Gandhi, Mohandas Karamchand (1869–1948)

A leading practitioner of civil disobedience and acclaimed as the father of India as a nation. Gandhi (1869–1948) was born into an upper-caste Hindu family and grew up in the religiously plural environment of western India. At nineteen he went to England to train as a lawyer. There he read two religious texts that had a deep and abiding influence upon him, the great Hindu epic poem Bhagavad Gita and the Bible. He also read an account of the life and teachings of the Buddha. The Jain ideas of nonviolence (ahimsa) and nonpossessiveness (aparigraha), the Buddhist ethic of renunciation, the Hindu attitude of detachment (anasakti), and the Christian values of selfless love and passive (nonaggressive) resistance to evil embodied in Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount became the moral foundation of Gandhi’s life and work.

On his return to India, Gandhi accepted a short assignment as a legal consultant to an Indian merchant in South Africa. He arrived in Durban in 1893 to discover that Indian settlers in the British colonies of Natal and Transvaal were the victims of extreme racial discrimination. When his contract expired, he decided to stay in South Africa to organize the Indians to fight for their personal dignity and political rights.
Gandhi developed a philosophy of action anchored in an unflinching insistence on truth, *satyagraha*, in thought and in deed. He ruled out any compromise with evil but considered it morally obligatory to try to reform the evildoer through love. It was imperative that political actors should be moral individuals, ready to acknowledge their infirmities and atone for them. At the level of collective political action Gandhi developed the techniques of nonviolent civil disobedience and passive resistance. He maintained that politics was a legitimate instrument, provided that it was subsumed under ultimate values. His religious vision was holistic: “For me, every, the tiniest, activity is governed by what I consider my religion” (1932).

Gandhi, who was a theist but not a ritualist or traditionalist, placed moral reason above scripture. In 1909 he wrote a confession of faith, which was followed by a political pamphlet on Indian self-governance. In these he argued that modern industrial civilization is evil.

His efforts on behalf of Indians in South Africa were attended by both successes and failures. Between 1893 and 1915, when he finally returned home, Gandhi paid several visits to India and kept in touch with developments there. He became known as a leader in the heroic mold. Rabindranath Tagore (Nobel laureate in literature) acclaimed him as a *mahatma* (great or noble soul), and the title won ready and wide acceptance. It was only in 1917, however, that Gandhi plunged into political activity, championing, first, the cause of an exploited peasant community in northern India and, then, challenging the might of the British raj in Punjab.

During the 1920s and 1930s Gandhi emerged as the unquestioned leader of the Indian National Congress Party. He perceived quite early that two major obstacles impeded the struggle for freedom: the political differences between Hindus and Muslims and the moral and social degeneration of Hindu society, represented most critically by the practice of segregating the group known as untouchables.
In a bold move in 1920 Gandhi, in his first major noncooperation movement against the British, gave support to the Turkish sultan. The sultan, recognized by Muslims worldwide as their caliph, or religious leader, had most of his territories taken away from him by the victorious powers at the end of World War I (1914–1918). Gandhi hoped that his support of the sultan’s cause would bring Muslims into the Indian national movement. His success in mobilizing Muslims was exceptional, but it was short lived. His concessions to Muslim sentiments resulted in a right-wing Hindu backlash. Furthermore, conservative Muslims, who were the backbone of the caliphate movement, withdrew their support of Gandhi after the caliphate was abolished by Turkish nationalists. Thus the long-term consequence of Gandhi’s strategy was the strengthening of divisive religious nationalisms. He met with greater success in his crusade against caste discrimination in Hindu society.

Muslim separatism peaked in 1940, when the demand for partition of the subcontinent on a religious basis was formally made. Gandhi opposed the idea, calling it political folly and moral evil. In 1942 he launched the “Quit India” movement against British rule. All of the senior leaders of the Congress Party were jailed. Their absence created an opportunity for Muslim separatists to mobilize support. When the imprisoned leaders were released, they found that the political situation had changed significantly. India and Pakistan emerged as free nations in 1947, in the midst of unprecedented intercommunity violence and the movement of millions of refugees.

Old, frail, and deeply disappointed, Gandhi refused to give up his vision of religious concord in the subcontinent. He called for the establishment of a secular state in India. His efforts on behalf of the Muslims who stayed in India angered Hindu fanatics. One of them, Nathuram Godse, shot Gandhi dead on January 30, 1948, when he was on his way to an evening prayer meeting.

Gandhi’s emphases on the moral foundations of society and on nonviolence in politics have won universal recognition. His influence has been acknowledged in major political struggles, notably that of African Americans under the leadership of Martin Luther King Jr. In a world that has woken up to the destructive dimensions of technology, consumerism, and religious fundamentalism, Gandhi’s ideas of religious pluralism, limitation of desires, and living in harmony with nature have acquired a keen relevance.

See also Hinduism; India.

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