, Gandhiji waged a relentless war against the British government. During this period, he was lodged in jails several times. When he started his non-cooperative movement for the attainment of India’s freedom, he was sentenced to six years rigorous imprisonment in 1922. In 1930, he marched for Dandi to break salt restrictions imposed by the English. Many Indians followed him and he broke the restrictions on salt. The success,
which he achieved, was the sign of non-violent revolution in his public action. The social structure is based on the principle of non-violence. If the social groups were not based on the principle of non-violence, they would have destroyed one another. The very survival of human society proves the necessity of non-violence to exist a peaceful world order. The practice of non-violence by the society will lead to greater degree of peace among the individuals and the various social groups in the society and among nations with different social systems. Gandhiji realized that the society should be based on non-violence. It implies that the society, which is not based on non-violence, will not be stable. For Gandhiji, non-violence is the weapon of the brave, not of the coward. He successfully demonstrated the efficacy of this method in South Africa and in several occasions in India also. For Gandhiji, non-violence was a moral weapon. And moreover, it was the basic structure of his entire public action. Hence he was a man of morality and non-violence by all means. Gandhiji’s moral thinking have been influenced by various sources such as; the influence coming from the Indian sources, the influence coming from the Western sources and the influence of various religions.
3.2 Indian Influence

While discussing the various Indian factors, which influenced Gandhiji’s thoughts, his family was the first and foremost influence of his early life. In the family, he was influenced very much by his parents. Gandhiji inherited much from his father, Kaba Gandhi. He learnt a lot from “his rich experience of practical affairs” which helped him in solving many intricate problems of social and political life on a practical basis. These influences from his father helped him a lot to be a practical idealist. Hence he said, “I am not a visionary. I claim to be a practical idealist”.

Thus father’s life and ideas cast a considerable influence in Gandhiji’s works and ideas. Gandhiji’s mother, Putlibai, a lady of most devout temperament, influenced his religious thoughts. She was deeply religious and never took meals without saying and offering daily prayers. This way of life influenced Gandhiji to practice self-restraint in his life. And moreover, the basic tenets of Hinduism, Jainism and Buddhism were first infused into the mind of Gandhiji by his mother. Gandhiji learned the ‘alpha’ of religion from his mother which formed the foundation of his religious ideas. The image of woman he imbibed from his mother was that of love and sacrifice. About his mother, Gandhiji said, “my mother had
strong common sense". His family nurse Rambha also influenced Gandhiji. In his childhood days, he was used to be afraid of ghosts and spirits. That is why Rambha suggested him to repeat the name of Rama. The repetition of ‘Ramanama’ helped him as a remedy for the fear of ghosts and evil spirits. And moreover, the recitation of ‘Ramanama’, proved to him to be an armour in moments of crisis throughout his life. Gandhiji said: “I think it is due to the seed sown by that good woman Rambha, that today ‘Ramanama’ is an infallible remedy for me”.

Kasturba, the wife of Gandhiji has played an important role in his personal life. Her tireless service, immeasurable restraint, infinite patience and boundless love she won the heart and mind of Gandhiji and brought out the highest potentials latent in his personality. Gandhiji loved his wife very much. She became an indivisible part of his being. In the words of Gandhiji, “Kasturba has been my mother, friend, nurse, cook, bottle washer and all these things we have come to a reasonable understanding that I should have all the honours and she should have all the drudgery”10 The book on ‘Shravana Pitribhakti Natak’ influenced Gandhi to a great extent. He had said: “This book and the picture left an indelible impression on my mind. ‘Here is an
example for you to copy', I said to myself. The agonized lament of the parents over Shravana's death is still fresh in my memory". The other strong effect on Gandhiji's life was that of Harishchandra's story. It captivated him much. He had said, "Harishchandra captured my heart" He further said, "Why should not all be truthful like Harishchandra was the question I asked myself day and night. To follow truth and to go through all the ordeals Harishchandra went through was the one ideal it inspired in me". Harishchandra's story impressed Gandhiji's thoughts and religion. Gandhiji's religion of truth had its source in that play like Harishchandra, Gandhiji also suffered for preaching and practicing truthfulness. His entire life was based on truth and its application. The whole of his life may be summed up as a quest for truth or an experiment in truth. Gandhiji loved his country much and the major part of his life was spent for the sake of his country's upliftment. He expressed his deep sense of commitment to his nation without any hesitation. He had said: "I am wedded to India because I owe my all to her. I believe absolutely that she has a mission for all the world. She is not to copy Europe blindly. My life is dedicated to service of India through the religion of non-violence". Gandhiji had a great vision about his nation. For
him non-violence was his religion. He practiced non-violence as a way of life in his entire public action. Gandhiji was also influenced by the teaching of Jainism in his early life. Jainism preaches the well-known extreme view of non-violence, which impressed Gandhiji very much. Buddhism also influenced him a lot. Gandhiji was a true disciple of Buddha, adopted and practiced the same code of morality for achieving 'moksha' or salvation. And moreover, many religious books also influenced Gandhiji's thoughts and ideas. Bhagavadgita ranked the first among them. Gandhiji said: “The verses in the second chapter made a deep impression on my mind, and they still ring in my ears. The book struck one as one of the priceless worth. The impression has ever since been growing on me with the result that I regard it today as the book par excellence for the knowledge of Truth. It has afforded one invaluable help in my moments of gloom”. And moreover he had said: “The Gita became an infallible guide of conduct. It became my dictionary of daily reference”. This statement clearly reveals the influence of Gita in Gandhiji's life. It was a guide for him. He had found out solution in his life in troubles. He had said: “When doubt haunts me and when I see not one ray of light on the horizon, I turn to the Bhagavadgita, and find a verse to comfort
me”. Hence, Gita was a comforter in his personal life. He used it as a problem solver and guide, and moreover he practiced Gita in his personal life. Gandhiji was also greatly influenced by the life and teaching of Swami Vivekananda. Vivekananda’s conception of ‘Daridranarayan’, the poor, as God was adopted and practiced by Gandhiji himself. For Gandhiji service of the poor is the service of God. Service to the poor was the most important thing for Gandhiji. Raychandbhai, a saintly Indian merchant and a distinguished reformer of Bombay, exercised a profound influence on Gandhiji. Gandhiji said: “No one else has ever made on me the impression that Raychandbhai did”.

He also moulded Gandhiji’s thoughts and ideas.

Gokhale was the first Indian political leader who introduced the principles of religion into public life and tried to spiritualize it. Gandhiji was much influenced by him and accepted Gokhale as his political ‘Guru’. Gandhiji had said: “My conception of a Guru is perhaps not of the ordinary. Nothing but perfection will satisfy me. I am in search of one who though in the flesh, is incorruptible and unmoved by passion, free from the pairs of opposites, who is Truth and Ahimsa incarnate and will therefore fear none and be feared by none”. The other great Indians who stimulated the young
mind of Gandhiji were Sir Pherozeshah and Lokmanya Tilak. Gandhiji had said: “Sir Pherozeshah had seemed to me like the Himalaya, the Lokmanya like the ocean. But Gokhale was as the Ganges. One could have a refreshing bath in the holy river. The Himalaya was unsalable, and one could not easily launch forth on the sea. But the Ganges invited one to its bosom”. Thus Gandhiji was influenced by the great personalities of India. His opinion about the distinguished personalities of India clearly revealed the open attitude of Gandhiji. He accepted and respected the great personalities of India and was willing to absorb the good qualities from them.

3.3 Western Influence

The Western thinkers like Tolstoy, Ruskin, Thoreau, Socrates, Carlyle and Emerson also influenced Gandhiji. Count Leo Tolstoy (1828–1910) the Russian writer and thinker influenced Gandhi very much. Tolstoy by his book ‘The Kingdom of God is within you’ overwhelmed him very much. Gandhiji said that it left an abiding impression on him. About the effect of the book on his life he wrote: “It was 40 years back, when I was passing through a severe crisis of scepticism and doubt that I came across his book, ‘The Kingdom of God is within you’ and was deeply impressed by it. I was
at that time a believer in violence. Its reading cured me of my skepticism and made me a firm believer in Ahimsa²¹. Ahimsa was the fundamental principle of Gandhiji’s entire life. It was for him not only a principle but for a way of life. Rev. Joseph J. Doke, the first biographer of Gandhiji is of the opinion that the miscellaneous writings of Tolstoy especially on ethical, religious and allied problems were traced out, read and digested by Gandhiji. Doke calls him “a disciple of Tolstoy”²². Tolstoy’s simplicity of life and purity of purpose influenced Gandhiji very much. Tolstoy accepted love to be the law of life. The principle of non-violence is based on love for the entire mankind. Both Tolstoy and Gandhiji adopted the instrument of love to solve all problems in their lives. And moreover, they believed that non-violence could cure all social maladies, remove political ills, and establish peace on earth and goodwill among mankind.

Another Western thinker who influenced Gandhiji was John Ruskin (1819 – 1900). He was an author, social reformer, and art critic, in the last half of the nineteenth century²³. His book Unto This Last was one of the most decisive influences of Gandhiji’s life. In Gandhiji’s own words, “The book was impossible to lay aside, once I had begun it, it gripped me. I could
not get any sleep that night". The reading of this book had deep impact on Gandhiji. And moreover, it transforms his life. Gandhiji wrote: "The one that brought about an instantaneous and practical transformation in my life was 'Unto This Last'. I translated it later into Gujarati, entitled it 'Sarvodaya' (The welfare of all), I believe that I discovered some of my deepest convictions reflected in this great book of Ruskin, and that is why it so captured me and made me transform my life". Gandhiji changed his life in accordance with the ideals of ‘Unto This Last’ and drew from it three principles.

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;

3. That the life of labour, i.e., the life of the tiller of the soil, and the handicraftsman is the life worth living.”

Under the influence of Ruskin’s ‘Unto This Last’ he equally believed that differential wages should not be paid for intellectual work in preference to manual work since intellectual labour should not be treated as superior to
manual labour. After reading ‘Unto This Last’ Gandhi was convinced of the need that one must earn his bread by the sweat of his brow or by performing bread labour.

Henry David Thoreau (1817–1862), the American writer, poet and philosopher also impressed Gandhiji very much. Gandhiji read Thoreau’s *Civil Disobedience* with great interest while he was in jail as a result of satyagraha campaign in South Africa. The reading of the essay ‘Civil Disobedience’ greatly influenced Gandhiji’s movements. He had said: “There is no doubt that Thoreau’s idea greatly influenced my movement in India.” Thus Thoreauvian influence on Gandhiji was so deep and powerful in many respects. The ancient philosopher Socrates (470 – 399 B.C.) has exercised an incalculable influence on Gandhiji as a satyagrahi, and moreover a seeker after truth. Both of them were spiritualists and idealists. Thomas Carlyle (1795 – 1881) an essayist and historian of eminence influenced Gandhiji very much. During his stay in London as a student Gandhiji read Carlyle’s monumental work on Heroes, Hero-worship, and the Heroic in History. While in jail he read Carlyle’s *French Revolution* and that book confirmed the glory of non-violence in his mind.
Gandhiji was also influenced by Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803 – 1882). He was an American and a radical transcendentalist. Gandhiji had read about Emerson during his second term of imprisonment in South Africa. After reading Emerson’s essays, he wrote to his son on March 25, 1909 which was “Emerson, Ruskin and Mazzini all confirm the view that education does not mean a knowledge of letters but it means character building.” For Gandhiji, education is a means of character formation. Character determines whether a person is literate or illiterate. Education is a tool for character formation.

3.4 Religious Influence

Gandhiji was also influenced by various religions of the world such as Hinduism, Islam, Christianity, Jainism and Buddhism.

In Hinduism, Gandhiji often called himself a Sanatan Hindu, a Vedantist. He finds solace, a Kamadhenu in the Gita. Gita is the sacred book of Hinduism. The verses in the second chapter of Gita made a deep impression on Gandhiji’s mind. He had said: “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 today as the book par excellence for the knowledge of Truth. It has afforded me invaluable help in my moments of gloom.” And moreover,
he reveals: "The teachings of the Gita became an infallible guide of conduct. It became my dictionary of daily reference". This statement clearly revealed the deep influence of Gita in Gandhiji’s life. Every moment of Gandhiji’s life is a conscious effort to live the message of the Gita. No other book influenced him so deeply as the study of the Bhagavad Gita. Gandhiji was also greatly influenced by the life and teachings of Swami Vivekananda. Vivekananda’s concept of Daridranarayan influenced him very much. The concept of poor as God, was adopted, elaborated and practiced by Gandhiji himself. He had said: "Daridranarayan is one of the millions of names by which humanity knows God who is unnameable and unfathomable by human understanding, and it means God of the poor, God appearing in the hearts of the poor". Gandhiji loved the poor very much and moreover, service to the poor was the most important thing for Gandhiji. He dedicated the major portions of his life to the service of the poor and his belief was that the service of the poor is the service of God.

As for Islam, Gandhiji declared that in his view, ‘the point of brotherhood is manifested in other religions as clearly as in Islam’. According to Gandhiji, the chief contribution of Islam has been the brotherhood of
man. Both Muhammad and Gandhiji were men of action. The reading of the Koran has convinced Gandhiji that the basis of Islam is not violence. He had said: “The very word Islam means peace which is non-violence. The sword is no emblem of Islam”\(^3^2\). Hence Gandhiji was greatly influenced by the concept of non-violence in Islam. Islam stands for peace. Gandhiji was also influenced by Christianity very much. During his student days in London, he read the Bible. In Bible, the New Testament influenced Gandhiji much especially the Sermon on the Mount. About it Gandhiji had said: “The New Testament produced a different impression especially the sermon on the mount which went straight to my heart. I compared it with the Gita”\(^3^3\). On many occasions, Gandhiji found consolation and derived inspiration and strength from the Bible. For Gandhiji, Jesus Christ represented the purest form of passive resistance or soul force; and Jesus was the king of satyagrahis. Gandhiji said: “Christ died on the cross with a crown of thorns on his head defying the might of a whole empire. And if I raise resistance of a non-violent character, I simply and humbly follow in the footsteps of the great teacher”\(^3^4\). Gandhiji often appraised Jesus as a great teacher, and as a saviour of humanity. Gandhiji dedicated his whole life towards the service of
humanity which he owed much to Christian influence. Jainism also cast a deep impression on the ethico-religious life of Gandhiji. Both Jainism and Buddhism preached the virtue of Ahimsa (non-violence) in India long ago. Buddhism emphasized the non-killing of animal life and non-injury to men. Jainism proceeds a step further and prescribes non-killing of animal life, even of the smallest insect. Gandhiji accepted this ethics of non-violence of both Jainism and Buddhism to every sphere of his life. Jaina philosophy accepts and advocates non-violence (Ahimsa) as the highest label of life and as the means of attaining liberation (Moksha). For Gandhiji non-violence (Ahimsa) was the highest ideal of life and as the means of attaining self-realization (moksha). Gandhiji was also influenced by many Parsi people of his time. Dadabhai Naoroji influenced Gandhiji very much. During his stay in London as a student Gandhiji was much impressed by the speech and personality of Naoroji. The lectures delivered by Naoroji were of immense benefit to him. Gandhiji wrote: 'whenever an address by him was announced, I would attend it, listen to him from a corner of the hall and go away after having feasted my eyes and ears'35.
3.5 Conclusion

Gandhiji was of course, very much influenced by the Indian, western and religious sources. For Gandhiji, home life was the first and foremost influence in his early life. His parents influenced him much. They were cultured and as per prevailing Indian standards, were well to do. And moreover, the notable thing is that all the members of his family influenced him at various levels. Even the housemaid influenced him much. Gandhiji’s father and mother, both of them played an important role in his early life, especially the mother, Putlibhai made a spiritual foundation in his life. Thus the mother had played an important role in their children’s spiritual life. Her daily life must be very careful as the speech and deed of mother greatly influence the children. They have a tendency to imitate their parents every movement. Hence family is said to be the great school and mother, the best teacher. Gandhiji absorbed the goodness of all religions with regard to his idea of communal harmony and it helped him to be a man of morality and a firm believer in God. The concept of Truth and non-violence he imbibed from the religions Buddhism, Jainism, Hinduism and Christianity. Gandhiji is known to the world as a brave man, a man of simple and austere living,
and a seeker after truth cannot be the product of one or two circumstances. But he was rather a man of varied influences. His personality was a result of various sources of influences in his life. Gandhiji himself said: “I have learnt from the New Testament as also from other sources”\textsuperscript{36}. According to Prof. D.M. Dutta, “A variety of experiences gradually shaped Gandhiji’s ideas”\textsuperscript{37} and moreover, S.M. Tiwari, a scholar of Gandhian thought remarks; “His (Gandhiji’s) teaching drew its inspiration from the sages of almost all lands and ages”\textsuperscript{38}. These statements clearly revealed the fact that Gandhiji was influenced by many sources and which helped him to mould his personality and ideals in a proper way.
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13 Ibid., p. 4.


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22 Young India Sept. 20, 1928, p. 319.


26 Ibid., p. 224.

27 Ibid., p. 224.


31 Ibid., p.16.


