
UNIT 2 FORMATIVE YEARS

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2.1 INTRODUCTION

This Unit will trace the beginnings of an extra-ordinary man. What role did Gandhi's community play in moulding his character? Similarly, what were his family and neighbourhood like, and what role did they play in instilling those sterling qualities and values that set him apart from other people? What were the experiences of his early education? After completing his matriculation, Gandhi chose to study law in England, and spent close to three years there. What experiences did he undergo there and how did they shape his character?

Aims and Objectives

After studying this Unit, you will be able to understand:

- The defining moments and incidents in Gandhi's early life.
- The role played by his parents, his immediate family, and his neighbourhood
- The role played by his school(s), his teachers and his friends in very impressionable periods of his life.
- The varied experiences he underwent as a law student in England.

2.2 COMMUNITY, FAMILY AND NEIGHBOURHOOD

Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi was born at Porbandar in Gujarat on 2nd October 1869. He belonged to a respectable middle-class modh Bania family (businessmen), whose members had long ago abandoned their traditional caste occupation of trade, and taken to administrative service. His grandfather, father and uncle were Prime Ministers in some of the Indian Princely States in the peninsula of Kathiawar before Independence. About this, in his Autobiography, Gandhi says: "For three generations, from my grandfather, they have been Prime Ministers in several Kathiawar States."

Gandhi's grandfather, Uttamchand, served as Prime Minister to the princeling of Porbandar.

Uttamchand handed the office down to his son Karamchand who passed it to his brother Tulsidas. Karamchand was the father of Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi.

Political intrigues forced grandfather Uttamchand out of the Prime Ministership of Porbandar and into exile in the nearby little state of Junagadh. There he once saluted the ruling Nawab with his left hand. Asked for an explanation, he said: "The right hand is already pledged to Porbandar!" Mohandas was proud of such loyalty: "My grandfather," he wrote, "must have been a man of principle."

Gandhi's father likewise left his position as Prime Minister to Rana Saheb Vikmatji, the ruler of Porbandar, and took the same office in Rajkot, another miniature Kathiawar principality, 120 miles to the north-west. Once, the British Political Agent spoke disparagingly of Thakor Saheb Bawajiraj, Rajkot's native ruler. Karamchand sprang to the defence of the ruler. The Agent ordered Karamchand to apologise. Karamchand refused and was forthwith arrested. But Gandhi's father stood his ground and was released after several hours. Subsequently he became Prime Minister of Wankaner.

"Karamchand Gandhi", his son Mohandas wrote, "had no education save that of experience; he was likewise 'innocent' of history and geography, but he was incorruptible and had earned a reputation for strict impartiality in his family as well as outside.' He was a lover of his clan, truthful, brave and generous, but short-tempered. Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi was the fourth and last child of his father's fourth and last marriage.

Gandhi's home life was cultured and the family, by Indian standards, was well-to-do. There were books in the house; they dealt chiefly with religion and mythology. Karamchand once owned a house in Porbandar, a second in Rajkot and a third in Kutiana, but in his last three years of illness, he lived modestly on a pension from the Rajkot prince. He left little property.

Gandhi's elder brother Laxmidas practised law in Rajkot and later became a treasury official in the Porbandar government. Karsandas, the other brother, served as Sub-Inspector of Police in Porbandar. Both brothers died while Mohandas K. Gandhi was still alive. A sister, Raliatben, four years his senior, survived him.

Monia, as the family affectionately called Mohandas, received the special treatment often accorded to a youngest child, and a nurse named Rambha was engaged to look after him. His warmest affection, however, went to his mother Putlibai. He sometimes feared his father, but he loved his mother and always remembered her 'saintliness' and her 'deeply religious' nature. Writing about her in his Autobiography, Mohandas states:

The outstanding impression my mother has left on my memory is that of saintliness. She was deeply religious. She would not think of taking her meals without her daily prayers. Going to 'Haveli' – the Vaishnava temple – was one of her daily duties. As far as my memory can go back, I do not remember her ever having missed the 'Chaturmas'. (Literally, a period of four months. A vow of fasting and semi-fasting is taken by the devout during the four months of the rains.) She would take the hardest vows and keep them without flinching. Illness was no excuse for relaxing them. I can recall her once falling ill, when she was observing the 'Chandrayana' vow, but the illness was not allowed to interrupt the observance. To keep two or three consecutive fasts was nothing to her. Living on one meal a day during 'Chaturmas' was a habit with her. Not content with that, she fasted every alternate day during one 'Chaturmas'. During another 'Chaturmas' she vowed not to have food without

seeing the sun. We children on those days would stand, staring at the sky, waiting to announce the appearance of the sun to our mother. Everyone knows that at the height of the rainy season, the sun often does not condescend to show his face. And I remember days when, at his sudden appearance, we would rush and announce it to her. She would run out to see with her own eyes, but by that time, the fugitive sun would be gone, thus depriving her of her meal. "That does not matter," she would say cheerfully, "God did not want me to eat today." And then she would return to her round of duties.

Gandhi records that his mother was also well informed about all matters of State, and was well respected for her intelligence. Gandhi would often accompany her to the court, and he remembers the many lively discussions she had with the widowed mother of the ruler, Thakore Saheb.

As was the custom in those days, Mohandas was married at the early age of thirteen. His bride was Kasturbai, the daughter of a Porbandar merchant named Gokuldas Makanji. About his early marriage, Gandhi writes in his Autobiography:

It is my painful duty to have to record here my marriage at the age of thirteen. As I see the youngsters of the same age about me who are under my care, and think of my own marriage, I am inclined to pity myself and to congratulate them on having escaped my lot. I can see no moral argument in support of such a preposterously early marriage.

It would be useful, and interesting to narrate one or two incidents involving the young couple. Gandhi had come across little pamphlets in which matters like child marriage and conjugal love had been discussed. Lifelong faithfulness to the wife, inculcated in these booklets as the duty of the husband, remained permanently imprinted in his heart. Furthermore, the passion for Truth was innate in him, and to be false to his wife, was therefore, out of question. But the lesson of faithfulness had also an untoward effect. To quote Gandhi:

If I should be pledged to be faithful to my wife, she also should be pledged to be faithful to me. The thought made me a jealous husband. Her duty was easily converted into my right to exact faithfulness from her. I had absolutely no reason to suspect my wife's fidelity, but jealousy does not wait for reasons. I must needs be forever on the lookout regarding her movements, and therefore she could not go anywhere without my permission. This sowed the seeds of a bitter quarrel between us. The restraint was virtually a sort of imprisonment. And Kasturbai was not the girl to brook any such thing. She made it a point to go out whenever and wherever she liked. More restraint on my part resulted in more liberty being taken by her and in my getting more and more cross. Refusal to speak to one another thus became the order of the day with us, married children. I think it was quite innocent of Kasturbai to have taken those liberties with my restrictions. How could a guileless girl brook any restraint on going to the temple or on going on visits to friends? If I had the right to impose restrictions on her, had she not also a similar right? All this is clear to me today. But at that time, I had to make good my authority as a husband!

In his Autobiography, Gandhi clearly acknowledged his love and passion for his wife and demanded it to be reciprocated. A bold admission by Gandhi regarding his passion even as his father was on deathbed, speaks volumes of his firm adherence to truthful speaking.

“If passion had not blinded me,” Gandhi ruminated forty years later, “I should have been spared the torture of separation from my father during his last moments. I should have been massaging him and he would have died in my arms...The shame of my carnal desire at the critical moment of my father’s death is a blot I have never been able to efface or forget,” writes Gandhi remorsefully, when he was nearly sixty.

2.3 EARLY EDUCATION IN SCHOOLS AND OUTSIDE

Gandhi’s initiated education was at a school in Porbandar, where he encountered more difficulty in mastering the multiplication table than in learning naughty names for the teacher.

Gandhi was about seven when his father left Porbandar for Rajkot to become a member of the Rajasthanik Court. At Rajkot, he was put into a primary school. From this school, he went to a suburban school and then to High School. During this period, Gandhi does not remember ever having told a lie, either to his teachers or to his school-mates. Being a shy child, he took as his books and his lessons as his sole companions. He inculcated the habit of being at school at the stroke of the hour, and to run back home as soon as school closed.

In his first year at the Alfred High School in Rajkot, when Mohandas was twelve, a British educational inspector named Mr. Giles came to examine the pupils. They were asked to spell five English words. Gandhi mis-spelt ‘kettle’. The regular teacher saw the mistake and motioned Mohandas to copy from his neighbour’s slate. Mohandas refused.

Recounting this incident in his Autobiography, Gandhi states:

I would not be prompted. It was beyond me to see that he wanted me to copy the spelling from my neighbour’s slate, for I had thought that the teacher was there to supervise us against copying. The result was that all the boys, except myself, were found to have spelt every word correctly. Only I had been stupid. The teacher tried later to bring this stupidity home to me, but without effect. I could never learn the art of ‘copying’.

Yet the incident did not in the least diminish my respect for my teacher. I was, by nature, blind to the faults of elders. Later I came to know of many other failings of this teacher, but my regard for him remained the same. For I had learnt to carry out the orders of elders, not to scan their actions.

Two other incidents of the same period are worth remembering.

One day, he came across a book purchased by his father, *Shravana Pitribhakti Nataka*, a play about Shravana’s devotion to his parents., which Mohandas read with intense interest. He also saw a picture of Shravana carrying, by means of slings fitted to his shoulders, his blind parents on a pilgrimage. These left an indelible impression on his mind. “Here is an example for you to copy,” Gandhi told himself.

Another play, ‘Harishchandra’, captured his heart. He was never tired of seeing it. “Why should all not be truthful like Harishchandra?” was the question Mohandas asked himself constantly. “To follow Truth and to go through all the ordeals Harishchandra went through was the one ideal it inspired in me!” writes Gandhi in his Autobiography.

“I was not regarded as a dunce at the High School!” writes Gandhi. He always enjoyed

the affection of his teachers. Certificates of progress and character used to be sent to his parents every year, and he does not recollect ever getting a bad certificate. In fact, in the fifth and sixth standard, he even obtained scholarships of Rs. Four and Ten respectively, although he chooses to thank Good Luck more than his merit for the achievement. In his words, "I used to be astonished whenever I won prizes and scholarships. But I very jealously guarded my character. The least blemish drew tears to my eyes..."

Gandhi recollects once receiving corporal punishment. He did not mind the punishment so much as the fact that he was accused of being untruthful. The incident is worthy of being recounted in Gandhi's own words:

When I was in the seventh standard, Dorabji Edulji Gimi was the headmaster. He was popular among boys as he was a disciplinarian, a man of method and a good teacher. He had made gymnastics and cricket compulsory for boys of the upper standards. I disliked both. I never took part in any exercise, cricket or football, before they were made compulsory. My shyness was one of the reasons for this aloofness, which I now see was wrong. I then had the false notion that gymnastics had nothing to do with education. Today I know that physical training should have as much place in the curriculum as mental training.

I may mention, however, that I was none the worse for abstaining from exercise. That was because I had read in books about the benefits of long walks, which has still remained with me. These walks gave me a fairly hardy constitution.

The reason of my dislike for gymnastics was my keen desire to serve as nurse to my father. As soon as the school closed, I would hurry home and begin serving him. Compulsory exercise came directly in the way of this service. I requested Mr. Gimi to exempt me from gymnastics so that I might be free to serve my father. But he would not listen to me. Now it so happened that one Saturday, when we had school in the morning, I had to go from home to the school for gymnastics at 4 o'clock in the afternoon. I had no watch, and the clouds deceived me. Before I reached the school, the boys had all left. The next day, Mr. Gimi, examining the roll, found me marked absent. Being asked the reason for absence, I told him what had happened. He refused to believe me and ordered me to pay a fine of one or two annas.

I was convicted of lying! That deeply pained me. How was I to prove my innocence? There was no way. I cried in deep anguish. I saw that a man of truth must also be a man of care. This was the first and last instance of my carelessness in school. I have a faint recollection that I finally succeeded in getting the fine remitted. The exemption from exercise was of course obtained, as my father wrote himself to the headmaster saying that he wanted me at home after school.

But though I was none the worse for having neglected exercise, I am still paying the penalty of neglect. I do not know whence I got the notion that good handwriting was not a necessary part of education, but I retained it until I went to England. When later, especially in South Africa, I saw the beautiful handwriting of lawyers and young men born and educated in South Africa, I was ashamed of myself and repented of my neglect. I saw that bad handwriting should be regarded as a sign of an imperfect education. I tried later to improve mine, but it was too late. I could never repair the neglect of my youth. Let every young man and

woman be warned by my example, and understand that good handwriting is a necessary part of education. I am now of the opinion that children should first be taught the art of drawing before learning how to write. Let the child learn his letters by observation as he does different objects, such as flowers, birds, etc., and let him learn handwriting only after he has learnt to draw objects. He will then write a beautifully formed hand.

Two more reminiscences of my school days are worth recording. I had lost one year because of my marriage, and the teacher wanted me to make good the loss by skipping a class – a privilege usually allowed to industrious boys. I therefore had only six months in the third standard and was promoted to the fourth after the examinations which are followed by the summer vacation. English became the medium of instruction in most subjects from the fourth standard. I found myself completely at sea. Geometry was a new subject in which I was not particularly strong, and the English medium made it still more difficult for me. The teacher taught the subject very well, but I could not follow him. Often I would lose heart and think of going back to the third standard, feeling that the packing of two years' studies into a single year was too ambitious. But this would discredit not only me, but also the teacher; because counting on my industry, he had recommended my promotion. So the fear of the double discredit kept me at my post. When, however, with much effort, I reached the thirteenth proposition of Euclid, the utter simplicity of the subject was suddenly revealed to me. A subject which only required a pure and simple use of one's reasoning powers could not be difficult. Ever since that time, geometry has been both easy and interesting for me.

Sanskrit, however, proved a harder task. In geometry, there was nothing to memorize whereas in Sanskrit, I thought everything had to be learnt by heart. This subject also was commenced from the fourth standard. As soon as I entered the sixth, I became disheartened. The teacher was a hard taskmaster, anxious, as I thought, to force the boys. There was a sort of rivalry going on between the Sanskrit and the Persian teachers. The Persian teacher was lenient. The boys used to talk among themselves that Persian was very easy and the Persian teacher very good and considerate to the students. The 'easiness' tempted me and one day I sat in the Persian class. The Sanskrit teacher was grieved. He called me to his side and said: "How can you forget that you are the son of a Vaishnava father? Won't you learn the language of your own religion? If you have any difficulty, why not come to me? I want to teach you students Sanskrit to the best of my ability. As you proceed further, you will find in it things of absorbing interest. You should not lose heart. Come and sit again in the Sanskrit class."

This kindness put me to shame. I could not disregard my teacher's affection. Today I cannot but think with gratitude of Krishnashankar Pandya. For if I had not acquired the little Sanskrit that I learnt then, I should have found it difficult to take any interest in our sacred books. In fact, I deeply regret that I was not able to acquire a more thorough knowledge of the language, because I have since realized that every Hindu boy and girl should possess sound Sanskrit learning.

It is now my opinion that in all Indian curricula of higher education, there should be a place for Hindi, Sanskrit, Persian, Arabic and English, besides of course, the vernacular. This big list need not frighten anyone. If our education were more systematic, and the boys free from the burden of having to learn their subjects

through a foreign medium, I am sure learning all these languages would not be an irksome task but a perfect pleasure. A scientific knowledge of one language makes a knowledge of other languages comparatively easy.

The above mentioned incidents greatly depict the gradual but a firm evolution of Gandhi's thoughts and ideas.

2.3.1 Tasting Forbidden Fruit/My Experiments with Meat

Gandhi's physique was frail compared with his older brother's, and especially compared with a Moslem friend named Sheik Mehtab, who could run great distances with remarkable speed and spectacular in the long and high jump. These exploits dazzled Gandhi.

Gandhi regarded himself as a coward. "I used to be haunted," he asserts, "by the fear of thieves, ghosts and serpents. I did not dare to stir out of doors at night." He could not sleep without a light in his room; his wife had more courage than he and did not fear serpents or ghosts or darkness. "I felt ashamed of myself."

Sheik Mehtab played on this sentiment. He boasted that he could hold live snakes in his hand, feared no burglars and did not believe in ghosts. Whence all this prowess and bravery? He ate meat. Gandhi ate no meat; it was forbidden by his religion. The boys at school used to recite a poem which went:

*Behold the mighty Englishman,
He rules the Indian small,
Because being a meat-eater
He is five cubits tall.*

'If all Indians ate meat, they could expel the British and make India free. Besides, argued Sheik Mehtab, boys who ate meat did not get boils; many of their teachers and some of the most prominent citizens of Rajkot ate meat secretly, and drank wine, too.' Sheik Mehtab propagandised Mohandas and finally the latter yielded. Sheik Mehtab brought cooked goat's meat and bread. Gandhi rarely touched baker's bread, and he had never even seen meat. The family was strictly vegetarian and so, in fact, were almost all the inhabitants of the Gujarat district in Kathiawar. In the resolve to make himself an effective liberator of his country, Gandhi bit into the meat but became sick immediately.

In spite of a nightmare, he decided to continue the experiment. It continued for a whole year.

The sin of consuming and liking meat was made greater by the sin of lying. In the end he could not stand the dishonesty and, though still convinced that meat-eating was 'essential' for patriotic reasons, he vowed to abjure it until his parents' death enabled him to be a carnivore openly.

By now Gandhi developed an urge to reform Sheik Mehtab but the naïve and younger Gandhi was no match for his shrewd friend who offered revolt and adventure. Sheik even once led Gandhi to the entrance of a brothel. The institution had been told and paid in advance. Gandhi went in. "I was almost struck blind and dumb in this den of vice. I sat near the woman on her bed, but I was tongue-tied. She naturally lost patience with me and showed me the door, with abuses and insults." Providence, he explains, interceded and saved him despite himself.

Mohandas also pilfered a bit of gold from his older brother. This produced a moral crisis. He had gnawing pangs of conscience and resolved never to steal again. Confessing his mistake to his father, he made a full, written statement of the crime, asked for due penalty, promised never to steal again and, with emphasis, begged his father not to punish himself for his son's dereliction.

Karamchand was moved to tears after his son's confession but tore up the paper and lay down in silence. A remorseful Mohandas sat near him and wept, never forgot that silent scene. Sincere repentance and confession induced by love, rather than fear, won him his father's "sublime forgiveness" and affection.

Lest he give pain to his father, and especially his mother, Mohandas did not tell them that he absented himself from temples. He did not like the 'glitter and pomp' of the temples. Religion to him meant irksome restrictions like vegetarianism which intensified his youthful protest against society and authority. And he had no 'living faith in God'. Who made the world; who directed it, he asked? Elders could not answer, and the sacred books were so unsatisfactory on such matters that he inclined 'somewhat towards atheism'. He even began to believe that it was quite moral, indeed a duty, to kill serpents and bugs.

When Karamchand died in 1885, Putlibai took advice on family matters from a Jain monk named Becharji Swami, who helped Gandhi to go to England.

After graduating from high school, Gandhi enrolled in Samaldas College, in Bhavnagar, and found the studies difficult and the atmosphere distasteful. As a friend of the family suggested, if Mohandas was to succeed his father as Prime Minister, he had better become a lawyer and the quickest way was to take a three-year course in England. Gandhi was most eager to go. But he was afraid of law; could he pass the examinations? Gandhi was interested in medicine but was objected to it by his brothers.

Mother Putlibai disliked parting with her last-born and was worried about the finances apart from relative's reproach. Having set his heart on England, Mohandas sought permission from his uncle. The latter discouraged him because European-trained lawyers forsook Indian traditions, took to cigars, ate everything and dressed "as shamelessly as Englishmen". But he would not object if Putlibai agreed.

Gandhi tried to get a scholarship from the Porbandar government but the British administrator of the state rebuffed him curtly without even letting him present his case.

Mohandas even wanted to pawn his wife's jewels as they were valued at high cost. Finally, his brother promised to supply the funds, but his mother was apprehensive about the young men's morals in England. Here, Becharji Swami, the Jain monk, came to his rescue and administered an oath to Mohandas who then solemnly took three vows: not to touch wine, women and meat. This earned his mother's consent.

In June 1888, Gandhi left for Bombay with his brother but that did not end his tribulations. He was discouraged on the grounds of hostile weather. Meanwhile, the Modh Baniyas of Bombay heard about the projected trip, and summoned Mohandas to explain as their religion forbade overseas voyages because Hinduism could not be practised there. The resolve to go ahead resulted in Mohandas getting ostracised. Undaunted, he set sail to Southampton on 4 September 1888. The voyage to England gave Gandhi 'a long and healthy separation' from his wife and his new born child, Harilal.

2.4 STUDY IN ENGLAND

Gandhi had himself photographed shortly after he arrived in London in 1888. Despite the impressive features, the eyes seem to mirror puzzlement, fright, yearning; they seem to be moving and looking for something. The face is that of a person who fears coming struggles with himself and the world. Will he conquer his passions, he wonders; can he make good?

In England, this shy young man found himself at sea. He often yearned for home and the tender affection of his mother. The vow never to touch meat left him half-starved and caused his friends much embarrassment, owing to a false sense of social decorum, born of inferiority complex from which most of the Indians suffered in those days. But Gandhi would not yield to the pressure of his well-meaning friends. For him “a vow was a vow and could not be broken”. He found a vegetarian eating house in Farringdon Street, near Fleet Street, not far from the Inner Temple where he studied law. He invested a shilling in Henry Salt’s *A Plea for Vegetarianism* which was being sold at the entrance. Inside, he ate his first hearty meal in England. This further strengthened his resolve. He was no more a vegetarian because of the vow but because of free choice. About this, he says:

I had all along abstained from meat in the interest of truth and of the vow I had taken, but had wished at the same time, that every Indian should be a meat-eater and had looked forward to being one myself freely and openly some day, and to enlisting others in the cause. The choice was now made in favour of vegetarianism, the spread of which henceforward became my mission.

The literature on vegetarianism that he made it a point to read initiated him in the science of dietetics, and experiments therein occupied an important place in his life. Also, it brought him in contact with some notable persons of the time. With a youthful zeal, he became the Secretary of a Vegetarian Club. Though eager to speak, he always felt tongue-tied, and was at a loss to know how to express himself. His incapacity to express himself freely lasted throughout his stay in England. He says: *My constitutional shyness has been no disadvantage whatever. In fact I can see that, on the contrary, it has been all to my advantage. My hesitancy in speech, which was once an annoyance, is now a pleasure. Its greatest benefit has been that it has taught me the economy of words.*

Having disappointed his friends in the matter of food, he tried to satisfy them by making of himself an English gentleman. He took lessons in dancing and playing on the violin. He succeeded better with his dress. But he continued to live a simple life. He had limited funds and these he used with the utmost economy, keeping account of every penny he spent. He writes: *“This habit of economy and strict accounting has stayed with me ever since, and I know that as a result, though I have had to handle public funds amounting to lakhs, I have succeeded in exercising strict economy in their disbursement, and instead of outstanding debts have had invariably a balance in respect of all movements I have led.”*

This plain and simple living did not make his life dreary. On the contrary, his simple living, he says, “harmonized my inward and outward life; my life was certainly more truthful and my soul knew no bounds of joy”.

Gandhi had, during his stay in London, moved chiefly among vegetarians, reformers and

clergymen. The last-mentioned were anxious to mould and save his soul in their particular way, which, however, made no impression on him. But his contact with clergymen made him think deeply about religion and introduced him to his own. He studied the *Gita* in Arnold's translation and greatly liked it. He also read Arnold's *The Light of Asia*. He read the Bible. The Old Testament did not impress him. But the New Testament, especially the Sermon on the Mount, with its absolute and unconditional Non-Violence appealed to him, as its teachings conformed with the Vaishnavite ideas and practices in which he had been brought up at home. He thought that in spite of the war setting of the *Gita*, its fundamental morality was not different from that of the New Testament.

In spite of his three years' stay in England, Gandhi remained as diffident and shy as ever, "sitting tongue-tied, and never speaking, except when spoken to". His efforts at public speaking were a dismal failure. At a farewell party given to friends, all that he could say with difficulty was, "Thank you, gentlemen, for having kindly responded to my Invitation." He knew no law that would be useful to him in his practice in the Indian courts. But he had remained true to the three vows he had taken at the instance of his mother before leaving for England.

The purpose for which Gandhi came to England receives only a few lines in his reminiscences, far fewer than his dietetic adventures. He was admitted as a student at the Inner Temple on 6 November, 1888, and matriculated at London University, in June 1890. He learned French and Latin, Physics, and Common and Roman Law. He read Roman Law in Latin. He improved his English and had no difficulty in passing the final examinations. Called to the Bar on 10 June, 1891, he enrolled in the High Court on 11 June, and sailed for India on 12 June, 1891. He had no wish to spend a single extra day in England, after spending two years and eight months there.

2.5 SUMMARY

Gandhi gave absolutely no indication, during his formative years, of the greatness that would be thrust on him. He considered himself as one who could not put his heart and soul into academics. With a habit of deprecating his good qualities, which was usual with him throughout his life, he writes that he had no high regard for his abilities and was surprised when he was awarded prizes and scholarships. He was hard-working and conscientious in his studies. He carefully guarded his character and was very sensitive to rebuke or punishment.

There was nothing that specifically marked him out as the future great man in the making except his conscientiousness born of a shy and sensitive nature, and his scrupulous regard for truth. He states: "One thing took deep root in me – the conviction that morality is the basis of things, and that truth is the substance of all morality. Truth became my sole objective."

Gandhi's years in England at a formative phase must have shaped his personality. Gandhi did not learn essential things by studying; he was the doer, and he grew and gained knowledge through action. Books, people and conditions affected him. But the real Gandhi, the Gandhi of history, did not emerge, did not even hint of his existence in the years of schooling and study. Perhaps it is unfair to expect too much of the frail provincial Indian transplanted to metropolitan London at the green age of eighteen. Yet the contrast between the mediocre, unimpressive, handicapped, floundering M. K. Gandhi, barrister-at-

law, who left England in 1891, and the Mahatma, the leader of millions is so great as to suggest that until public service tapped his enormous reserves of institution, will-power, energy and self-confidence, his true personality lay dormant. To be sure, he fed it unconsciously; his loyalty to the vow of no meat, no wine, no women, was a youthful exercise in will and devotion which later flowered into a way of life. But only when it was touched by the magic wand of action in South Africa did the personality of Gandhi burgeon. In *Young India* of 4 September, 1924, he said his college days were before the time “when I began life”.

2.6 TERMINAL QUESTIONS

1. Describe the defining moments and incidents in Gandhi’s early life that played an important role in shaping his character.
2. Outline the role played by Gandhi’s parents, his family and his neighbourhood in instilling noble qualities in him.
3. Describe the varied experiences of Gandhi as a law student in London.

SUGGESTED READINGS

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