

Gandhi by Leo Rosten

¹INDIA, MARCH 12, 1930. The wizened, toothless, half-naked little Hindu had walked 200 miles to the sea, enlisting volunteers for a *Satyagraha* (“insistence on truth”) demonstration against British rule. Now, at the sea’s edge, he picked up a pinch of dried salt—calmly breaking the law that made salt a government monopoly. As his followers surged forward, native policemen “rained blows on their heads with steel-shod *lathis*,” reported Webb Miller. “Not one of the marchers even raised an arm to fend off the blows. They went down like tenpins... The waiting marchers groaned, sucked in their breaths at every blow, [then] marched on until struck down... The police kicked [them] in the abdomen and testicles...Hour after hour, stretcher-bearers carried back a stream of inert, bleeding bodies.”

²This terrible scene climaxed but one more passive- resistance crusade led by the man millions called Mahatma, “Great Soul” or “man of God.” To the British, he was a mystic rabble-rouser, a preposterous gnome in an immaculate white *dhoti* (a diaper, they sneered) who toured the engorged cities and squalid villages to preach love, self-purification and civil disobedience—leading a goat, whose milk, unlike the cow’s or buffalo’s, he drank. He was a strict vegetarian, befitting his caste, and lived on fruit and nuts. He addressed meetings of hundreds of thousands, or sat silent, cross-legged, on a platform before them—and they remained silent, too, transfixed.

³This Gandhi held no office, commanded no soldiers, yet paralyzed India with a word: Men simply stopped work, crippling the offices, factories, mines, railways, ignoring the courts, paying no taxes, inviting arrest by tens of thousands, filling the jails until there was

no room for more. The proud British *sahibs* imprisoned him again and again, but it did not help. “Jail is jail for thieves... For me, it [is] a palace.” He spent over 2,000 days in prisons, reading, meditating, and drove the British frantic with his final, bloodless weapon: fasting. Nothing so haunted Whitehall as the nightmare of what might happen in this idolatrous land if the “seditious fakir,” as Churchill called him, died in a protest fast.

⁴India, this disease-ridden, clamorous, superstitious, bursting Asian subcontinent, lived not by politics, but within a fantastic tangle of rituals and demonologies before which Europeans stood bewildered or aghast. The doctrine of *karma* sanctified cows, birds, horses; an ant was a soul reincarnated. Young widows mounted funeral pyres to burn alive in sacred suttee. The worship of Brahma, Vishnu and Siva, of Buddha, Allah, Krishna, mingled with fearful fealties to afreets and jinns of the air. In this mosaic of autistic commitments, the grinning little Mahatma exercised spiritual power such as “no ancient king or conqueror ever surpassed.”

⁵He was born Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, in 1869, and was married off by his parents at 13. Excruciatingly shy, intensely sensuous, he studied law in London, then went to South Africa as a barrister. He suffered insults and humiliations because he was “colored,” and urged his despised, disenfranchised compatriots to unite for peaceful disobedience, which he had learned from reading Thoreau. He told them to end the ancient rancors that split Hindu from Muslim, Parsee from pariah; to be clean of body, no less than spirit; to set a moral example to their overlords by absolute truthfulness. (“Not even for the freedom

of India would I resort to an untruth.”) He led 2,000 Indians from Natal across the Transvaal border, defying the law that forbade Asians to immigrate; returned by force to the coal mines, they refused to work. Beaten, starved, they held fast. Fifty thousand joined the *Satyagraha*, until the hamstrung government passed the Indian Relief Bill.

⁶Gandhi set up an *ashram* (retreat) of ascetics devoted to prayer and meditation, in a search for godliness. Later, he left his lucrative law practice, returned to India and established a Tolstoyan retreat to which he admitted untouchables—horrifying even his Hindu wife, who warned that a place so defiled would fail. When funds finally ran out, Gandhi said, “We shall go to live in the untouchable quarter.” He was often stoned, vilified, almost lynched.

⁷His moral severity alienated his four sons. He set out to become a *Brahmachari* (“godlike”) and at 37 took a vow of celibacy. He held the New Testament as sacred as the *Bhagavad Gita* and regarded all men as equal. India’s future lay in education, sanitation, self-discipline: “It is not so much British guns that are responsible for our subjection as our...cooperation.” He angered his countrymen by denouncing the caste system and child marriages, and by advocating birth control through continence. Converts flocked to him from all India, Europe, America. To them, he was a Mohammed or Jesus. To gibes that he was a saint meddling in politics, Gandhi replied, “I am a politician trying... to be a saint.”

⁸He asked his disciples to love those who hated them: “It is not nonviolence if we merely love those that love us.” He long refused to call the British enemies, because he admired them for “ideals [I] love...If we are just to them, we shall receive their support.” Despite the religious and caste hatreds that split India

into impassioned and irreconcilable fragments, he became its undisputed leader. “All India is my family.”

⁹His influence declined as his hours of meditation, his economic panaceas (the use of crude spinning wheels to make homespun and boycott British cotton), even his fasts came to seem ineffectual. He refused to help Britain against the unspeakable Nazis, talked on the edges of subversion, was interned once more.

¹⁰With Jinnah, the Moslem leader, and Lord Mountbatten, he framed India’s independence in 1947, desperately opposing partition into Hindu and Moslem (Pakistan) states. When hideous fighting broke out, he toured the Bengal villages, pleading for an end to bloodshed. At a great prayer meeting in New Delhi, he was assassinated—by a Hindu fanatic who blamed him for India’s partition. The irony was as supreme as the injustice. His ashes were strewn into the sacred river Ganges at Allahabad, and his great disciple Nehru said, “The light has gone out of our lives, and there is darkness everywhere.”

¹¹This ugly, skinny, fearless little man was “a moral genius,” a triumph of sheer character and will. He sounded the death knell of colonialism. Soon, dark-skinned masses in Africa and the Middle East and Mississippi were using their bodies as unprotesting instruments of protest—in marches, boycotts, sit-ins—acting out a Hindu-Christian drama that still disorients the modern world, refuting power with the ageless dream of dignity and freedom blind to color.

—LEO ROSTEN

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