CHAPTER II

GANDHI'S LIFE HISTORY

The purpose of providing a brief sketch of biographical details containing mainly some of the important events from Gandhiji's childhood, student days and his experience as a lawyer in South Africa are: one, Gandhiji's social, economic, political, moral, religious ideas have roots in his early life; two, some of these events have influenced his views and as can be seen, his desire for social service, his commitment to truth and non-violence and his concept of self-realization through social service are very closely connected with his early life. These events throw light on Gandhiji's social philosophy and this in turn helps us understand the man and his mission in a broader context.

Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi was born of Karamchand Gandhi and his fourth wife Putlibai, on October 2, 1869 in Porabandar in Kathewar of Rajkot state. Karamchand Gandhi was the retired Dewan (Prime Minister) of Rajkot state. The Gandhis were an affluent business family belonging to the Baniya (Merchant) community of Gujarat. Gandhi's parents Karamchand and Putlibai were highly religious, pious and God fearing people.
Gandhi's Childhood

Gandhi, as a child, was under the profound influence of his religious parents. He was very fond of his parents. He listened to the mythological stories narrated by his mother. Among mythical heroes Shravana Kumar and Harischandra were his favourites.

Gandhi's childhood was not totally free from pranks and follies. He smoked beedi and ate flesh so that he could be a strong man. But to obtain money for these habits, he had to borrow from his friends. To settle these borrowings he stole a piece of gold from the bracelet of his elder brother.

Gandhi's father Karamchand was bed-ridden when this incident took place. Gandhi was afraid that if his father came to know about the misdeeds of the son, he would be hurt, and his illness might worsen. To avoid any trouble to his father, Gandhi confessed his sin to his father. Karamchand forgave his son with tearful eyes. That was a punishment strong enough to open the eyes of a sensitive Gandhi. He later remembered 'those affectionate tears washed away all my sins; I was taught the lesson of non-violence'. With this came an end to his sinful activities. His heart was cleansed of the feeling of guilt.
Gandhiji was married to Kasturbai at the age of thirteen years. She was six months older than him. He was not interested in pursuing the college education, but some of his well-wishers advised him, 'Go to England and return as Barrister or else you shall not get your father's Dewan (Prime Minister) position'. But there were others who were against his going to Europe because crossing the ocean was considered a sin then. Some fundamentalists even threatened to excommunicate him and his family if he went abroad. Gandhi did not budge to this threat. He prepared himself by obtaining the money through the sale of Kasturbai's ornaments and jewels. The most important thing needed for his going abroad was the blessings of his mother Putlibai.

Again he once stole a piece of gold belonging to his brother to settle a debt, and truth moved in him so strongly that although he was too ashamed to speak out, he wrote down what he had done and went to his father.

'I was trembling all over', he wrote later, 'as I handed the confession to my father. He was then suffering from fistula and was confined to bed. His bed was a bare plank of wood. I handed him the note and sat opposite. As he read it through, tears like pearl drops trickled down his cheeks, wetting the paper.
For a moment he closed his eyes in thought and tore up the note. He had sat up to read it. He again lay down. I also shed tears when I saw my father's agony... Those pearl drops of love cleansed my heart and washed my sins away.

He went to England for further studies and there he fell in the bad company. A Muslim friend advised him to go to non-vegetarian inn if he wanted to be strong. Young Gandhi started taking lessons in French and the western dance. He got his first suit stitched in Bond Street London. Gandhi did not go far on these roads, as he soon realised that he had not gone there to waste his time and money.

At this time too, a sense of shame settled upon him. It so happened that the local British Political Agent had become prejudiced against Gandhi's brother. This man had been friendly to Gandhi in England and Gandhi went to him to plead but paying no heed to Gandhi's pleadings, Gandhi was put out of the office by the British Political Agent.

This insult meant not only shame but also insecurity. Gandhi considered that not only his honour had been brooked but that his work had been jeopardised, for his law practice could not
continue for long in a place, where a hostile man was the final authority of the Government.

It was at this time that an offer came to him to leave for South Africa and work there at a law firm of Indian merchants. Gandhi went to South Africa immediately.

Scarce did Gandhi knew at the time of his departure to South Africa that his life was to undergo a tremendous transformation which in turn was to determine the future of British Empire and its innumerable colonies which had made it 'An Empire on which the Sun never set'.

**Gandhi in South Africa**

Gandhi’s life in South Africa, which was then under the British rule, reads like a saga of an adventurer in a lost land, searching for an identity for himself as well as for his brethren. As a lawyer in South Africa, Gandhi could have amassed much wealth, but he eschewed it. His idea was to serve the oppressed and fight the evil with the power of truth.

An incident that took place during the train journey of Gandhi to Transvaal from the province of Natal is of crucial importance in understanding his future resolve and determination
to fight against the apartheid, which ultimately culminated in overthrowing the yoke of British rule from the shoulders of the Indian people.

Gandhi came into the city of Durban in the province of Natal, where Indians were called coolies or sammies, and after a few days he visited the courts, from where he was thrown out because he would not take off his turban. Shortly thereafter he was sent out to work in a neighbouring area, i.e., the Transvaal and during the journey he was ordered out of a train because he was a coloured man travelling in first class. Gandhi said, 'I was permitted to travel in compartment at Durban and I insist on going on in it'.

The railway official said, 'No you won't, you must leave this compartment, or else I shall have to call the police constable to push you out'. But Gandhi remained firm and he said, 'Yes, you may. I refuse to get out voluntarily'. Gandhi was forced out from the train and his baggage was taken from it.

Gandhi had been put down in the town of Maritzburg and in the morning the Indian merchants of the place came to console him but they could console him only with the stories of their hardships. In the evening Gandhi took the train again and went
on without trouble. But he had to travel a distance by stagecoach, and the conductor of the coach would not let him sit inside. After some time he would not even allow him to set any longer on the coach box inside. The conductor pointed to the dirty foot board of the coach and said, ‘Sammy, you sit on this; I want to sit near the driver’. Gandhi trembled with shame and with fear but he would not come down from the box. The man swore and used great strength trying to pull Gandhi down, but Gandhi clung to the brass rails of the box and would not let go. Then the people inside the coach cried out against the conductor and insisted that Gandhi be seated inside among them.

When Gandhi finally reached Transvaal he was same Gandhi physically but a new Gandhi mentally for the idea of serving others had entered his mind. Shortly after his arrival he called a meeting of Indians of all faith – Hindus, Mussalmans, Parsis and Christians to discuss ways by which they could better their lot. He looked more closely into the conditions of his countrymen, and he was moved by their hardships. Europeans had brought them into South Africa under a system of indenture, whereby they slaved five years at the plantations and mines and then became free. But the Europeans objected to free Indians and levied taxes and passed laws against them in their newspapers they said,
'These Indians have no sense of human decency. They suffer from loathsome diseases. They consider every woman as their prey'. (Gandhi once observed that 'the human intellect delights in inventing specious arguments in order to support injustice'.) Stirred, he spoke in public for the first time, and his words also stirred those who heard him, for thereafter Indians sought him after.

In Transvaal the work of Gandhi was to aid the law suit of one Indian Mussalman against another both being well-to-do traders. But he was troubled that one person should attempt to destroy the well being of another. He was certain that his own client could win at court, but he convinced both parties to seek arbitration. When his client was awarded a large claim in money, he sought means whereby the opponent could repay the sum without being ruined. This attachment of Gandhi to goodness brought him respect from the Indian community.

Meanwhile, encouraged by the European Christians and Indian Mussalmans, he gave himself over to study the scriptures of Christianity, Islam and of his own old Hindu religion, paring over the Bible, over Tolstoy and Thorean, and examining the light of Asia and the Gita. The first reward of his practice in Truth was not a preaching of ideas but more work for his people. It was in
this work that he taught himself to listen to the inner voice and it was in this work, he said, that '... the religious spirit within me became a living force...'

It was settled that he would go back to India at the end of one year. Accordingly he left Transvaal for Natal to take passage from the city of Durban. But a bill had been introduced in that area to take the vote away from Indians, and when his countrymen in Natal pressed him to stay back, Gandhi agreed to stay for a month. He drew up petitions, held meetings, and secured ten thousand signatures on a memorial to the Government. And again he made ready to leave South Africa.

Indians came to him and said, 'You yourself have explained to us that this is the first step taken with a view to our ultimate extinction... You have now witnessed our enthusiasm. We are willing to work and we have funds. But for want of a guide, what little has been already done will go to nothing. We, therefore, regard it to be your duty to stay on'.

Gandhi refused to take any salary and made ready to support himself through the practice of law. Thereupon in May 1894 he formed the Natal Indian Congress, a group which was to struggle for the rights of Indian settlers. One year had passed
since he arrived in South Africa, and many new ideas kept coming to his mind: education of the young, action to overcome the shortcomings of Indians not simply those of Europeans, and cooperation with all races and peoples, wherever possible on a footing of equality.

He had not only fresh ideas on politics but fresh ideas on law. He would not take a case if his client would not speak the truth. Once, when a man brought a suit but indicated by his answering in court that he was not truthful, Gandhi moved that his client’s suit be dismissed. His client begged him for forgiveness. This incident made him so famous that other men came begging for his services.

Once his friend Parsi Rustomji, an importer of goods, came to him to confess that he had been caught smuggling, albeit in an offence involving only a small sum of money. The Parsi begged Gandhi to save him. Gandhi said, ‘To save or not to save you is in His hands. As for me, you know my way: I can but try to save you by means of a confession’. The name and wealth and freedom of this man were at stake, but he said, ‘Well, I have told you that I am entirely in your hands. You may do just as you like’. Gandhi took his Parsi’s confession for all the smuggling he had done, not just the smuggling at which he had been caught, and he took it to
the court, there to plead for his friend. The court was moved; a fine instead of a jail sentence was imposed; and Parsi Rustomji framed the confession and put it on the wall of his office by way of a warning to other merchants.

In such ways Gandhi sought to grow in the practice of Truth but his truth was more than mere honesty, for it included love and forgiveness, and the use of these in his own life began to free him from the fear of insult and shame. One day, when he had been in South Africa only a short time, a sentry threw him into the street in front of the house of the President of the Transvaal because his skin was dark. A European friend came running to him, saying, ‘Gandhi, I have seen everything. I shall gladly be your witness in court if you proceed against the man. I am very sorry you have been rudely assaulted’.

But Gandhi said, ‘You need not be sorry. What does the poor man know? All coloured people are the same to him. He, do doubt, treats Negroes just as he has treated me. I have made it a rule not to go court in respect of any personal grievance. So I do not intend to proceed against him’.

Then sentry apologized, but Gandhi said there was no need since he had already forgiven him.
In 1897, when Gandhi was more grievously attacked, he was equally forgiving. He had gone home the year before to bring his family to South Africa, and while in India he had written a pamphlet about Natal. A Reuters's newspaperman cabled a false account of the pamphlet and the Europeans of Natal gave way to feelings of anger and outrage. On his return Gandhi landed at Durban and started walking towards the house of Parsi Rustomji, where he and his family were to stay. At once the cry went up, 'Here's Gandhi, here's Gandhi! Thrash him! Surround him!'

Mob gathered and it began to curse and throw stones. One man slapped and kicked Gandhi so hard that he almost became unconscious. But he determined to walk on, warding off no blows even if it cost him his life. At last he reached Rustomji's house only because the wife of the Superintendent of Police who was passing by, came to walk beside him. Thus he was spared critical injuries. Finally, the mob surrounded Rustomji's house and shouted that they would burn it unless Gandhi was delivered over to them. But the Police Superintendent spirited Gandhi out of the house and into a place of safety.

The press of Natal had already talked with Gandhi before he left the bout and learning of the falseness of the report from Reuters, they wrote sympathetically. The mood of the city of
Durban changed altogether, and the Attorney General came to Gandhi to ask him to identify those who had attacked him, that they might be arrested and tried. Gandhi neither identifies anyone nor has any one prosecuted, explaining that he did not hold the mob at fault. He said, 'Prosecuting my associates is, therefore, out of the question. This is a religious question with me'.

He would not only forgive his opponents, he would seek ways of helping them. In the year 1899 the war between British and the Boers broke out, and Gandhi convinced other Indians that they should act loyally toward the Empire even if the Empire did not always act justly towards them. (He then believed that the British system was for the good of mankind.) Therefore, he set up a group of stretcher bearers and worked with them under fire. Some years later he led another corps when a rebellion appeared among the African Zulu people. He found comfort that this works aided both sides of the conflict, but he believed their great value lay in the taking on the task of citizenship, the privileges of which were many times denied to Indians.

While he grew in simplicity, the compelling power of his own being had become evident, and the way opened to him for success in the practice of law. Clients came to him in great
numbers, and he looked to be a worldly success, a respected citizen who was beginning to make a fortune. But the more money came in, the more money he tried to give away to the needy people. He furnished his house with only the most necessary furniture; he took over grinding meal and baking his own bread; he even started washing his shirts. On a visit to India in 1902 he began travelling in third class railway compartments and steamships. Possessions and extravagances he had come to understand as encumbrances upon him.

While he made his living simpler, he enlarged his household. To his family, made up of his wife Kasturbai and their four sons, he added more family friend of all beliefs. Among them there were Hindus and Mussalmans and among the Europeans there were Christians and Jews. At the marriage of a Jewish-Christian couple, his friends Polaks, he served as Best Man, and they came to live within his household. ‘... I have known no distinction’, he wrote, ‘between relatives and strangers, countrymen and foreigners, white and coloured, Hindus and Indians of other faiths, whether Mussalmans, Parsis, Christians, or Jews. I may say that my heart has been incapable of making any such distinction. I cannot claim this as a special virtue, as it has been in my very nature, rather than a result of any effort on
my part...'. His heart was never touched by the petty differences of religious and he knew no difference of race. He even became angry with Kasturbai and anger was rare with him then when she found it hard to bring herself to empty the slops of a young man born to parents of the caste that Hindus believed untouchable.

In the year 1904 he was living in Johannesburg in the Transvaal, where he had been called two years earlier to aid the plight of Indians in that province, which by then forbade their re-entry into the place once they had left it. It happened that black plague in one of the mining camps and spread to twenty-three of the Indians working in the mine, and Gandhi undertook to stop the epidemic and to nurse the sick through the course of their fatal and often contagious disease. He asked his four law clerks to come and help, and they followed him. He also summoned a European physician for his services. The sick were isolated and tended carefully.

Meanwhile other European volunteers came forward, and one of them, Albert West, a printer, was dispatched to edit Indian Opinion a paper Gandhi had started for discussing subjects that were both timeless and timely. After the plague was over, West reported that the finances of the periodical were in disorder, and Gandhi prepared to leave for Durban in Natal, where the paper
was printed. Henry Polak went with him to the railway station, and as Gandhi entered the train he put into his hands a book by John Ruskin, a Briton who sought a simple and good life. Gandhi read it constantly during the twenty-four hour train trip to Durban. He said, 'The one book that brought about an instantaneous and practical transformation of my life was Unto This Last... I discovered some of my deepest convictions reflected in this great book of Ruskin and that is why the book so captured me and made me transform my life'.

'This how I understood Ruskin's teaching:

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

2. A lawyer's labour has the same value as the barber's, inasmuch as all have the same right of earning their livelihood from their labour.

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

I awoke with the dawn, ready to put these principles to practice.'

This book set off the first of the great spiritual explosions of Gandhi's life. He went to see West, proposed that the paper and its staff be moved to a farm, where everyone should labour and
where everyone should draw the same living wage. Within a week Gandhi purchased twenty acres of land in the country at a place called Phoenix, added eight acres more, drew poor and well-to-do Indians and Europeans from their occupations, and established, away from the cities and centres of temporal greatness, the first of his Ashramas, or communities for seeking after Truth. Thereafter he ate simple food, put on coarse clothes, lived in flimsy houses, and shared in the work of the scullery, fields and the latrines.

But this was not to be a life of quiet growth for Gandhi at his new Ashram. Before long the authorities in the Transvaal put forth a new and onerous system of registration and finger printing for Asiatics and sought to increase the severity of the old laws. Their aim was to give colour prejudice the full strength of law and to control the slave labourers while they pushed the freed labourers out of South Africa. Gandhi made clear to the people in the Transvaal that the Government had taken the first step in evicting all the Indians, and he proposed that a meeting be held on September 11, 1906, in the Old Empire Theatre in the city of Johannesburg to decide how Indians could maintain life in South Africa.
Out of this meeting came a second great spiritual explosion. Gandhi went to it without any settled ideas of what should be done. But he went to it with a deep experience of inner growth. Growth had began in his youth, when he began to say the simple and primitive prayer of India, where in the name of God is repeated until the very throat and lips become weary, so that he might banish his fears. Growth had gone forward during a period of reflection in London. It had been speeded up when his eyes fell upon the words of Jesus, '... I say unto you, resist not evil; but whosoever shall smile thee on thy right cheek; turn to him the other also. And if any man will sue thee at law to take away thy coat, let him have thy cloak also'. His growth had been spurred by his talks in India with the poet Raychand, a saintly man of business when Gandhi recognized, as a seeker after Truth even before Gandhi knew what Truth was. And in South Africa growth had quickened and borne fruit. Gandhi was no longer the timid young man suffused with fear and shame. He had passed through beatings and through wars; he had led the Indian community in its struggle for simple human rights. He had sensed the depth of spirit of the great teachers of East and West; and he was already practising what they had preached. He understood from his own life the commandment, 'Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which
despiteful use you and persecute you, that ye may be sons of your Father which is in heaven'. In his ears there were the verses of a Hindu poem; 'If a man gives you a drink and you give him a drink in return, that is nothing. Real beauty consists in doing good against evil'.

Although he sat on the platform of Old Empire Theatre without anything ready to say, he was ready to say something. And when a Mussalman friend invoked the name of God in demanding an oath never to submit to registration, Gandhi got to his feet and called for a struggle for the rights of the Indians that would rely entirely on the power of Truth, casting aside altogether the power of violence. He invited labourers, mine workers as well as merchants to disobey the Government, to go to jail with their wives and sons and sisters if need be, to march in protest if need be, to leave work if need be, and in all cases to pray. He did not speak lightly of the danger for he said, 'We may have to remain hungry and suffer from extreme heat and cold. We may even be flogged by the wardens. Or we may not be imprisoned but fined heavily and our property attached and held up for non-payment. Though some of us are wealthy today. We may be reduced to poverty tomorrow. We may even be deported from South Africa for good.'
‘Suffering from hunger hardships in jail, some of us may fall ill or even die. Our wisdom, therefore, lies in pledging ourselves, knowing full well that we shall have to suffer things like these and even worse.’

Then he spoke for himself saying, ‘Even if everyone else were to hold back, leave me alone, I am confident that I should never violate my pledge. Please do not misunderstand me. I am not suggesting this in a boastful spirit but I wish earnestly to put you on your guard. I would respectfully suggest that if you have not the will or the ability to stand firm even when you are perfectly isolated, you should not only refuse to take the pledge yourselves but you should here and now declare your opposition to it. Each single man should full realise his responsibilities and then only pledge himself independently of others. He should understand that he himself must be true to his pledge even unto death’.

Then every man, Hindu, Mussalman, Parsi and Christian, in the theatre rose up and pledged to resist only by the power of Truth. This was the beginning of great weapon of Satyagraha, with which man can conquer evil not by doing violence to others but by taking violence upon themselves.