

Mahatma Gandhi



'Gandhi' is a family name. The Gandhi's had been merchants for many years. They lived in a town called Porbandar. It now belongs to Gujarat State. The town had stone walls around it. As the stones shone in the sun, the town was known as 'Shwetapuri' (the White City).

Uttamchand Gandhi was the grandfather of Gandhiji. He was the Diwan or the Prime Minister or the Rana (ruler) of Porbandar. His son Karamchand Gandhi was Gandhiji 's father. Gandhiji's full name was Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi. He was born on October 2, 1869.

Karamchand Gandhi was the Diwan of Porbandar State for some time, and later became the Diwan of Raikot State. Like his father, he too was an honest and a courageous man. His wife's name was Putlibai. Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi was their youngest son.

Karamchand Gandhi was a very practical man. Gandhiji describes his father in his autobiography as follows: 'My father was a lover of his clan, truthful, brave and generous.' Often there used to be readings from the Ramayana and the Mahabharatha in his house.

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There used to be religious discussions also among Jain, Parsi and Muslim scholars. Young Gandhi listened to all this with attention.

Putlibai was in the habit of visiting temples every day. She used to take Gandhi also with her. She used to keep stern vows and fasts. Religious practices were her very life breath. Her influence on the son was great. Many years later, Gandhiji, recollecting his early years, said, 'If there is any purity in me, it is all due to my mother.' The son imbibed from his mother the qualities of service, sacrifice and affection for others.

Young Gandhi had his primary education up to the seventh year at Porbandar. Then his education continued at Rajkot. Gandhi was a very shy boy. He never found fault with elders. He was very obedient.

Once an Inspector of Schools visited the school. The teacher dictated some English words. Gandhi had misspell the word 'Kettle'. The teacher noticed this, and made signs to the boy to correct it by copying from his neighbor. But Gandhi did not do so. He also felt that the same teacher, who had taught him that copying was bad, was not right in prompting him to do so. Still, the respect he had for his teacher did not grow less.

At that time, Gandhi had occasion to see two plays. They were 'Shravana Pitribhakti' and 'Harishchandra'. These two plays left a deep impression on his mind. The devotion of Shravana to his aged parents was a model in itself. Harishchandra suffered great misery for the sake of truth. Gandhi began to consider if he could not also live like them.

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On the plastic mind of the young, example and company act as powerful forces. When Gandhi joined the High school in his thirteenth year, he fell into evil company. But he soon realized his folly and returned to the right path.

Sheik Mehtab, a classmate of Gandhi, was a strong boy. He always excelled all the boys in games and sports. Gandhi came to believe that, in order to expel the English rulers from our country, it was necessary that one should become strong like Sheik by eating meat. This false belief took deep root in his mind. He tried to eat meat in secret. He found it distasteful. In the same way, he smoked cigarettes. He also stole a piece of gold to pay his brother's debts. He felt sad because he had not the freedom to act as he wished. In a moment of despair, he tried to kill himself, by swallowing Matura seeds (an effective poison). But he lost courage and could not do so. At last he felt sorry for his conduct. He confessed his guilt in a letter and, with trembling hands, handed it to his father. The father did not say even a word, and simply shed tears of sorrow. This melted Gandhi's heart. He touchingly refers to this incident in his autobiography: 'Those pearl-drops of love cleansed my heart, and washed my sin away.'

Gandhi was only an ordinary boy both in the Primary School and in the High School. No special qualities were seen in him. At school he never took part in any games. He would not even freely mix with his companions. The fear that somebody would make fun of him always filled his mind.

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Gandhi was married to Kastur Ba in his thirteenth year. Kastur Ba was also a girl of the same age. It was a case of child-marriage, and child-marriage was a custom of those days. It was a marriage of two persons, who did not understand anything about it. The immediate result of this was that a year's studies were spoiled. By the time Gandhi's High School education ended, a child was born, and died, and another was born. A boy of fifteen or sixteen years had already become a father. By that time Gandhi's father also had passed away.

A Gujarati poem, by Shyamlal Bhat, that Gandhi read in deep impression on his mind. The lines were:

For a bowl of water give a goodly meal;
For a kindly greeting bow thou down with zeal;
For simple penny pay thou back with gold;
If thy life were rescued, life does 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.

This became the ideal of Gandhi's life. He understood that revenge was not true religion. He understood what the 'Religion of Humanity' was. He understood the great force of religion.

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After completing his High School studies, Gandhi joined the Samaldas College, Bhavnagar and continued his studies for some time.

One day, a Swamiji who came to Gandhi's house remarked: "Why don't you send this boy to England for studies? The family can regain its honor." This appealed to Gandhi. He had a great desire to study medical science; but his brother was not in favor of it. Further, in those days it was supposed to be, against religion to cross the sea. His mother too did not consent. Her fear was that her son might take to liquor and meat eating. At last, Gandhi gave his word to his mother that he would not do anything immoral, and got her consent. His brother agreed to bear the burden of the expenses, though he was not a rich man. It was finally decided that Gandhi should go to England and study Law to become a Barrister.

Gandhi was only nineteen years old then. He was to leave for England on September 4, 1888. The elders of his caste learnt this. They opposed his journey. But Gandhi disobeyed them and left. The elders declared that Gandhi was an outcaste.

Gandhi had learnt from some elders about life in London as also about manners to be observed in English society. Friends had told him that it was difficult to live without drinking wine and eating meat, in a cold country like England. But Gandhi tried hard to keep his promise to his mother. He went in search of vegetarian hotels, and was content to eat whatever food he got there. Every day he had to walk a long distance from his residence to the hotel. But he never felt it a hardship. In the end, he decided to cook his food himself.

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Gandhi also tried to practice English gentlemen's ways and manners and to learn to speak French, dancing, and the art of public speaking. His expenses increased. Neither could he learn any of them. And then the realization came to him that his brother was struggling hard to send him money. Then he gave up all needless expenses, and began to live a simple life. His studies became his sole aim.

Gandhi developed great intimacy with an English family. He pretended to be an unmarried man. He used to be quite free with the two grownup daughters of the family. It looked as if the friendship would go beyond the proper limits. It was a testing time for Gandhi. At that hour, he remembered the promise he had made to his mother. It saved him from a moral fall. He felt repentant, and wrote a letter of apology to the lady of the house, confessing that he was a married man and the father of a child.

Gandhi stayed in England for two years and eight months. He obtained the degree of Barrister-at-Law. Without staying even for a day more, he started on the return journey to India, on June 12, 1891.

During his stay in England, Gandhi tried some experiments in vegetarian diet. He came to the conclusion that a human being should not eat non-vegetarian food for any reason. He got acquainted with some great persons of the day, like Dadabhai Naoroji and Dr. Beasant. But there was no indication at all that some day Gandhi would become a great man. For the first time Gandhi read the Bhagavad Gita, in the company of two English Theosophist friends. Together they studied 'The Song Celestial' (the English translation of

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the Gita) by Sir Edwin Arnold. This roused Gandhi's interest in the Holy Books of the Hindu religion; and his interest grew with time. The teaching of the Gita was a source of spiritual strength to Gandhi.

A great sorrow awaited Gandhi on his return to India. His mother had passed away while he was in England. But his brother had not informed him of this. In England, Gandhiji had dreamed of telling his mother how he had struggled hard to keep his promise to her and of her joy when she listened to his story. But Gandhi was denied this pleasure.

Now, Gandhi was a young man of twenty- two. His son Harilal was a boy of four. Gandhi began the practice of law with great zeal in Bombay. But he lacked the courage to plead a case in the court. He could not conduct the very first case. He was deeply disappointed in the profession. He could not get any suitable work. At last he returned to Rajkot. His brother too was disappointed.

At this time, there arose a hope that the eldest brother Lakshmidas might become the Diwan of Porbandar State. But he had incurred the anger of the British Political Agent. Gandhi had met that Political Agent when he was in London. Lakshmidas naturally expected that his brother would recommend his case. Though Gandhi was unwilling he called on the Political Agent and pleaded the case. He was warned that it was improper to make such a plea. Still Gandhi continued to plead for his brother. This put out the Agent, and he ordered his servant to show Gandhi the door. Gandhi felt greatly ashamed. But he was helpless. He felt distressed at his pitiable condition. This bitter event led to a total change in his way of life.

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Some Gujarati merchants had trade relations with South Africa. One of them, a relative of a merchant called Dada Abdulla Sheth, was a friend of Gandhi's brother. He asked Gandhi's brother if Gandhi would be willing to go to South Africa to assist his relative's English Lawyer in a lawsuit pending before a court. The work would take a year. All expenses would be borne by the merchant and, in addition, Gandhi would get one hundred and five pounds as fees. This seemed a good opportunity to Gandhi, as he was not only disappointed in the profession, but had also been put to shame by the English Political Agent. He obtained his brother's consent and set sail to South Africa in April 1893. He was only twenty-four years old.

Two or three days had passed after Gandhi's arrival in Durban, in Natal State. Gandhi was wearing a turban on his head when he went to the court. The judge, noticing it, ordered him to remove it. All Indians, except the Muslims, who habitually wore a turban, had to remove it as a mark of respect to the court. Gandhi refused to remove it and went out of the court. This was the first insult that he had to suffer in South Africa.

After a week Gandhi had to make a journey by train. He had bought a first class ticket.

The train reached Maritzburg station. It was a bitter cold night. An officer of the railway came to Gandhi and asked him to vacate his seat for a white man, and to move to the van on the train. Gandhi refused. The railway officials, with the help of the police, had his things, thrown out. He was also removed from the carriage by force. The train left. Gandhi sat alone on the platform in the dark station and

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brooded over the insult he had suffered. In India a white officer put him to shame; should such a thing happen here too! The cup of sorrow was full. The next day, he continued the journey. It had to be done partly by horse coach and partly by train. Only Europeans were permitted to sit inside the carriage. Gandhi could not sit with them. He sat outside by the side of the coachman. Some time later, he was ordered to sit on the footboard. Gandhi could not bear it. He refused to carry out the order. The supervisor of the carriage, a European, attacked Gandhi and began to thrash him. Gandhi suffered the blows but did not at all move from where he sat. At last, the passengers intervened and checked the supervisor.

Thus Gandhi was subject to untold shame. But when he learnt that such a shame was the fate of all Indian settlers, he was a transformed man.

Indians had begun to settle in South Africa in 1860. Many of them were laborers in the sugarcane, tea and coffee plantation's belonging to Englishmen.

In the eyes of the white Europeans all Indians were 'coolies'; the merchants were 'coolie merchants'; Barrister Gandhi was a 'coolie Barrister'. All were put to shame by being called 'Girmitias' and 'Samy'. (Girmitia is an ugly form of 'permit', and 'Samy' the ugly form of 'Swamy'.) In Natal no Indian was allowed to move about after 9 at night. In Orange Free State, no Indian could acquire property; he could neither be an agriculturist or a tradesman. In Transvaal, he had no right to own land; in addition to this, he had to pay a settlement tax of three pounds. All Indians had to live in dirty areas. Once Gandhi

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himself was knocked down by police patrol guards, for being out after 9 at night. In short, Indians were not considered as human beings. The South African Indian problem was thus a problem of life and death for a hundred thousand people. It was a problem of self-respect. All Indians suffered the shame mutely.

Gandhi was successful in bringing about a compromise in the lawsuit of Abdulla Sheth. His work in South Africa was over.

The time to return to India had come. A meeting was arranged to bid him farewell. Those who had assembled discussed a news item, which had appeared in the papers that day, under the title 'The Indian Franchise'. Finally they decided to request Gandhi to stay in South Africa for some time more, to help them. Gandhi agreed. The assembly to bid farewell to Gandhi was converted into an action committee to fight for citizenship rights of the Indian settlers of South Africa. This laid the foundation for Gandhi's stay in South Africa. Thus the seed of the fight for the rights of Indian brethren was sown.

Gandhi started an organization and called it 'The Natal Indian Congress'. It was to carry on the struggle of the Indians. He also started a newspaper. It was called 'The Indian Opinion'. The paper became an organ to give information about the struggle.

It created unity and a sense of self-respect among the Indian settlers. Gandhi once visited India and attended the session of the Indian National Congress; he spoke about the hardships of the South African Indians, and got the Congress to pass a resolution supporting the struggle.

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While in India, Gandhi made some speeches about the South African question. They were misreported in the press. The white men of South Africa who read the report became angry with Gandhi. They were waiting for Gandhi's return. As soon as he left the ship, they attacked him. His life was in danger. They kept shouting 'Hang Gandhi'. They also threw brickbats and rotten eggs at him. At that critical time, the wife of a European police officer courageously entered the fray, and led Gandhi to a place of safety.

Gandhi was determined in his struggle. He united the Indian settlers and carried on the struggle. At that time, the Zulus, the natives of South Africa, rose in rebellion against the British. Gandhi suspended the struggle, formed a Red Cross Corps, and served the wounded soldiers. This was a great service. The British Government appreciated it, and awarded him the 'Kaiser-i- Hind' medal.

Towards the end of 1907, the Government of South Africa tightened its laws against the Asian settlers in South Africa. It was called the 'Asiatic Act'. It laid down that all men and women of Asian origin above the age of eight years should get their names registered. In addition to this, the Government recognized only Christian marriages as legal. The result of this was that a Hindu couple or a Muslim couple who were married according to Hindu and Muslim religious rites were no longer considered as legally wedded husband and wife. Further, there was restriction on movement from one province to another.

Gandhi advised his men not to honor and obey the Registration Law. This led to a fierce struggle. Gandhi called it 'Satyagraha'; it was

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the use of 'Soul-Force' or 'Love- Force' against 'Brute-Force' or violence. He trained men, women and children as volunteers to offer Satyagraha. He called his band a 'Peace Brigade'. It had to enter Transval from Natal. This was the civil disobedience that he planned. It continued for six months. All the Satyagrahis including Gandhi were arrested and put into prison. At last, the Government of South Africa came to an honorable settlement with Gandhi. The citizenship rights of Indians were recognized. Thus Gandhi was the champion of the self-respect of the Indians in South Africa.

Satyagraha, this new way of struggle in South Africa, began a new chapter in the political history of the world, Politics is generally understood to permit cheating, killing and violence. Its policy is that the end justifies the means. But Gandhi taught the principle that both the end and the means must be equally pure and moral. He himself put that principle into practice. He showed that if this is to be possible, love or nonviolence alone is the way to it.

Gandhi now became a world-renowned person. He was considered by many famous persons in the West as an incarnation of Jesus Christ. This was for his nonviolent struggle - Satyagraha. He stayed in South Africa for 22 years. When he finally returned to India, he was welcomed and honored by the millions of his countrymen as 'Mahatma Gandhiji'.

Gandhiji formed an Ashram near Ahmedabad. It was called 'Satyagraha Ashram'. The way of life that he practiced there was known as 'Sarvodaya' - the well being of all. It was the way of life that he practiced in South Africa. In South Africa, he had started two

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institutions -the Phoenix Settlement and the Tolstoy Farm. The aim of these Ashrams was plain living and high thinking. He believed that by such a way of life the well being of all men could be secured. 'A tooth for a tooth and an eye for an eye' was not true religion, that is, revenge was not religion. His desire was that the individual should lead a truthful, religious and loving life. Man should strive to establish truth, piety and love in human society. It was Gandhiji's belief that the power of goodness that comes from such a life could transform the worst power on earth.

The people of India were also carrying on a struggle for freedom from the British rule. The Indian National Congress was striving for it. In 1919, British soldiers had acted in a brutal manner against an innocent and unarmed assembly of people, who had gathered for a meeting at Jalian-wala Bagh in Punjab. There were walls around with only a small passage to go out of the Bagh. The soldiers fired on the assembly, and killed and wounded many people mercilessly.

Lokamanya Tilak, the great Indian national leader, passed away at that time. The nation was looking for an able leader. The Mahatma, the hero of the Satyagraha struggle in South Africa, had attracted the attention of many Indians. Thus leadership courted him naturally. There was great charm in his words. His conduct was flawless and crystal clear. He filled the nation with a new spirit. Under his leadership the weakest man, woman and child, as well as innocent ryots, were ready for a nonviolent fight. They were ready to

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sacrifice their all. Self-sacrifice and service became the religion of the nation.

The Indian National Congress carried on five major struggles for freedom, during three decades, under the leadership of Gandhiji. In 1920-22, it was called 'The Non-Cooperation Movement'.

Government schools and colleges, courts and Legislatures were all boycotted. Gandhiji himself was arrested, and was sentenced to six years imprisonment. His trial in the court at that time drew the attention of the entire civilized world.

In 1922, there was Hindu-Muslim disturbances in Bombay. Many were injured and killed on account of religious madness.

Gandhiji was shocked to the core, He called his son Devadas and advised him: "Go and tell Hindus and Muslims, wherever they may be fighting, that this hatred is bad. It does not matter even if they kill you. I would be happy to sacrifice my son for the cause of Hindu-Muslim amity."

The Salt Satyagraha of 1930-31 became world-famous. It was known as the 'Dandi March'. Manufacturing salt from sea-water was the monopoly of the Government. By breaking the Salt Law Gandhiji desired to show that the Indians were a free nation. On March 12, he went on foot with seventy-nine trusted disciples, from his Ashram at Sabarmati to Dandi, a sea-side place 241 miles away. Staff in hand he walked about 10 to 15 miles each day. The determination of the 62-year-old 'young man' was wonderful. He was like one in quest of Truth. His action shook the foundations of the British Empire. The

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courage and the spirit of self-sacrifice with which he filled the hearts of millions of Indians were amazing. There was Civil Disobedience or non-violent breaking of the law throughout the country. Cities, towns and villages were all scenes of Satyagraha. Heroism was the order of the day. The British Government put Gandhiji in prison again.

In 1932, when Gandhi was behind the bars, an extraordinary event took place. In the name of political reforms, the British Government planned to cut away millions of Indians called 'untouchables' from the Hindu Society. Their principle was to 'Divide and Rule'. In 1924, Gandhiji had fasted for 21 days to bring about Hindu- Muslim unity. He had been saying that untouchability was a shame to Hindu Society. Hinduism should be purged of that guilt. When he saw what the Government was doing, he became unhappy, and decided to fast unto death. There was great commotion in the entire country. The Government realized its folly and gave up the plan. There was an awakening among the people. Government temples, wells and public places were declared open to the untouchables. Gandhiji called the untouchables - 'Harijans' (men dear to God). He started three periodicals 'Harijan Sevak', 'Harijan-Bandhu' and 'Harijan'-all devoted to the service of the Harijans. He took a vow not to re-enter his Ashram at Sabarmati until untouchability became a thing of the past in India. He settled down at Sevagram, (near Wardha) a new Ashram, which he started there.

In 1941, the Satyagraha struggle took a different shape. It was called the 'Symbolic Satyagraha', and was different from the previous mass Satyagrahas. Only the individuals, whom Gandhiji selected or

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permitted, had to offer Satyagraha. This change was made because Gandhiji, the Truth-seeker, knew that the past mass Satyagrahas had not been entirely free from violence. Thus he conducted this experiment to make Satyagraha free & from violence as far as humanly possible.

In 1942, there came the final struggle for freedom. The call was 'Britishers, Quit India'. For this struggle, Gandhiji gave the inspiring message, 'Do or Die'. Gandhiji expected that the struggle would be purely non-violent. It did not happen that way. Out there was great national upsurge for freedom. Thousands were put into prison. They faced the lath and the bullet, and gave up their lives. A whole nation rose up against an alien empire. It took all the suffering on itself cheerfully, without a word of demur or hatred or ill will. The way India got her freedom is unique in the history of the world. And all the glory of this unique struggle goes to the great leader Gandhiji.

On August 15, 1947, India became a free country. But it was divided into two independent States - India that is Bharat and Pakistan. Gandhiji was totally opposed to this division of the country. Though the country was divided, the Hindu-Muslim riots did not cease. They increased. Lakhs of people were rendered homeless. Many lost their near and dear ones, and became orphans; In Noakhali and Thippera of East Bengal, the killings of Hindus and the shameful acts committed on women were a blot on humanity. It looked as if man had become a demon. For half a century Gandhi had tried to put into action the principles of love and nonviolence in his personal life and in public life; now it seemed to him that those

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principles had totally failed. Naked violence ruled every where. In that fearful situation, Gandhiji tried to test his great principles. He decided to go to those areas, as a messenger of peace. Political madness and religious unreason had reached the height of cruelty. He decided to bring about peace between the Hindus and the Muslims. Though he was seventy-seven years old, he walked from village to village. He brought hope and courage to the suffering, unhappy people. He addressed prayer meetings. He advised both the Hindus and the Muslims. It was a noble mission of compassion. It shines as a noble proof of the heights of divinity to which frail man can soar.

Peace returned to the unfortunate area. The people of both the communities had realized the shame of their senseless acts. Gandhiji returned to Delhi. He was staying at the Birla House.

It was Friday, January 30, 1948. Gandhiji used to hold prayer meetings every evening at 5:30. Prayer was his sole strength. That evening too he was on his way to the prayer meeting. A man called Nathuram Vinayak Godse had come to think that Gandhiji was partial to the Muslims and that he would be saving Hinduism by killing him. As Gandhiji was walking to the prayer meeting Godse bowed to him in respect, and then fired three bullets at point blank range.

Gandhiji, the embodiment of the eternal message of the Gita, was no more.

The tragedy sent tremors the world over. A great and noble spirit that showed the path of piety to man, disappear from the world-stage; all who had a heart to feel shed tears of sorrow.

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The Swaraj or Freedom that Gandhiji dreamed was not merely of a political character. It was to be a means to create a new man, who would strive to create a new society, a new civilization and a new culture. He called the new social order 'Ramraj' - 'the Kingdom of God on Earth'. Love would be the sole law there. All would be dutiful. There would be no distinction of caste, religion and community. No one would be treated as untouchables. All would be equal in the eyes of religion, All would live by the sweat of their brow. The intellectual worker and the manual worker would be equals; neither could claim superiority. There would be no intoxicating drinks. Women would be honored. Every one would be ready to give up his life for the good of his country. Gandhiji called such a state of society 'Sarvodaya (The Prosperity of All).

To realize Sarvodaya, man has to live with fellow men, with other living beings and nature in understanding and harmony.

Service to the lowly and the lost in society was Gandhiji's first step towards Sarvodaya.

Gandhiji taught that knowledge and wealth devoid of religion and morals led to the fall of men. He died as a martyr in the cause of true religion.

A leader's responsibilities are high. He has to examine himself severely time and again, to convince himself that he is fit to lead others. He has to bear all the moral responsibility for all that his followers do. If he feels unable to do so, he has to retire from the field of action. Through self-criticism and self-confidence, he has to work

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to lead this imperfect world in the way of perfection. This is the deathless message that Gandhiji has left us.

Single-minded devotion to the God of Truth and prayer are lights that Gandhiji has bequeathed to us. He could not remain without prayer even for a single day. 'Silent prayer is my greatest strength' - he used to say.

'Raghupathi Raghava Rajaram, Pathitha Pavana Seetharam.'

Whenever we hear this prayer Gandhiji's memory becomes alive. His soul will be present there unseen, and blesses all. It is the task of religion to purify the fallen; it is the power of goodness in man. What does it matter what name we give it? Let us all be blessed with goodness. This is the perennial message that Gandhiji has left to mankind.

As a boy Gandhiji was afraid of ghosts and devils. A good nurse, Rambha by name, taught him to repeat the name of Shri Rama to get over this fear. It brought him hope and courage. He chanted it day in and day out. It is significant that, when the assassin shot at him and his body slumped to find eternal rest in the lap of Mother Earth, the last words he uttered were 'Rama', 'Rama'.

Mahatma Gandhiji, called 'Bapu' by his loving countrymen, will ever be remembered as a saint and a great leader of men.

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