

INTRODUCTION

The present book covers the last years of Mahatma Gandhi's life, in which the results of all the experiments that he carried out throughout his career were put to final test. The author's writings in *Young India* and *Harijan* and several works on Mahatma Gandhi have well established him as a faithful and authoritative chronicler and interpreter of Gandhiji's life and philosophy.

It is only in a detailed account of what Gandhiji did, how and why he did it, that a soul-stirring picture of his life and teaching can be found. The present work represents such an attempt by one who had first-hand knowledge of the events he has described and has the insight to interpret them correctly.

What made Mahatma Gandhi almost unique among leaders was his capacity to harmonize widely different points of view so that they became contributory to the prosecution of the common goal. An outstanding instance was the way in which he dealt with his colleagues in the Congress organization who differed from him. While holding to his own principle, he allowed his colleagues full scope to serve the country according to their light. As a result of this, not only did most intimate relations continue between them, but also those who differed from him ultimately came round and worked under his leadership.

Gandhiji was uncompromisingly opposed to the Partition of India, which he had called her vivisection. The Muslim League agitation for the Partition of the country resulted in serious rioting. Partition, based on a wrong theory and brought about by such questionable means, Gandhiji was certain, would do irretrievable harm to both Hindus and Muslims—in India and Pakistan. But he left it to the Congress Ministers in the Central Government, who were in charge of running the administration, to act according to their judgment. Once they had decided in favour of Partition, he did not oppose them, although he never concealed his own opinion. Instead of carrying on propaganda against his own colleagues, he set about with an amazing energy to repair the vast damage to communal harmony and peace which

preceded and followed the Partition. His words became commands, his mere presence sometimes sufficed to check the blaze where the police and army could have succeeded only after much bloodshed.

It is this last phase of his life which is particularly dealt with in this book with insight, understanding and restraint, and with meticulous regard for accuracy. Some of the most fascinating pages of the book are devoted to describing the functioning of his mind in search of new techniques for setting India on the road to the new social order of his dreams. The time had arrived when, with all the experience and prestige acquired in the course of the Indian struggle for freedom which he had conducted for more than 30 years, Mahatma Gandhi could extend the ambit of his activities and prove that ahimsa could work wonders even in the most adverse of circumstances. At this stage he was taken away. But the ideas and forces he has released may yet accomplish things even more marvellous than were witnessed in his lifetime.

The core of Gandhiji's teaching was meant for all mankind and is valid for all time. He wanted all men to be free so that they would grow unhampered into full self-realization. He wanted to abolish the exploitation of man by man in any form, because both exploitation and submission to it are a sin against the law of our being. He had been invited by many foreigners to visit their countries and deliver his message to them directly. But he had declined since, as he said, he must make good what he claimed for Truth and Ahimsa in his own country before he could launch on the gigantic task of converting the world. With the attainment of freedom by India by following his method, in spite of all the imperfections in its practice, the condition precedent for taking his message to other countries was to a certain extent fulfilled. And he might have been able to turn his attention to this larger question. But Providence had ordained otherwise. May some individual or nation arise and carry forward the effort launched by him.

Rajendra Prasad

PREFACE

The Last Phase presents a full, detailed and authentic story of the ultimate phase of Gandhiji's life, in which his spiritual dynamism was at the height of its power. The book deals with the period from his release from detention in the Aga Khan's Palace, in 1944, up to the end of his life.

An amazing story of the mingling of streams of Eastern and Western thought from which he derived his spiritual nourishment, and a meteoric rise to recognition and fame unfolds to a student of Gandhiji's life. A shrinking, shy, immature youth, unsure of himself and baffled by life's jigsaw puzzle, he finds himself—an utter stranger in a strange land, where a freak of fortune had thrown him—suddenly confronted by the challenge of racial and political prejudice at its worst. Armed with nothing save unsoiled integrity, undeterred by fear of where it might lead him, he takes up that challenge, and in the short span of two years becomes a factor to be reckoned with. Practically single-handed, he changes the course of political events, inspiring many with awe and even affection. Whence came this strength and what was the secret of his alchemy?

His capacity for compromise—rooted in the habit he had cultivated of seeing a problem from the opponent's viewpoint—and for trust which begets trust, enabled him to win the respect and goodwill even of those with whom he was locked in a fierce conflict and to convert determined antagonists into personal friends.

The transformation in South Africa was due almost entirely to the unremitting toil of one man, member of a despised race, with no official status or authority, save what his selfless service and the moral pressure generated by it gave him—MK Gandhi, the Mahatma-to-be.

Gandhiji's work in South Africa can be properly studied only as a prelude to India's struggle for independence. No better apprenticeship for it could have been found than what South Africa provided. There, he had to raise from the dust a people who had come to regard insults and humiliations in pursuit of a living as their lot, who were

torn by dissensions and divided into factions. The authorities were only too eager to exploit their differences. In short, every one of the problems that Gandhiji had to tackle later, in the course of India's non-violent struggle, had its prototype in this microcosm of South Africa. All this experience proved to be a most valuable asset to him in his confrontation with the British Empire during India's fight for liberation. None of his Indian colleagues in the struggle had the advantage of this vast and varied experience.

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What I have drawn upon, in the first instance, are Gandhiji's office records, his own writings in *Young India* and *Harijan*, statements to the press and personal correspondence. I had, besides, my own notebooks and diaries, as well as notebooks of other members of the party. I have relied upon his own journal which he began specially for me—to make up for my absence from him at the time of the second Simla Conference in May, 1946—and which was continued till July, 1947.

In giving quotations from Gandhiji's speeches and interviews, I have taken the liberty to amplify or revise the language of the published version with the help of the original notes. I have spared no pains to check up and verify information by reference to the actors in the drama. In support of my conclusions, I have cited appropriate chapter and verse; hence the close documentation which has added to the bulk of the volume.

I have, in some cases, departed from the dates and sequence of events, relating to certain incidents in Gandhiji's career as given in his own writings. In every such case, I have fully justified my reasons with evidence. I have also taken the liberty in some places to give my own translation of some of the quotations from Gandhiji's *Autobiography*, originally in Gujarati, where I felt that the corresponding version given in *The Story of My Experiments with Truth* was either faulty or not sufficiently clear.

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Almost the first thing a foreign visitor does on arrival in India is to visit Rajghat, to pay homage to the Father of the Nation. Before he leaves, he invariably ends up asking: "Where is Gandhi in the India of

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THE BAREFOOT PILGRIM

The village of Srirampur and its environs were beginning to stir into new life when, on the morning of 2nd January, 1947, winding up his camp, Gandhiji set out on his long trek. The rice crop had recently been harvested and the paddy fields lay bare. The whole countryside was astir. On either side of the way, villagers from both the communities stood lined up to have a look at the Mahatma as he passed by.

Sixteen years earlier, he had set out on foot similarly, on his historic Salt March to the sea, with a party of 79. Back then, he used to walk eight to ten miles daily and he outpaced many a youngster without being tired. The physical frame had since been worn out by many long fasts and a decade and a half of ceaseless toil; but the spirit within burnt stronger than ever. In those days, people used to join him in thousands in his march and were welcome; this time he let it be known to all concerned that he wanted no other companion but God in his pilgrimage.

Abdullah, the Superintendent of Police, who had developed a deep attachment for Gandhiji and had become almost a member of the family, accompanied him from Srirampur to Chandipur.

The evening prayer was held at the rather early hour of 4.30, to enable the women who had come from the neighbouring village to attend the prayer meeting to return home before dark. Gandhiji remarked that he would roam from village to village, teach the villagers how to clean their ponds and practise arts and crafts that

would enrich their lives. Such unselfish labour of love was bound to ultimately overcome all prejudice.

In one of his post-prayer addresses, Gandhiji compared his venture in Noakhali to a pilgrimage. In ancient days, pilgrimages were undertaken on foot. The most sacred places were situated at the far and inaccessible ends of India. The journey to them was long and arduous. During the journey the pilgrims walked barefoot, put themselves under rigorous vows and practised austerity. The merit of the pilgrimage lay in self-purification. In the context of his mission in Noakhali this meant that all impurities should be removed from their hearts, "most of all the impurity styled fear". If those who had suffered during the riots could shed their fear, they would want not punishment or revenge, but the conversion of their assailants. By cultivating in themselves the spirit of fearlessness and forgiveness, all could join him in his pilgrimage without leaving their homes.

Rehabilitation was, to Gandhiji, not merely economic, but moral and spiritual as well. There had to be a spiritual rebirth. And not only theirs but their oppressors' as well. To the sufferers, his advice was that they should forget all about the culprits, return to their homes and face all risks.

And even while he was energetically pursuing his mission of peace in Noakhali, where the Hindus were the victims, his heart ached no less for the Muslims of Bihar. In answer to his inquiries, a Minister from Bihar with several representative officials was sent by the Bihar Government to apprise him of the situation in Bihar. They admitted that the brutality had taken place during the disturbances. They were prepared, they said, to bear all justifiable censure on that account.

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In Noakhali nature is kind. The earth under the feet is soft and soothing. There are no sharp stones or thorns to prick bare feet. Even the stubble in the harvested fields is soft as silk. Gandhiji had very delicate feet. He took extraordinary care of them. Even then, he was footsore when he arrived at Chandipur. But he decided that he would have no footwear during the rest of his wanderings; it would be an act of irreverence on his part to tread the ground which was hallowed by the sufferings of innocent men and women, with shoes on.