# CHAPTER III

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G andhi had himself photographed shortly after he arrived

in London in 1888. His hair is thick, black and carefully

combed with the parting slightly to the right of centre.

The ear is large. The nose is big and pointed. The eyes and lips

are the impressive features. The eyes seem to mirror puzzlement,

fright, yearning; they seem to be moving and looking for some¬

thing.- The lips are full, sensuous, sensitive, sad and defensive.

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? He has either been injured or is afraid of

injury.

In an out-of-doors group picture of the 1890 Vegetarians’

Conference at Portsmouth, Gandhi was wearing a white tie, hard

white cuffs and a white dress handkerchief in his front pocket.

His hair is neatly dressed. He used to spend ten minutes every

morning combing and brushing it.

Dr. Sachchidananda Sinha, an Indian then a student in Lon¬

don, recalls meeting Gandhi in February 1890, in Piccadilly

Circus; Gandhi, he says, ‘was wearing at the time a high silk top

hat “burnished bright”, a stiff and starched collar (known as a

Gladstonian), a rather flashy tie displaying all the colours of the

rainbow, under which there was a fine striped silk shirt. He wore

as his outer clothes a morning coat, a double-breasted waistcoat,

and dark striped trousers to match, and not only patent-leather

shoes but spats over them. He also carried leather gloves and a

silver-mounted stick, but wore no spectacles. His clothes were

regarded as the very acme of fashion for young men about town

at that time, and were largely in vogue among the Indian youth

prosecuting their studies in law at one of the four institutions

called the Inns of Court’. There were four Inns of Court: Lincoln’s

Inn, Gray’s Inn, the Middle Temple and the Inner Temple, and

the last, where Gandhi had enrolled, was, says Dr. Sinha, con¬

sidered by Indians ‘the most aristocratic’.

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Gandhi says his ‘punctiliousness in dress persisted for years\*.

His top hat, he writes, was expensive, and he spent ten pounds

for an evening dress suit tailored to order in Bond Street. He

asked his brother to send him a double watch chain of gold. He

abandoned his ready-made cravat and learned to tie one himself.

Further ‘aping the English gentleman\*, he invested three pounds

in a course of dancing lessons. But ‘I could not follow the piano’

or ‘achieve anything like rhythmic motion\*. Adamant and logical,

he thought he would develop an ear for music by mastering the

violin. He purchased an instrument and found a teacher. But

he gave up the effort and sold the violin. He acquired Bell’s

Standard Elocutionist and took elocution lessons. Very soon he

abandoned that too.

Playing the gentleman would, Gandhi mistakenly thought,

bring him into key with the dominant note in British life. He

always needed harmony, and the need helped him to develop

delicate antennae of leadership.

Throughout life, Gandhi concentrated on man’s day-to-day

behaviour. In London, his central concern was the day-to-day

behaviour of M. K. Gandhi. His autobiographical reminiscences

of London student days deal entirely with his food, clothes, shy¬

ness, relations with acquaintances and his religious attitude.

George Santayana, the American philosopher of Spanish

descent, visited London as a young man when Gandhi was there.

Decades later, in The Middle Span , the second volume of his

memoirs, he described the visit and commented on the quality

of the theatre, the character of Englishmen and the appearance

of London houses, parks and streets; there are references to litera¬

ture and philosophy. Santayana, the artist, attempts to recon¬

struct a life and an era. Gandhi, the reformer, omits the cultural

and historical background and dissects himself for the instruction

of others.

Experiences are the interaction between self and the objective

world. But Gandhi’s autobiography is called Experiments in Truth ;

an experiment in this sense is induced by the objective world, but

it is essentially an operation within and upon oneself. To the end

of his days, Gandhi attempted to master and remake himself.

Gandhi always focused attention on the personal. English

friends tried to persuade Gandhi to eat meat. One of them read

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to him from Bentham’s Theory of Utility. ‘These abstruse things

are beyond me,’ Gandhi pleaded; he would not break the vow

he had given his mother.

Gandhi’s ‘capacious stomach’ demanded filling, but the family

with whom he lived served no more than two or three slices of

bread at each meal. Later the two daughters of the household gave

him a few extra slices; he could have done with a loaf. ‘I practi¬

cally had to starve.’ He found a vegetarian eating house in

Farringdon Street, near Fleet Street, not far from the Inner

Temple. He invested a shilling in Henry Salt’s A Plea for Vege¬

tarianism which was being sold at the entrance. Inside, he ate

his first hearty meal in England: ‘God had come to my aid.’

The Salt treatise made him a vegetarian by choice. In the be¬

ginning was the act, and only then the conviction.

Frugal eating led to frugal spending. Even during the brief

spree of ‘aping the gentleman’, Gandhi kept minutely accurate

accounts of all outlays for food, clothing, postage, bus fares,

newspapers, books, etc. Before going to bed each night he

balanced his finances. Now, after an experiment in boarding

with a family, he found lodgings about half an hour’s walk from

school. He thus saved on fares as well as rent and, to boot, got

some exercise. He walked eight to ten miles a day.

The example of poor Indian students in London and the guilty

sense of being prodigal with his brother’s money impelled Gandhi

to economize still further. He abandoned his suite and moved

to one room. He cooked his own breakfast of oatmeal porridge

and cocoa. For lunch he went to his favourite vegetarian

restaurant; dinner consisted of bread and cocoa prepared at

home. Food cost him one and threepence a day.

All the while sweets and spices had been coming to him by sea

from India. He discontinued this luxury. He began to eat, and

enjoy, boiled spinach with no condiments. ‘Many such experi¬

ments’, he remarked, ‘taught me that the real seat of taste was

not the tongue but the mind,’ and Gandhi had commenced that

remarkable lifelong task of changing his mind.

Under the influence of food reformers Gandhi varied his menu,

giving up starches for a period, or living on bread and fruit, and

again on cheese, milk and eggs for weeks at a time. He had

become a member of the executive committee of the Vegetarian

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Society of England. An expert convinced him that eggs were not

meat; the consumption of eggs injured no living creatures. After

a while, however, Gandhi thought better of it. His mother, he

reasoned, regarded eggs as meat, and since she had received his

vow, her definition was binding. He gave up eggs; he gave up

dishes, cakes and puddings made with eggs, even when they were

served at the vegetarian restaurant. This was an additional priva¬

tion, but satisfaction in observing the vow produced ‘an inward

relish distinctly more healthy, delicate and permanent’ than food.

Gandhi had reduced his weekly budget to fifteen shillings. He

learned to prepare English dishes. Carrot soup was a speciality.

Sometimes he invited Narayan Hemchandra to partake of a meal

in his room. Narayan was a young Indian who had just arrived

from home after having earned a reputation as a writer. ‘His

dress was queer,’ Gandhi reports.

Gandhi’s English was still far from perfect but Narayan’s was

worse, and Mohandas began giving him lessons. Once Narayan

arrived at Gandhi’s home clothed in a shirt and a loincloth.

When the landlady opened the door she ran back in fright to tell

Gandhi that ‘a madcap’ wanted to see him. ‘I was shocked’ at

Narayan’s clothes, Gandhi wrote.

Narayan planned to learn French and visit France, to learn

German and visit Germany, and to travel to America. He did

go to France and translated French books. Gandhi revised several

of the translations. Narayan also visited America, where he was

arrested for indecent exposure.

Stirred by Narayan Hemchandra, Gandhi crossed the Channel

in 1890 to see the great Paris Exhibition. ‘I had heard of a

vegetarian restaurant in Paris-. So I engaged a room there and

stayed seven days,’ Gandhi recalls. ‘I managed everything very

economically ... I remember nothing of the Exhibition except its

magnitude and variety. I have a fair recollection of the Eiffel

Tower as I ascended it twice or thrice. There was a restaurant

on the first platform, and just for the satisfaction of being able to

say that I had my lunch at a great height, I threw away seven

shillings on it.’

Count Leo Tolstoy had called the Eiffel Tower a monument to

man’s folly. Gandhi read this disparaging remark and concurred.

‘The Tower’, Gandhi felt, ‘was a good demonstration of the fact

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that we are all children attracted by trinkets’; neither beauty nor

art recommended it, only its size and novelty. However, Gandhi

did enjoy the grandeur and peace of the ancient churches of Paris,

notably Notre-Dame with its elaborate interior decorations and

sculptures. After the noisy, frivolous streets and boulevards,

Gandhi found dignity and reverence in the houses of God. French

people kneeling before a statue of the Virgin were ‘not wor¬

shipping mere marble’ but rather ‘the divinity of which it is

symbolic’.

Gandhi made no comment on British churches. In England,

he played bridge, wore his ‘visiting suit’ on occasions and evening

dress for festivitiesj and took an active organizational part in

several vegetarian societies. But he could not make the most

informal remarks, and had to write out his views and ask others

to read them. ‘Even when I paid a social call the presence of-

half a dozen or more people would strike me dumb.’

The purpose for which Gandhi came to England receives only

a few lines in his reminiscences, far fewer than his dietetic adven¬

tures. He was admitted as a student at the Inner Temple on

November 6th, 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 and bought many

books. He improved his English. He had no difficulty in passing

the final examinations. Called to the bar on June iotli, 1891, he

enrolled in the High Court on June nth, and sailed for India on

June 12th. He had no wish to spend a single extra day in England.

Gandhi does not seem to have been happy in England. It was

a necessary interim period: he had to be there to get professional

status. His chief English contacts were a group of aged, crusading

vegetarians ‘who’, he later declared, ‘had the habit of talking of

nothing but food and nothing but disease’. He neither received

nor gave warmth.

Gandhi did not yet feel at home in English. Later, as a

Mahatma, he constantly stressed the importance of studying and

speaking in one’s native tongue; otherwise one lost much mental

effort bridging the gulf of language. British life was very foreign

to him.

At first, Gandhi had thought he could become an ‘Englishman’.

Hence the fervour with which he seized the instruments of con-

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version: clothes, dancing, elocution lessons, etc. Then he realized

how high the barrier was. He understood he would remain

Indian. Therefore he became more Indian.

Gandhi’s two years and eight months in England came at a

formative phase of his life and must have shaped his personality.

But their influence was probably less than normal. For Gandhi

was not the student type; he 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 leader of millions is so

great as to suggest that until public service tapped his enormous

reserves of intuition, will powder, 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 wall and devotion which later flowered into

a way of life. But only wdien it was touched by the magic wand of

action in .South Africa did the personality of Gandhi burgeon.

In Young India of September 4th, 1924, he said his college days

were before the time ‘when ... I began life’.

Gandhi advanced to greatness by doing. The Gita, Hinduism’s

holy scripture, therefore became Gandhi’s gospel, for it glorifies

action.

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