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The Romantic Legend of the Mahatma Who Shaped Indian Independence

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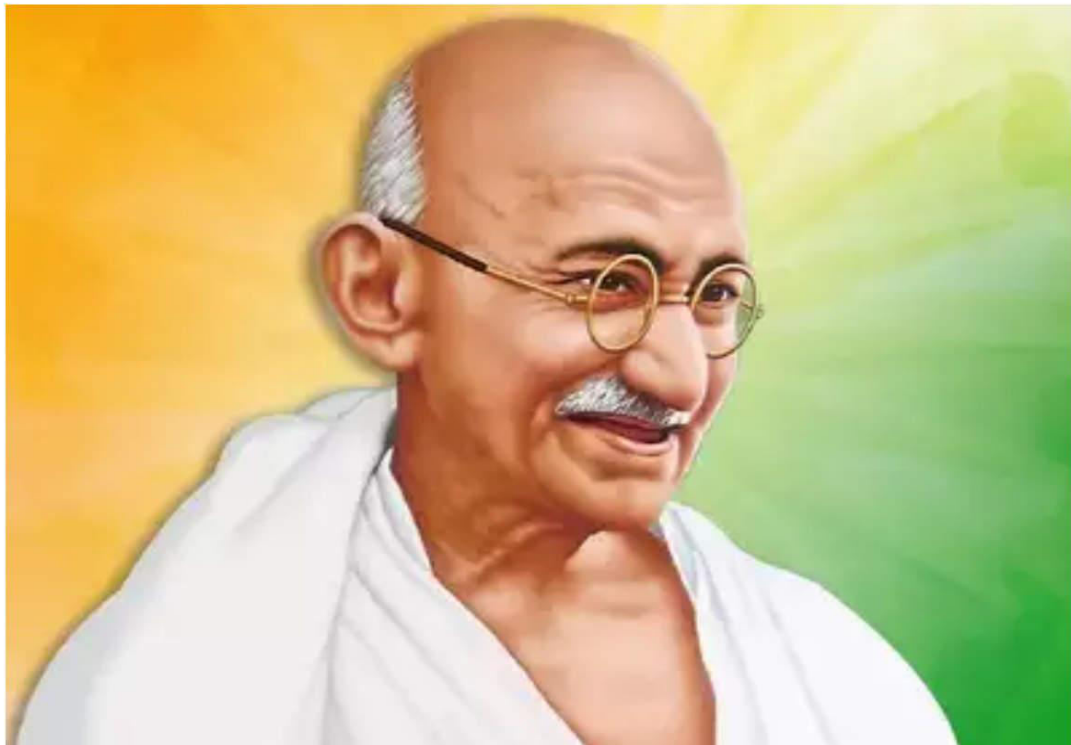
ABSTRACT: Mohandas Gandhi's reputation as the Indian spiritual and political leader who coordinated and led a successful national struggle for independence against British imperial rule on the strength of a non-violent movement survives largely intact. The legend of Mahatma Gandhi has it that he returned to India from South Africa in 1915, took control of and radically transformed the Indian nationalist movement, and led three great popular movements that eventually wore down the British government and led to Indian independence. Mahatma Gandhi was the leader who guided India towards Independence. India was under the British rule for over 250 years. Gandhi returned to India from South Africa in 1915 at the request of Gopal Krishna Gokhale.

Gandhi's contribution to the Indian freedom movement cannot be measured in words. He, along with other freedom fighters, compelled the British to leave India. His policies and agendas were non-violent and his words were the source of inspiration for millions.

Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, more commonly known as 'Mahatma' (meaning 'Great Soul') was born in Porbandar, Gujarat, in North West India, on 2nd October 1869, into a Hindu Modh family. His father was the Chief Minister of Porbandar, and his mother's religious devotion meant that his upbringing was infused with the Jain pacifist teachings of mutual tolerance, non-injury to living beings and vegetarianism. At the age of 13, Gandhi wed Kasturba Makanji, a merchant's daughter, in an arranged marriage. She died in Gandhi's arms in February 1944 at the age of 74.

In 1885, Gandhi endured the passing of his father and shortly after that the death of his young baby.

In 1888, Gandhi's wife gave birth to the first of four surviving sons. A second son was born in India 1893. Kasturba gave birth to two more sons while living in South Africa, one in 1897 and one in 1900.



Mahatma Gandhi-Father of the Nation



I. INTRODUCTION

Born into a privileged caste, Gandhi was fortunate to receive a comprehensive education, but proved a mediocre student. In May 1883, aged 13, Gandhi was married to Kasturba Makhanji, a girl also aged 13, through the arrangement of their respective parents, as is customary in India. Following his entry into Samaldas College, at the University of Bombay, she bore him the first of four sons, in 1888. Gandhi was unhappy at college, following his parent's wishes to take the bar, and when he was offered the opportunity of furthering his studies overseas, at University College London, aged 18, he accepted with alacrity, starting there in September 1888.

Determined to adhere to Hindu principles, which included vegetarianism as well as alcohol and chastity he found London restrictive initially, but once he had found kindred spirits he flourished, and pursued the philosophical study of religions, including Hinduism, Christianity, Buddhism and others, having professed no particular interest in religion up until then. Following admission to the English Bar, and his return to India, he found work difficult to come by and, in 1893, accepted a year's contract to work for an Indian firm in Natal, South Africa.

Although Gandhi was interested in becoming a doctor, his father hoped he would also become a government minister and steered him to enter the legal profession. In 1888, 18-year-old Gandhi sailed for London, England, to study law. The young Indian struggled with the transition to Western culture.[1]

II. DISCUSSION

Upon returning to India in 1891, Gandhi learned that his mother had died just weeks earlier. He struggled to gain his footing as a lawyer. In his first courtroom case, a nervous Gandhi blanked when the time came to cross-examine a witness. He immediately fled the courtroom after reimbursing his client for his legal fees. In 1906, Gandhi organized his first mass civil-disobedience campaign, which he called "Satyagraha" ("truth and firmness"), in reaction to the South African Transvaal government's new restrictions on the rights of Indians, including the refusal to recognize Hindu marriages. After years of protests, the government imprisoned hundreds of Indians in 1913, including Gandhi. Under pressure, the South African government accepted a compromise negotiated by Gandhi and General Jan Christian Smuts that included recognition of Hindu marriages and the abolition of a poll tax for Indians. When Gandhi sailed from South Africa in 1914 to return home, Smuts wrote, "The saint has left our shores, I sincerely hope forever." At the outbreak of World War I, Gandhi spent several months in London. In 1915 Gandhi founded an ashram in Ahmedabad, India, that was open to all castes. Wearing a simple loincloth and shawl, Gandhi lived an austere life devoted to prayer, fasting and meditation. He became known as "Mahatma," which means "great soul." Gandhi returned to active politics in 1930 to protest Britain's Salt Acts, which not only prohibited Indians from collecting or selling salt—a dietary staple—but imposed a heavy tax that hit the country's poorest particularly hard. Gandhi planned a new Satyagraha campaign, The Salt March, that entailed a 390-kilometer/240-mile march to the Arabian Sea, where he would collect salt in symbolic defiance of the government monopoly.[2]

Gandhi returned to India to find himself imprisoned once again in January 1932 during a crackdown by India's new viceroy, Lord Willingdon. He embarked on a six-day fast to protest the British decision to segregate the "untouchables," those on the lowest rung of India's caste system, by allotting them separate electorates. The public outcry forced the British to amend the proposal.

III. RESULTS

After his eventual release, Gandhi left the Indian National Congress in 1934, and leadership passed to his protégé Jawaharlal Nehru. He again stepped away from politics to focus on education, poverty and the problems afflicting India's rural areas. As Great Britain found itself engulfed in World War II in 1942, Gandhi launched the "Quit India" movement that called for the immediate British withdrawal from the country. In August 1942, the British arrested Gandhi, his wife and other leaders of the Indian National Congress and detained them in the Aga Khan Palace in present-day Pune. "I have not become the King's First Minister in order to preside at the liquidation of the British Empire," Prime Minister Winston Churchill told Parliament in support of the crackdown. With his health failing, Gandhi was released after a 19-month detainment in 1944. After the Labour Party defeated Churchill's Conservatives in the British general election of 1945, it began negotiations for Indian independence with the Indian National Congress and Mohammad Ali Jinnah's Muslim League. Gandhi played an active role in the negotiations, but he could not prevail in his hope for a unified India. Instead, the final plan called for the partition of the subcontinent along religious lines



into two independent states—predominantly Hindu India and predominantly Muslim Pakistan. Violence between Hindus and Muslims flared even before independence took effect.[3]

IV. CONCLUSION

On January 30, 1948, 78-year-old Gandhi was shot and killed by Hindu extremist Nathuram Godse, who was upset at Gandhi's tolerance of Muslims. Weakened from repeated hunger strikes, Gandhi clung to his two grandnieces as they led him from his living quarters in New Delhi's Birla House to a late-afternoon prayer meeting. Godse knelt before the Mahatma before pulling out a semiautomatic pistol and shooting him three times at point-blank range. The violent act took the life of a pacifist who spent his life preaching nonviolence. Godse and a co-conspirator were executed by hanging in November 1949. Additional conspirators were sentenced to life in prison.[4]

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