# CHAPTER II

THE BEGINNINGS OF AN

EXTRAORDINARY MAN

G andhi belonged to the Vaisya caste. In the old Hindu

social scale, the Vaisyas stood third, far below the Brah¬

mans who were the number one caste and the Kshatriyas,

or rulers and soldiers, who ranked second. The Vaisyas, in fact,

were only a notch above the Sudras, the working class. Origin¬

ally, they devoted themselves to trade and agriculture.

The Gandhis belonged to the Modh Bania subdivision of their

caste. Bania is a synonym in India for a sharp, shrewd business¬

man. Far back, the Gandhi family were retail grocers; ‘Gandhi’

means grocer. But the professional barriers between castes began

to crumble generations ago, and Gandhi’s grandfather Uttam-

chand served as prime minister to the princeling of Porbandar, a

tiny state in the Kathiawar peninsula, western India, about half

way between the mouth of the Indus and the city of Bombay.

Uttamchand handed the office down to his son Karamchand

who passed it to his brother Tulsidas. The job had almost become

the family’s private property.

Karamchand was the father of Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi,

the Mahatma.

The Gandhis apparently got into trouble often. 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.

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Karamchand sprang to the defence of his chief. The Agent

ordered Karamchand to apologize. 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.

In the 1872 census, Porbandar state had a population of 72,077,

Rajkot 36,770 and Wankaner 28,750. Their rulers behaved like

petty autocrats to their subjects and quaking sycophants before

the British.

Karamchand Gandhi ‘had no education save that of experi¬

ence’, his son, Mohandas, wrote; 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. To a certain extent he might have been even

given to carnal pleasures. For he married for the fourth time when

he was over forty’. The other three wives had died.

Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi was the fourth and last child

of his father’s fourth and last marriage. He was born at Porbandar

on October 2nd, 1869. That year the Suez Canal was opened,

Thomas A. Edison patented his first invention, France celebrated

the hundredth anniversary of the birth of Napoleon Bonaparte,

and Charles W. Eliot became president of Harvard University.

Karl Marx had just published Capital , Bismarck was about to

launch the Franco-Prussian War, and Victoria ruled over England

and India.

Mohandas was born in the dark, right-hand corner of a room,

11 feet by 19 J feet and 10 feet high, in a three-storey humble house

on the border of the town. The house is still standing.

The little town of Porbandar, or Porbunder, rises straight out

of the Arabian Sea and ‘becomes a vision of glory at sunrise and

sunset when the slanting rays beat upon it, turning its turrets and

pinnacles into gold’, wrote Charles Freer Andrews, a British

disciple of the Mahatma. It and Rajkot and Wankaner were quite

remote, at the time of Gandhi’s youth, from the European and

Western influences which had invaded less isolated parts of India.

Its landmarks were its temples.

Gandhi’s home life was cultured and the family, by Indian

standards, was well-to-do. There were books in the house; they

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dealt chiefly with religion and mythology. Mohandas played

tunes on a concertina purchased especially for him. Karamchand

wore a gold necklace and a brother of Mohandas had a heavy,

solid gold armlet. 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. He

spent money freely and married his daughters with a pomp worthy

of petty Indian royalty. He owned two houses in Rajkot. Kar-

sandas, the other brother, served as sub-inspector of police in

Porbandar and ultimately of the princeling’s harem. His income

was small.

Both brothers died while Mohandas K. Gandhi was still alive.

A sister, Raliatben, four years his senior, survived him. She

remained resident in Rajkot.

Mohania, as the family affectionately called Mohandas,

received the special treatment often accorded a youngest child.

A nurse named Rambha was engaged for him and he formed an

attachment to her which continued into mature life. His warmest

affection 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. She never ate a

meal without prayer, and attended temple services daily. Long

fasts did not dismay her, and arduous vows, voluntarily made,

were steadfastly performed. In the annual Ghaturmas, a kind of

Lent lasting through the four-month rainy season, she habitually

lived on a single meal a day and, one year, she observed, in addi¬

tion, a complete fast on alternate days. Another Ghaturmas, she

vowed not to eat unless the sun appeared. Mohandas and his

sister and brothers would watch for the sun, and when it showed

through the clouds they would rush into the house and announce

to Putlibai that now she could eat. But her vow required her to

see the sun herself and so she would go out of doors and by then the

sun was hidden again. ‘That does not matter,’ she would cheer¬

fully comfort her children. ‘God does not want me to eat today.’

As a boy, Mohandas amused himself with rubber balloons and

revolving tops. He played tennis and cricket and also ‘gilli danda’,

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a game, encountered in so many widely separated countries,

which consists in striking a short, sharpened wooden peg with a

long stick: ‘peggy’ or ‘pussy’ some call it.

Gandhi started school in Porbandar. He encountered more

difficulty in mastering the multiplication table than in learning

naughty names for the teacher. ‘My intellect must have been

sluggish and my memory raw,’ the adult Mahatma lays charge

against the child of six. In Rajkot, whither the family moved a

year later, he was again a ‘mediocre student’, but punctual. His

sister recalls that rather than be late he would eat the food of the

previous day if breakfast was not ready. He preferred walking

to going to school by carriage. Pie was timid: ‘my books and

lessons were my sole companions’. At the end of the school day,

he ran home. He could not bear to talk to anybody: ‘I was even

afraid lest anyone should poke fun at me.’ When he grew older,

however, he found some congenial mates and played in the streets.

He also played by the sea.

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-spelled ‘kettle’. Walking up and down

the ’aisles, the regular teacher saw the mistake and motioned

Mohandas to copy from his neighbour’s slate. Mohandas refused.

Later the teacher chided him for this ‘stupidity’ which spoiled the

record of the class; everybody else had written all the words

correctly.

The incident, however, did not diminish Gandhi’s respect for

his teacher. ‘I was by nature blind to the faults of elders ... I had

learned to carry out the orders of elders, not to scan their actions.’

But obedience did not include cheating with teacher’s permission.

Perhaps the refusal to cheat was a form of self-assertion or

rebellion. In any case, compliance at school did not preclude

revolt outside it. At the age of twelve, Gandhi began to smoke.

And he stole from elders in the house to finance the transgression.

His partner in the adventure was a young relative. Sometimes

both were penniless; then they made cigarettes from the porous

stalks of a wild plant. This interest in botany led to the discovery

that the seeds of a jungle weed named dhatura were poisonous.

Off they went to the jungle on the successful quest. Tired of life

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under parental supervision, they joined in a suicide pact. They

would die, appropriately, in the temple of God.

Having made their obeisances, Mohandas and his pal sought

out a lonely corner for the final act. But perhaps death would be

long in coming and meanwhile they might suffer pain. Perhaps

it was better to live in slavery. To salvage a vestige of self-respect

they each swallowed two or three seeds.

Presently, serious matters claimed the child’s attention.

Mohandas K. Gandhi married when he was a high school pupil

— aged thirteen. He had been engaged three times, of course

without his knowledge. Betrothals were compacts between

parents, and the children rarely learned about them. Gandhi

happened to hear that two girls to whom he had been engaged —

probably as a toddler — had died. T have a faint recollection’,

he reports, ‘that the third betrothal took place in my seventh year,’

but he was not informed. He was told six years later, a short time

before the wedding. The Bride was Kasturbai, the daughter of a

Porbandar merchant named Gokuldas Makanji. The marriage

lasted sixty-two years.

Writing about the wedding more than forty years later, Gandhi

remembered all the details of the ceremony, as well as the trip to

Porbandar where it took place. ‘And oh! that first night,’ he

added. ‘Two innocent children all unwittingly hurled themselves

into the ocean of life.’ Kasturbai, too, was thirteen. ‘My brother’s

wife had thoroughly coached me about my behaviour on the first

night. I do not know who had coached my wife.’ Both were

nervous and ‘the coaching could not carry me far’, Gandhi wrote.

‘But no coaching is really necessary in such matters. The impres¬

sions of the former birth are potent enough to make all coaching

superfluous.’ Presumably, they remembered their experiences in

an earlier incarnation.

The newlyweds, Gandhi confesses, were ‘married children’ and

behaved accordingly. He was jealous and ‘therefore she could

not go anywhere without my permission’ for, ‘I took no time in

assuming the authority of a husband’. So when the thirteen-year-

old wife wanted to go out to play she had to ask the thirteen-year-

old Mohandas; he would often say no. ‘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

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wherever she liked. 1 The little husband got ‘more and more

cross 1 ; sometimes they did not speak to each other for days.

He loved Kasturbai. His ‘passion was entirely centred on one

woman 1 and he wanted it reciprocated, but the woman was a

child. Sitting in the high school classroom he daydreamed about

her. ‘I used to keep her awake till late at night with my idle talk. 1

‘The cruel custom of child marriage 1 , as Gandhi subsequently

castigated it, would have been impossible but for the ancient

Indian institution of the joint family: parents and their children

and their sons 1 wives and children, sometimes thirty or more

persons altogether, lived under one roof; newly wed adolescents

therefore had no worry about a home, furniture, or board. Later,

British law, seconding Indian reformers, raised the minimum

marriage age. In its time the evil was mitigated by enforced

separations for as much as six months in a year when the bride

went to live with her parents. The first five years of Gandhi’s

marriage — from thirteen to eighteen — included only three

years of common life.

The ‘shackles of lust 1 tormented Gandhi. They gave him a

feeling of guilt. The feeling grew when sex seemed to clash with

the keen sense of duty which developed in him at an early age.

One instance of such a conflict impressed itself indelibly. When

Mohandas was sixteen his father Karamchand became bedridden

with a fistula. Gandhi helped his mother and an old servant to tend

the patient; he dressed the wound and mixed the medicines and

administered them. He also massaged his father’s legs every night

until the sufferer fell asleep or asked his son to go to bed. ‘I

loved to do this service, 1 Gandhi recalls.

Kasturbai had become pregnant at fifteen and she was now in an

advanced stage. Nevertheless, ‘every night whilst my hands were

busy massaging my father’s legs’, Gandhi states in his autobio¬

graphy, ‘my mind was hovering about [my wife’s] bedroom —

and that too at a time when religion, medical science and common

sense alike forbade sexual intercourse 1 .

One evening, between ten and eleven, Gandhi’s uncle relieved

him at massaging Karamchand. Gandhi went quickly to his

wife’s bedroom and woke her. A few minutes later the servant

knocked at the door and urgently summoned Gandhi. He jumped

out of bed, but when he reached the sick room his father was

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dead. Tf 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. But now it

was my uncle who had had this privilege. 5

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 5 , Gandhi wrote when he was near sixty. Moreover,

Kasturbai’s baby died three days after birth and Mohandas

blamed the death on intercourse late in pregnancy. This doubled

his sense of guilt.

Kasturbai was illiterate. Her husband had every intention of

teaching her, but she disliked studies and he preferred lovemaking.

Private tutors also got nowhere with her. Yet Gandhi took the

blame upon himself and felt that if his affection ‘had been

absolutely untainted with lust, she would be a learned lady to¬

day 5 . She never learned to read or write anything but elementary

Gujarati, her native language.

Gandhi himself lost a year at high school through getting

married. Modestly he asserts he ‘was not regarded as a dunce 5 .

Every year he brought home a report on study progress and char¬

acter; it was never bad. He even won some prizes but that, he

says, was only because there were few competitors.

When Mohandas merited a teacher’s rebuke it pained him and

he sometimes cried. Once he was beaten at school. The punish¬

ment hurt less than being considered worthy of it: ‘I wept

piteously. 5

Gandhi neglected penmanship and thought it unimportant.

Geometry was taught in English, which was then a new language

for him, and he had difficulty in following. But ‘when I reached

the thirteenth proposition of Euclid the utter simplicity of the

subject was suddenly revealed to me. A subject which only re¬

quired 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 5 . He likewise had trouble with Sanskrit,

but after the teacher, Mr. Krishnashanker, reminded him that it

was the language of Hinduism’s sacred scriptures, the future

Mahatma persevered and succeeded.

In the upper grades, gymnastics and cricket were compulsory.

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Gandhi disliked both. He was shy, and he thought physical

exercises did not belong in education. But he had read that long

walks in the open air were good for the health, and he formed the

habit. ‘These walks gave me a fairly hardy constitution.’

Mohandas envied the bigger, stronger boys. He was frail

compared with his older brother and especially compared with a

Moslem friend named Sheik Mehtab who could run great distances

with remarkable speed. Sheik Mehtab was spectacular in the

long and high jump as well. These exploits dazzled Gandhi.

Gandhi regarded himself as a coward. T 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 prom¬

inent citizens of Rajkot ate meat secretly, and drank wine, too.

Day in, day out, Sheik Mehtab propagandized Mohandas,

whose older brother had already succumbed. Finally, Mohandas

yielded.

At the appointed hour the tempter and his victim met in a

secluded spot on the river bank. Sheik Mehtab brought cooked

goat’s meat and bread. Gandhi rarely touched baker’s bread (the

substitute was chappatis, an unleavened dough cushion filled with

air) and he had never even seen meat. The family was strictly

vegetarian and so, in fact, were almost all the inhabitants of the

Gujurat district in Kathiawar. But firm in the resolve to make

himself an effective liberator of his country, Gandhi bit into the

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meat. It was tough as leather. He chewed and chewed and then

swallowed. He became sick immediately.

That night he had a nightmare: a live goat was bleating in his

stomach. However, ‘meat-eating was a duty 5 , and, in the midst of

the terrible dream, therefore, he decided to continue the experiment.

It continued for a whole year. Irregularly throughout that long

period he met Sheik Mehtab at secret rendezvous to partake of

meat dishes, now tastier than the first, and bread. Where Sheik

got the money for these feasts Gandhi never knew.

The sin of consuming and liking meat was made the 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.

This prolonged the relationship. But the naive and younger

Gandhi was no match for the shrewd, moneyed wastrel who

offered revolt and adventure. Sheik also knew how to arrange

things. Once he 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.

About that time — Mohandas must have been fifteen — he

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. But he needed the cleansing effect of a

confession: he would tell his father. He made a full, written state¬

ment 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 sat up in his sick bed to read the letter. Tears

filled his eyes and fell to his cheeks. Then he tore up the paper and

lay down. Mohandas sat near him and wept.

Gandhi never forgot that silent scene. Sincere repentance and

confession induced by love, rather than fear, won him his father’s

‘sublime forgiveness’ and affection.

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Lest he give pain to his father, and especially his mother,

Mohandas did not tell them that he absented himself from

temple. He did not like the ‘glitter and pomp’ of the Hindu

temples. Religion to him meant irksome restrictions like vege¬

tarianism 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.

Gandhi’s anti-religious sentiments quickened his interest in

religion and he listened attentively to his father’s frequent discus¬

sions with Moslem and Parsi friends on the differences between

their faiths and Hinduism. He also learned much about the Jain

religion. Jain monks often visited the house and went out of their

way to accept food from the non-Jain Gandhis.

When Karamchand died in 1885, Mohandas’s mother Putlibai

took advice on family matters from a Jain monk named Becharji

Swami, originally a Hindu of the Modh Bania sub-caste. Jain

influence was strong in the Gujarat region. And Jainism prohibits

the killing of any living creature, even insects. Jain priests wear

white masks over their mouths lest they breathe in, and thus kill,

an insect. They are not supposed to walk out at night lest they

unwittingly step on a worm.

Gandhi was always a great absorber. Jainism, as well as

Buddhism, perceptibly coloured Gandhi’s thoughts and shaped

his works. Both were attempts to reform the Hindu religion,

India’s dominant faith; both originated in the sixth century

B.C. in north-eastern India, in what is now the province of Bihar.

The Jain monk, Becharji Swami, helped Gandhi to go to England.

After graduating from high school, Gandhi enrolled in Samaldas

College, in Bhavnagar, a town on the inland side of the Kathiawar

peninsula. But he found the studies difficult and the atmosphere

distasteful. A friend of the family suggested that if Mohandas was

to succeed his father as prime minister he had better hurry and

become a lawyer; 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? Might it not be preferable

to study medicine? He was interested in medicine.

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Mohandas’s brother objected that their father was opposed to

the dissection of dead bodies and intended Mohandas for the bar.

A Brahman friend of the family did not take the same dark view of

the medical profession; but could a doctor become prime minister?

Mother Putlibai disliked parting with her last-born. ‘What will

uncle say? He is the head of the family, now that father is no

more.’ And where will the money come from?

Mohandas had set his heart on England. He developed energy

and unwonted courage. He hired a bullock cart for the five-day

journey to Porbandar where his uncle lived. To save a day, he

left the cart and rode on a camel; it was his first camel ride.

Uncle was not encouraging; European-trained lawyers forsook

Indian traditions; cigars were never out of their mouths; they ate

everything; they dressed ‘as shamelessly as Englishmen’. But he

would not stand in the way. If Putlibai agreed, he would, too.

So Mohandas was back where he had started. His mother sent

him to uncle and uncle passed him back to mother. Meanwhile,

Gandhi tried to get a scholarship from the Porbandar government.

The British administrator of the state rebuffed him curtly

without even letting him present his case.

Mohandas returned to Rajkot. Pawn his wife’s jewels? They

were valued at two to three thousand rupees. Finally,, his brother

promised to supply the funds, but there remained his mother’s

doubts about young men’s morals in England. Here Becharji

Swami, the Jain monk, came to the rescue. He administered an

oath to Mohandas who then solemnly took three vows: not to

touch wine, women or meat. Therewith, Putlibai consented.

Joyfully, in June 1888, Gandhi left for Bombay with his

brother, who carried the monev. That did not end his tribulations.

People said the Arabian Sea was too rough during the summer

monsoon season; one ship had sunk in a gale. Departure was

delayed. Meanwhile, the Modh Banias of Bombay heard about the

projected trip. They convened a meeting of the clan and sum¬

moned Mohandas to attend. No Modh Bania had ever been to

England, the elders argued; their religion forbade voyages abroad

because Hinduism could not be practised there.

Gandhi told them he would go nevertheless. At this, the head¬

man ostracized Mohandas. ‘This boy shall be treated as an out¬

cast from today,’ the elder declared.

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Undaunted, Gandhi bought a steamer ticket, a necktie, a short

jacket and enough food, chiefly sweets and fruit, for the three

weeks to Southampton. On September 4th, he sailed. He was

not yet eighteen. Several months earlier, Kasturbai had borne

him a male child and they called it Harilal. Now the voyage

to England gave Gandhi ‘a long and healthy separation’ from

his wife.

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