CHAPTER 1

Formative Years

Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi was born on October 2, 1869, in Porbandar, a seaside town in western India. At that time, India was under the British raj (rule). The British presence in India dated from the early seventeenth century, when the English East India Company (EIC) first arrived there. India was then ruled by the Mughals, a Muslim dynasty governing India since 1526. By the end of the eighteenth century, the EIC had established itself as the paramount power in India, although the Mughals continued to be the official rulers. However, the EIC’s mismanagement of the Indian affairs and the corruption among its employees prompted the British crown to take over the rule of the Indian subcontinent in 1858. In that year the British also deposed Bahadur Shah, the last of the Mughal emperors, and by the Queen’s proclamation made Indians the subjects of the British monarch. Victoria, who was simply the Queen of England, was designated as the Empress of India at a durbar (royal court) held at Delhi in 1877. Viceroy, the crown’s representative in India, became the chief executive-in-charge, while a secretary of state for India, a member of the British cabinet, exercised control over Indian affairs. A separate office called the India Office, headed by the secretary of state, was created in London to exclusively oversee the Indian affairs, while the Colonial Office managed the rest of the British Empire. The British-Indian army was reorganized and control over India was established through direct or indirect rule. The territories ruled directly by the British came to be known as British India. The British also governed, though indirectly, six hundred plus princely states spread throughout the Indian subcontinent. Collectively these states were referred to as Princely India. A British Resident was appointed to serve as a liaison between the British and the Princes. Often intrigues of various types plagued the politics of the princely states. Porbandar was one such princely state.

Mohandas (henceforth referred to as Gandhi) was the youngest son of Karamchand Gandhi and his fourth wife, Putlibai. He had two older brothers, Laxmidas and Karsandas; an older sister, Raliat; and two half-sisters also older to him, Muli and Pankunwar. Beginning with Gandhi’s grandfather, Ota Gandhi, the members of the Gandhi family were involved in the local politics and served as diwans or prime ministers in various princely states of Kathiawad, in the present-day Indian state of Gujarat. Gandhi’s father had served as the diwan of the petty princely states of Porbandar, Rajkot, and Wankaner. The family was fairly well-to-do and owned houses in all three places.
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Upbringing and Schooling

Gandhi was raised in Rajkot, where his father had moved from Porbandar to assume his new diwanship. His parents had little or no formal education; however, they influenced Gandhi through their own examples. Gandhi admired his father’s truthful and generous nature, and respected his integrity and evenhandedness. But he also saw his father as being short-tempered, and, to some extent, given to “carnal pleasures.” The qualities that stood out for him in his mother were her religious nature and common sense. In particular, Putlibai’s unflinching commitment to the observance of vows she had taken and her regular fasts left a lasting impression on the young Gandhi.

Gandhi grew up in an eclectic religious environment. He was exposed to many sects of Hinduism and other major religions of India. His parents routinely went to Vishnu and Shiva (major deities in Hinduism) temples. His mother came from the Pranami tradition—a syncretistic sect of Hinduism, which venerated the Quran as a holy book along with Vedic scriptures. Jain monks (representing Jainism, an ancient Indian religion dating back to the sixth century BCE) often visited their home. So did his father’s Muslim and Parsee friends. His nurse Rambha introduced him to Ramanama (the name, Rama—the revered Hindu God and the hero of the Indian epic, Ramayana) to help him overcome his fear of darkness and serpents. Gandhi developed a sense of respect for religious pluralism as he sat through many conversations his father had with people from various religions, and he was particularly struck by the respect his father showed to these people from different faiths. Christianity was the only religion that Gandhi could not appreciate at the time because of the conduct of the local Christian missionaries and their abusive approach to Hindus and their gods. It was only later during his stay in England that Gandhi would acquire a positive perspective on Christianity.

From very early on, Gandhi was drawn to the values of truth and service. These values were reinforced in his mind by the two legendary stories he came across while growing up. The first one was a story about Shravan Kumar’s devotion and service to his blind parents. Shravan’s life of service ended when he was mistakenly killed by a hunter while taking his parents on a pilgrimage. The young Gandhi found Shravan’s example of service worth emulating. The second one was a story of King Harishchandra and his legendary dedication to truth. Harishchandra kept his words and promises at the cost of losing his kingdom, his wife, himself, and their child. Even the demons failed to derail him from his devotion to truth. For Gandhi, Shravan Kumar and King Harishchandra were “living realities.” More gripping for his spirit were the lines of a Gujarati poet, Shamal Bhatt, which provided him the guiding principle for his life, “return good for evil.”

For a bowl of water give a goodly meal;
For a kindly greeting bow thou down with zeal;
For a simple penny pay thou back with gold;
If thy life is rescued, life do not withhold.
Thus the words and actions of the wise regard;
Every little service tenfold they reward.
But the truly noble know all men as one,
And return with gladness good for evil done. (SWMG-V1:50)
Such stories and poetry along with the example of his parents, according to Gandhi, were critical in seeding in him a commitment to truth, service, and integrity, which took deeper roots in him as he was growing up, notwithstanding some lapses.

Gandhi’s primary and secondary education took place in Rajkot. He was modest about his achievements in school. He regarded himself as a “mediocre” student, with books and lessons as his only companions. However, he was one of only two students in his class of thirty-eight students to complete the matriculation required for pursuing higher education. Once he had also received a double promotion, skipping a grade for his outstanding performance. He had no interest in sports, but liked to go for long walks, a habit that lasted throughout his life. He often chose to eat the leftover food from the previous night as his breakfast rather than get delayed for school while waiting for breakfast to be served. His sense of time and punctuality was particularly remarkable for his age, as was his concern for truthfulness.

His first test of integrity came when he was a twelve-year-old, a freshman at the Alfred High School in Rajkot. Once during a periodic assessment visit to his class by an English educational inspector, Gandhi misspelled the word *kettle* on a test. His teacher gave him hints, and nudged and winked, prompting him to copy the correct spelling from a student sitting next to him so as to present the visiting inspector with a class of perfect spellers. But Gandhi refused to do that.

**Marriage at Thirteen**

While still in high school, Gandhi was married at the age of thirteen to Kastur Makanji, who was also the same age. She was the daughter of his father’s closest friend from Porbandar. Later, when Gandhi became known as *bapu*, the father of the nation, Kastur was affectionately called Kasturba (mother Kastur). Child marriages were common occurrences in India at that time. Getting children married was a responsibility of the parents who arranged them and took care of all the expenses involved.

To Gandhi, marriage at first was no “more than the prospect of good clothes to wear, drum beating, marriage processions, rich dinners and a strange girl to play with” (*SWMG*-V1:12). When the groom and the bride came together the first night after marriage, they were “too nervous to face each other” (*SWMG*-V1:14). As a desperate seeker of tips on marriage and love, the young Gandhi used to regularly look for opportunities to read magazines dealing with such issues. Although he read everything he came across, he made it a habit to discard and forget what he did not like and to practice what he liked. One of the things he liked the most was the husband’s duty to practice lifelong faithfulness to his wife. Although Kastur (henceforth Kasturba) was illiterate, Gandhi admired her for her simplicity, independence, and perseverance. Often ego got in the way of their relationship. Refusing to talk to one another became a frequent routine of the two children bound by marriage. Nonetheless, Gandhi was very fond of Kasturba but had his own ideas for her well-being and growth. He wanted her to learn what he had learned and follow him. He was, by his own admission, a dominating husband.
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Adventures as a Teenager

As a teenager in high school, Gandhi came to make friends with Sheikh Mehtab. This friendship, he described later, was a “tragedy” of his life. Drawn to Mehtab’s rakish youth and daring demeanor, Gandhi decided to remain friends with him against the advice of his family. This friendship led Gandhi to eat meat and even to jeopardize his fidelity to his wife. In his autobiography, he shared with striking candor and detail the tension and dilemma he experienced during such lapses. On the one hand, there was Gandhi’s upbringing in a staunch Vaishnava (a follower of Vishnu, a Hindu deity) family environment with strong influence of Jainism, with both traditions prohibiting meat-eating for ethical and spiritual reasons. On the other hand, there was his friend Sheikh Mehtab, who was persuading Gandhi to eat meat through all sorts of reasoning, including using the poetry from a local poet, Narmad:

Behold the mighty Englishman,
He rules the Indian small.
Because being a meat-eater,
He is five cubits tall. (SWMG-V1:29)

Convinced fully by Mehtab’s arguments, Gandhi decided to eat meat. His first bite into the goat’s meat, however, was far from a pleasant experience. In fact, he could not sleep all night and frequently felt as if “a live goat was bleating” in his belly, filling him with remorse. However, the reminder that eating meat was necessary for him to become strong like the Englishmen gave him some relief, though not without a growing dilemma.

Having eaten meat for his meal, he could not eat his regular meal at home and had to lie to his family about not being hungry. This created a deep tension between the two things Gandhi wanted to become: strong and truthful. Eventually Gandhi resolved the dilemma by pledging not to eat meat during the lifetime of his parents so that he would not have to deceive them or lie to them and could therefore keep his commitment to be truthful. He had every intention of eating meat after the death of his parents.

The company of Sheikh Mehtab also led Gandhi one day to a brothel. In his autobiography, Gandhi notes that while he was in the brothel, he felt the sexual desire but did not act on it. Gandhi’s continuous friendship with Sheikh Mehtab, nonetheless, led to a conflict between him and Kasturba, and often made things painful for her.

During the time when Gandhi had given in to the temptation of eating meat, he also became drawn to smoking—this time in the company of his brother Karsandas and following the example of one of their uncles. Fascinated by the act of emitting smoke-clouds, the two decided to venture into smoking. Since they had no access to money, they began to smoke the stumps of cigarettes thrown out by their uncle. Once, when stumps were not available, they stole money to buy cigarettes. Feeling guilty of stealing and acting secretly, the two teenaged brothers felt thoroughly disgusted with their lives and attempted suicide by eating seeds of a poisonous plant. But they could not go forward in their attempt, not having enough courage for it. They quickly came to their senses, went to a local temple, and resolved to give up smoking and the thoughts of suicide. This episode shook Gandhi to his core. Thereafter, he not only did not
smoke, but came to regard smoking as a harmful habit. Later on in his life, he could not travel in a smoking compartment as the smoke would make him choke.

At fifteen, Gandhi stole a second time, but not for smoking. He stole a little gold from his brother’s armlet to pay off the brother’s debt. However, the act was quite unsettling for Gandhi, and he felt shameful on two counts: stealing and not being truthful to the family. He therefore resolved not to steal again and to confess to his father about stealing. Although he was aware that it might come as a painful shock to his father, he was convinced there was no other way except making a “clean confession.” At the same time, Gandhi did not have the courage to speak directly about this to his father and, therefore, wrote a note and personally handed it to him. In the note he confessed to stealing, asked for his father’s forgiveness along with adequate punishment, and vowed never to steal again. Gandhi described his unforgettable experience of that moment as follows:

I was trembling as I handed the confession to my father. He read it through, and pearl drops trickled down his cheeks, wetting the paper. For a moment he closed his eyes in thought and then tore up the note…I could see my father’s agony. If I were a painter, I could draw a picture of the whole scene today. Those pearl drops of love cleansed my heart and washed my sin away. (SWMG-V1:38–39)

This act of unconditional forgiveness touched Gandhi deeply. It increased his respect for his father, just as the act of seeking forgiveness increased his father’s trust and affection for Gandhi. Reflecting on this incident several years later in his autobiography, Gandhi characterized it as his first “object lesson” in ahimsa as love and forgiveness and noted that it had an enduring impact on him. Gandhi concluded that an honest unconditioned acknowledgment of one’s mistake followed by a promise never to repeat it again is the “purest type of repentance.”

**Father’s Death and “Double Shame”**

Gandhi’s father was ill and bedridden during what became the last few months of his life. Gandhi, along with his mother and a family servant, usually took turns to attend to him. Following the example of Shravan Kumar, Gandhi took joy in serving his father as a nurse, giving him timely medications and massaging him at night. Not only did he not miss doing these chores even for a day, but he did so lovingly and as an act of service. He retired to bed only after his father fell asleep.

One evening he was giving his father a massage. An uncle, who was visiting to spend some time with his ailing brother, offered to relieve Gandhi and asked him to go to bed. Gandhi, who was always anxious to be with his wife at the end of the day, was glad to be relieved. They were then a young couple of sixteen years age. His wife had already gone to bed and was fast asleep. She was in the advanced stage of her first pregnancy. Sexual desire made Gandhi wake her up, and a few minutes later, he learned his father had passed away. He felt ashamed for leaving his father in critical condition and experienced a sense of guilt and loss for not being able to be with his father during his last moments. Later, when his wife gave birth to their first child, it did not survive beyond a few days. Gandhi blamed this on his lust and regarded this as
a “double shame.” He could not erase this “blot” and carried the guilt and shame in his memory. Nevertheless, in due course of time, he and his wife parented four sons: Harilal, Manilal, Ramdas, and Devdas.

**To England**

After graduating from Alfred High School in 1887, Gandhi went to attend Samaldas College. There, one of his peers planted in his mind the idea of pursuing higher education in England. Still in his teens, Gandhi was attracted to England and had imagined London
as the “the very center of civilization.” Going to England became his ambition. When he returned home following the end of the first term, he found an ally in Mavji Dave, a longtime family friend and well-wisher of the Gandhis. Dave convinced Gandhi’s family to send him to England. A law degree from England, Dave explained to the family, was the surest way of securing for Gandhi a senior administrative post like the diwanship held by his father, which would enhance the family’s social standing.

Although the modernizing trends had reached this remote part of India, in the 1880s very few Indians had the privilege of higher education, and going abroad for education was quite rare. In those days England was the most coveted destination for seekers of higher education. The Inner Temple, one of the four “Inns of Court” or professional associations for training barristers and judges in London, which Gandhi planned to join in the fall of 1888, admitted only a handful of Indians every year. To practice law as a barrister or judge in England, an individual was required to belong to one of the four Inns of Court.

Making the decision to go to England was easier than implementing it. There were several hurdles that Gandhi had to overcome. First, there were various concerns within the family. In the spring of 1888, his wife had given birth to Harilal, their first son, while Gandhi was completing his first term at the Samaldas College. Naturally, Kasturba wanted her husband by her side. Her parents too were interested in keeping Gandhi with their daughter and discouraged him from traveling overseas. Gandhi’s mother feared he might lose touch with the family’s traditions and values, including food habits. It was only when a Jain monk, who was highly respected by the family, administered the vows to Gandhi of not indulging in wine, women, and meat, that Putlibai gave permission to Gandhi for studying law in England.

Then there was the problem of finances. Although fairly well-to-do, Gandhi’s family by itself was not in a position to afford the tuition fee at Inner Temple. Gandhi explored getting financial support from his uncle but was not successful. He then considered taking a loan and even selling his wife’s ornaments—a common practice in India whenever there was a pressing financial need in the family. However, Laxmidas, his oldest brother, was able to arrange financial assistance for Gandhi’s education in England. Relieved from the financial responsibility, Gandhi began to plan his trip to England.

The final and the most formidable hurdle was the opposition to his plans by his caste community, the Modh bania, who regarded overseas travel a taboo. No member of this caste had crossed the ocean before. The caste leaders forbade his travel and called a general meeting to which Gandhi was summoned. They urged Gandhi to cancel his plans as it was against the caste rules and, therefore, against religion as caste was seen sanctioned by Hinduism. Gandhi mustered some courage and replied that he did not see anything wrong in going to England and that he had taken vows to protect his culture and values. The caste leaders then threatened to outcaste not just him but the entire Gandhi family if he were to proceed with his plans. Obstacles had emboldened Gandhi to pursue his ambition to go to England. In one of the most daring acts of his formative years, Gandhi ignored the threat of the caste headman and proceeded with his plans at the cost of becoming an outcaste.
Experiences in England

Gandhi sailed for London on September 4, 1888. He was nearing his nineteenth birthday. The journey proved to be a difficult one. He felt uneasy amid predominantly English-speaking passengers whose accent he could not follow, and his poor English made him increasingly conscious of his inability to converse with them. This forced him to eat alone in his cabin surviving largely on food he had brought from home.

During the next three years (1888–1891) in London, he was exposed to many intellectual, cultural, religious, and moral influences that contributed to the shaping of his worldview. This was the first time Gandhi was so far away from home. Initially, it was a nightmare for him. He felt homesick, missing his family, the comfort of his home, and the food he was used to eating. As time passed he realized that this was an opportunity to take charge of his life and to sort out his priorities. It was a life free from the constraints he usually faced in the context of his own family. Yet, he conscientiously upheld the three vows he had taken to refrain from touching women, wine, and meat. He was constantly confronted with issues of identity and tried to figure out who he was and what he wanted to become. At the same time, he felt the need of fitting in with the English society. In the process, he went through some dramatic changes in the ways he lived, dressed, and dined.

His fascination with England and the European way of life prompted him to become an English gentleman. He took lessons in French, dancing, violin, and elocution. He acquired a chimney-pot hat, had his clothes cut at the Army and Navy stores, and had an evening suit made on Bond Street, which was a hub for the latest fashions. He also mastered the art of tying a tie. The “infatuation” with becoming an English gentleman, however, lasted less than three months. Soon he gave up music and dancing and abandoned elocution as such practices, he felt, distracted him from his goal of becoming a barrister and also added to his expenses. But his punctiliousness in dressing as an English gentleman continued for many years.

During the same time Gandhi was exposed to the modest and often poor surroundings of his fellow students. Reading books on simple living helped him live an increasingly simple and frugal life. At first he lived in a hotel room. From there he moved into a rented suite with two rooms and finally settled in a single room, which served his needs for sleeping, cooking, and studying. There he cooked two modest meals—breakfast and dinner—while going out only for lunch. This not only saved him time, but also gave him the joy of simple living as is evident from his observation in his autobiography:

The change harmonized my inward and outward life. It was also more in keeping with the means of my family. My life was certainly more truthful and my soul knew no bounds of joy. (SWMG-V1:80)

He also began to walk whenever possible rather than rely on transportation. Walking served as a good exercise, became his lifelong habit, and prepared him well for the long marches he would undertake later in South Africa and India. He kept a daily account of his expenses. The changes he had made in his lifestyle helped him reduce his expenses considerably.
Although Gandhi had taken a vow to be a vegetarian, he was convinced that the English were stronger because they ate meat. Initially, on his arrival in England, Gandhi starved most of the time because he could not find vegetarian food. When he found a vegetarian restaurant, he had his first good meal since his departure from home. There he also came across Henry Salt’s pamphlet, *A Plea for Vegetarianism*, which he promptly read. The book had profound impact on him. Gandhi became a vegetarian by choice. In the weeks that followed, Gandhi read most of the available books on vegetarianism, including classics such as *The Ethics of Diet* by Howard William and *The Perfect Way of Diet* by Anna Kingsford. In becoming a vegetarian, Gandhi was attracted to the moral rationale—the duty of humans to not prey on fellow animals but to protect them. Gandhi was guided by the logic that humans eat to live rather than live to eat. He came to the conclusion that “the real seat of taste was not the tongue but the mind” (*SWMG*-V1:82). He also gave up sweets and condiments and began to dine at inexpensive restaurants. Vegetarianism became his mission, and he became a member of the Vegetarian Society. Soon he was nominated to its executive committee. Later, he started a Vegetarian Club in the community of Bayswater. Although this lasted for only a few months as Gandhi had to move from that locality, the experiment served to provide him an important lesson in community organizing.

England had also exposed the young Gandhi to the world of newspapers. Reading newspapers became his regular habit. Little did he know at that time how important this association with newspapers would become in his public life. During his three-year stay in England he contributed nine articles to the *Vegetarian*, the first one of these was published on February 7, 1891, under the title, “Indian Vegetarian.” Similarly, his engagement with the Vegetarian Society afforded him opportunities in writing and organizing—both were useful experiences for his public life later on.

It was in England that Gandhi was introduced to both Eastern and Western faiths. He read Madame Blavatsky’s *Key to Theosophy*, which inspired him to read books on his own tradition, Hinduism. Two theosophist brothers introduced him to Sir Edwin Arnold’s translation of the Bhagavad Gita or the *Song Celestial*. Later, he would learn Sanskrit to study the Gita in the original, and subsequently translate it into Gujarati and English. The Gita became his guide to daily life and nurtured him throughout his life. He was particularly drawn to the concept of *sthitha-prajna* (the state of equanimity), the idea of pursuing dispassionate action as duty without being attached to the outcome. He was also introduced to Christianity by a friend who sold him a copy of the Bible. Much of it did not interest Gandhi, but he did take to heart the Sermon on the Mount. These books also reinforced the values that Gandhi already held in high regard, such as the values of truth, nonviolence, compassion, and forgiveness. It was in England that Gandhi also studied atheism.

While pursuing such intellectual and spiritual activities, Gandhi demonstrated a remarkable dedication to the study of law, his primary purpose for being in England. In addition to diligently learning about Roman and Common laws, he meticulously pursued efforts to improve his English to enrich his educational qualifications. He took the London matriculation exam, which allowed him to learn French and Latin with the medium of English—all foreign languages for him. He was called to the Bar on June 10, 1891. He registered in the High Court there on June 11, and sailed for India on June 12.
Returning home, Gandhi had mixed feelings of accomplishment and anxiety. His overall experience in England contributed to his personal and professional growth and helped him develop a sense of identity. Although racial theories had gained currency by the late nineteenth century, Gandhi was spared any experience of racial discrimination during his stay in London, the imperial metropolis. There were fewer Indian students during the late nineteenth century, and generally they were treated well in England. Moreover, Gandhi had little association with people in the mainstream English society, outside of the Inner Temple, as he largely moved among people who were themselves at the margins of British society. During his three years in England, he met people with diverse ideas and interests, and read wide-ranging books, in addition to regularly reading newspapers. Such experience had expanded his intellectual and political horizons. He learned about the English way of life and the significance of “public hygiene, independent thinking, and exercise of judgment,” and he gained proficiency in English. Yet, he remained anxious and concerned.

Gandhi’s anxiety and unease arose largely from the uncertainty pertaining to his law practice, notwithstanding his qualifications. He felt Inner Temple had provided him with an opportunity to master Roman and Common laws, but he felt frustrated with the realization that he did not know how to practice these laws. He was aware of the legal maxims but did not know how to apply them to real cases. More importantly,
he had learned nothing about Indian law and felt totally ignorant of both Hindu and Muslim law. He had not even trained to draft a legal complaint. And although he could speak English fluently, he was still quite shy of public speaking. With such training, would he be able to earn his living by the practice of law? This preoccupied Gandhi through most of his journey back home.

**A Spiritual Encounter and Homecoming**

On arriving in Bombay in July 1891, Gandhi spent a couple of days at the home of Dr. Pranjivan Mehta, whom he had met in England, before heading to Rajkot to reunite with his family. (Dr. Mehta’s house, Mani Bhavan, became Gandhi’s official residence in the early 1930s and is today a Gandhi museum and library.) There he met Raychandbhai, formally known as Shrimad Rajchandra (1867–1901), a poet and a great scholar of Indian scriptures, who was also a successful diamond merchant. Gandhi was impressed with Raychandbhai’s extraordinary intellect and wisdom. Seeing him perform *shatavadhana*, the feat of remembering a hundred things simultaneously, was truly awe-inspiring for Gandhi, who was just a couple of years younger than him. He was struck by Raychandbhai’s approach to business, which was informed by his impeccable integrity of character and his knowledge of Indian scriptures. Of the three individuals Gandhi acknowledged as having made an enduring impact on his life, the first and foremost was Raychandbhai, who was the only one to inspire Gandhi through his living example. The other two, Leo Tolstoy and John Ruskin, influenced him via their books. In the decade that followed this meeting (1891–1901), Gandhi and Raychandbhai corresponded regularly and became close friends as kindred spirits. Gandhi regarded Raychandbhai as his spiritual guide and mentor.

After a brief stop in Bombay, Gandhi headed home to Rajkot in July 1891. Homecoming for Gandhi was not exactly a happy moment. He was devastated to learn that his mother had passed away. His family had kept the news from him so as to not upset him while he was alone in England. As the youngest child, he was very fond of his mother and was longing to see her. He admired her unfailing observance of vows and fasts and her reliance on prayer and self-discipline. Adding to his grief was the frustration of having to go through the caste rituals of purification his family felt were necessary for him to be readmitted to the Modh Bania caste. The family also hosted a welcome dinner for the entire caste on Gandhi’s arrival in Rajkot. In spite of such gestures, not all the members of the caste were appeased, and in the eyes of many he remained an outcast. Although Gandhi had questioned caste rules and rituals, he went through the formalities to satisfy his family. Reuniting with his three-year-old son, Harilal, brought joy to Gandhi. He lost no time in playing with him and his brother’s children and enjoying their company. He assumed the task of teaching and guiding them. Gandhi and Kasturba were delighted to be reunited after more than two years. However, their relationship remained somewhat strained for a while. Both were independent minded and often disagreed with one another. In patriarchal societies such as India, where husband and wife were not equal partners, disagreement on the part of a wife was not entertained for the most part. Once such disagreement caused Gandhi a fit of temper, and he sent her back to her parent’s place, making her miserable.
Although he later invited her back, their relationship remained unequal and largely focused on “lust.” In this respect their marriage was no different than most couples of their age. What made it unusually unequal was the fact that Gandhi was a lawyer trained in England while Kasturba was illiterate. He felt it was his duty to be her teacher. Equally unusual was Gandhi’s confession and acknowledgement, in his autobiography, that such a strain in their early relationship was a result of his own “folly” and that it was Kasturba who had been his teacher by her example of simplicity, humility, and forbearance.

However, the questions that loomed large in his mind at the moment were: How must he begin his professional life? What course must it take?

**Seeking Placement as a Lawyer**

Gandhi’s immediate concern was, therefore, to find a suitable legal position. He felt an obligation to his older brother Laxmidas, who had helped financed his education in England. Laxmidas had high hopes for Gandhi’s placement in a lucrative legal position, which would bring name and wealth to the family and subsequently might also open doors for Gandhi in securing a diwanship, a position his family members had enjoyed over the last three generations. Anticipating such developments, and considering Gandhi’s English tastes, the family had renovated the house and altered its lifestyle, incorporating many aspects of European lifestyle. Gandhi completed the process of “Europeanization” by introducing Western clothing, oatmeal porridge, and cocoa to the family. These changes increased the household expenses and added to the pressure Gandhi felt to find himself a well-paying job.

Laxmidas was a partner with a local lawyer in Rajkot and had connections. However, to get placed in a well-paying legal position in Rajkot was difficult as opportunities for a beginning lawyer were limited there, and Gandhi did not have any knowledge of Indian law, much less experience. To gain legal experience, Gandhi began his practice at the Bombay High Court in 1891. There he learned about the significance of studying Indian law for becoming a successful attorney. He started the study of Indian law from scratch, but found it quite boring.

In court, he was able to argue his first case but failed to cross-examine the plaintiff’s witness. Gandhi was tongue-tied and could not think of a question to ask. He was, however, able to successfully draft a memorial (statement of facts, accompanying a petition) for a case, which gave him some confidence. After nearly six months of being a “briefless-barrister” in Bombay, struggling to make ends meet and maintain a household, he realized his income was no match for his living expenses there, in spite of his frugal lifestyle. Gandhi, therefore, returned to Rajkot, where expenses could be shared with Laxmidas and established an office in partnership with him in mid-1892.

**A Turning Point**

In Rajkot Gandhi succeeded in securing legal work such as drafting applications and memorials. Although this work generated decent income, on average ₹300 a month—a salary his father received as a diwan—Gandhi was unhappy about the situation as it was encroaching on his independence and clashing with his work ethic. Gandhi
secured his legal work both directly and through reference. However, he was opposed to the idea of paying commission for getting work—a practice that in his view dignified influence over talent. Therefore, people who brought legal work to him did not receive any commission. One of the persons who brought him legal work was Laxmidas’s business partner. Laxmidas insisted that his partner be paid a commission. Under obligation to his brother, who had financed Gandhi’s studies in England and had helped him establish an office for his legal work in Rajkot, Gandhi compromised his principle and gave the commission, but not without unease.

A few months later, Gandhi came to a turning point due to the sense of humiliation resulting from another instance in which he acted once again out of his felt obligation to Laxmidas. At one time, Laxmidas was the secretary and advisor to the heir apparent to the throne of Porbandar, Rana Bhavsingh, who was a minor at the time. In that role Laxmidas had allegedly ignored a theft of some state jewels by the minor Rana and was charged for rendering wrong advice to the ruler of Porbandar. Having failed to report the alleged theft, Laxmidas was seen by the British authorities as an accomplice. The case was being investigated by the British Political Agent, Charles Ollivant. When Laxmidas learned that Gandhi knew Ollivant from his days in London, he persuaded Gandhi to meet with Ollivant and “put in a good word” for him. Gandhi reasoned that if his brother were at fault, what point could there be in meeting with the political agent. On the other hand, if Laxmidas were innocent, he could submit a petition through proper channels. But Gandhi’s logic had no appeal to his brother, who constantly reminded the former of his obligations to the latter. Moreover, Laxmidas argued that the political environment of Rajkot was plagued by petty intrigues and arrogance of the British officials. In such an environment, influence played an important role in moving business forward. Gandhi yielded to the pressure and reluctantly agreed to meet the Political Agent, but he felt that he was once again compromising his principles.

During the meeting Ollivant acknowledged Gandhi’s acquaintance but refused to hear Gandhi’s plea as he had already concluded that Laxmidas was “an intriguer,” and he asked Gandhi to leave. When Gandhi insisted on being heard, Ollivant had his peon physically remove Gandhi from the room. Although Gandhi left the premises at that time, he wrote a note to Ollivant and demanded an apology and proper action to rectify his insulting behavior in the absence of which Gandhi threatened to take action against him. Ollivant of course did not care. Given that Gandhi had not experienced racial arrogance in England, he felt disturbed by Ollivant’s attitude, which was friendly when he first met him in London. Ollivant’s behavior belied Gandhi’s image of an Englishman with authentic liberal values. Gandhi desperately looked for guidance on how he might proceed against Ollivant. Sir Pherozeshah Mehta, one of India’s most eminent lawyers, was then on a visit in Rajkot. He was famed for his forceful presence in the courts and was knighted for his service to the law. Sir Pherozeshah’s advice to Gandhi was “pocket the insult,” as proceeding against the British Agent would be self-destructive. Gandhi swallowed this as a bitter pill. He felt powerless in not being able to execute the “threat” he had made to Ollivant. For Gandhi—a London-trained lawyer and son of former prime minister of Rajkot—both the behavior of the British Agent (representing the colonizer) and the response of Sir Pherozeshah Mehta (representing the colonized) were shocking and humiliating.
However, Gandhi not only “pocketed the insult, but also profited by it.” The profit was a lifelong lesson. Gandhi learned to be more alert and sensitive to racial arrogance and promised himself to never again focus on the arrogant (that is, the individual) but on the arrogance (that is, the act). He also resolved to never again place himself in a “false position.” Finally, this experience changed the direction of Gandhi’s life. He now had clarity about the things he did not want to do. As a legal counsel, the thought of remaining subservient to Ollivant, who presided over the jurisdictions of all the courts in Kathiawad, was not at all attractive for Gandhi. He could explore the possibility of a diwanship in one of the many petty states of Kathiawad but felt it would be impossible to avoid getting involved with the political intrigues there. Gandhi yearned to get away from Rajkot, and thus became receptive to an offer that followed.

Early in 1893, a South Africa–based firm of Dada Abdulla, a Porbandar Muslim, offered Gandhi a year-long contract to work as a legal aid on a civil suit worth £40,000. The contract offered to cover all his expenses and provide a small stipend. Neither the position nor the income from this assignment was attractive. However, Gandhi was desperate to get away from the unsavory atmosphere of Rajkot. Also, it was an opportunity to gain professional experience, to explore a new place, and to live there for a year without any cost to himself. Gandhi, therefore, accepted the assignment without any negotiations.

While leaving for South Africa, Gandhi felt the “ pang of parting” with Kasturba. He had been away in England for three years without her. Even after returning from England, they had not spent much time together, as Gandhi was away for six months getting legal experience in the Bombay High Court. The thought of separating again for a year was somewhat unbearable to them. Their love, according to Gandhi, was not “free from lust,” but was “gradually getting purer” and their relationship becoming better. On October 28, 1892, their second son, Manilal, was born. Harilal was now a five-year-old. In April 1893, assuring the family about his return in a year, he said his goodbyes and departed for South Africa.

Conclusion

The formative years point to an evolving Gandhi. Although from the earliest phase of his life, Gandhi showed a precocious sense of self-reflection and an equally precocious conscience. He grew constantly through his lifelong experiences, learning from his mistakes and from those around him. While he nurtured respect for truth, his ethical commitments evolved over a period of time. For example, his childhood escapades, such as eating meat under the influence of his friend Sheik Mehtab, gave way in England to his more conscious, studied, and “ethical” choice of vegetarianism, which became his lifelong commitment.

Although Gandhi was a born Hindu, his family environment exposed him to numerous religious traditions, and throughout his life he would celebrate religious pluralism. In England he became receptive to both theistic and atheistic ideas, which advanced his spiritual yearning further. Gandhi’s exposure to the West also allowed him to rediscover the value of Indian tradition. Gandhi’s association with Theosophical Society acquainted him with his own tradition—particularly the Gita—to which he remained committed for the rest of his life.
While growing up, Gandhi appeared to be quite impressionable in some ways. Yet his innate sense of right and wrong and his watchfulness about his character acted as a filter for the impressions that would last and the impressions that would prove ephemeral. As a student in England he explored many alternatives in his living arrangements, food practices, and ways of dressing, and also learned about a variety of political, philosophical, and religious ideas. Yet, what he retained from there was highly selective. While he discarded many aspects of English way of life, such as dancing and music, he retained his association with newspapers. Not only reading newspapers became his daily habit, he often wrote to their editors articulating his own position on crucial issues of the day, and in time would edit and publish four newspapers. Although his attraction for the English way of life, especially clothing, lasted for few years, his clothing would change several times until he would reduce it to a mere “loin cloth,” mirroring the constant evolution of his ideas and personality.

The formative years also show Gandhi’s growing commitment to truth, his propensity for service, and his openness to experimenting with new ideas. Such inclinations would become constant refrains in his life and work. At the same time, these years were marked with inner conflicts, uncertainties about his future life and career, anxieties about his ability to practice law, and unease about his continued shyness.

Although the Ollivant incident was a blow to Gandhi’s self-respect, it freed him from the course that might have confined him to a far more conventional life in the parochial environment of Rajkot and under the continuing obligation to his brother. As a turning point, it strengthened his commitment to public ethic over familial obligation and paved way for his transformative experiences and transforming experiments in South Africa.