Introduction

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Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi was born in Western India in 1869, a child of the Victorian age at the heyday of British imperial rule in India. He was assassinated by one of his own countrymen nearly eighty years later, in January 1948, just months after the subcontinent had gained political independence. During his long life, he had become known as Mahatma or 'great soul', and had risen from obscurity as a failed lawyer to become one of the most outstanding Indians active in the public life of his country and of the British Empire in the first half of the twentieth century. He is often spoken of as the 'father' of the new nation-state of India, but more seriously is recognized as a major practitioner of and thinker about nonviolence as a form of managing conflict and resisting injustice. Public interest in his career and thought has continued to develop into the next century, particularly as numerous groups have drawn on his example and attempted throughout the world to use nonviolence to resist multiple forms of political violence and control. There are therefore numerous reasons why it is timely to gather a collection of serious but accessible essays on his life and thought in a *Cambridge Companion*, designed to reach a wide readership, both inside and outside the world of education, who may know little about India but wish to know more about such a significant and intriguing figure.

The most utilitarian justification for this *Companion* is the growth of interest in Gandhi and his times, at university level and even among school students. In part, this is because history and politics courses often now spread their range well beyond older national histories and political analyses, and invite students to study global themes and subjects. The spread of a large diaspora from South Asia means that there are also many students of South Asian ethnic descent in schools and colleges in the English-speaking world, outside the country of their ancestors' origin, who wish to know more about that country and its emergence as a subcontinent of global significance in so many ways at the start of the twenty-first century.

Gandhi is also worth serious attention because of his intrinsic importance as a major thinker and publicist on the meaning of Indian nationalism and the nature of the Indian nation, as well as being the single most important organizer of the numerous movements that cohered loosely as a nationalist movement against imperial rule in India. Moreover, as we have noted, he was the chief ideologue and exponent in practice of nonviolence as a form of resistance to British rule and other perceived social and political wrongs. He was not a trained philosopher or professional writer, yet he thought deeply about a whole series of key moral, religious, and public issues that were crucial in his day and are still of significance long after his death; and he wrote copiously about them in ephemeral and more permanent formats, which still have the power to challenge, irritate, and inspire. Gandhi also lives on: and one might say there are many 'contemporary Gandhis' as people consider his thought and his example, and are motivated to follow, use, and adapt much of what he suggested, as they seek to resist injustice in the contemporary world. This *Companion* therefore seeks first to provide readers with what they need to know to understand Gandhi in his own lifetime – this being the subject matter of Part 1, 'Gandhi: The historical life'. It then proceeds to examine his key writings and his considered thinking about major contemporary problems in India, while emphasizing that Gandhi was both thinker and activist, and that his thinking was profoundly influenced by the problems he was forced to face, as well as vice versa. Part 2, 'Gandhi: Thinker and activist', deals with these issues. Part 3 offers some clues to the reality of 'The contemporary Gandhi', the image and memory that still has power long after his death in his homeland and far beyond its shores.

A brief reminder here of the shape and nature of Gandhi's life provides the background for the interpretive essays that make up the substance of this book. Gandhi was born in what is now the state of Gujarat, in Western India, in Porbandar, a port city looking out on the Indian Ocean. The area was then made up of a number of small princely states under British suzerainty, and his father was employed in state administration. It was a backwater compared with parts of India under direct British imperial rule, particularly in terms of its political organization and connections, and Gandhi grew up in a very traditional Hindu family of middling caste rank, where his mother at least paid considerable attention to religious ritual and observance. In keeping with Hindu practice, the parents arranged the marriage of their son while he was only thirteen years old – much to his later embarrassment when he had to explain to Europeans that he was married at such an early age. The

young Gandhi was sent to school and then to an English-speaking college but was undistinguished in his performance and apparent potential. However, his life changed dramatically when his father died in 1885, when he was himself still a teenager. His family decided to send him to England to study law in the hope that he would return to India and make a success of his professional life and so be able to support his extended family. In 1888, he set sail from Bombay, travelling into the unknown, afraid even to stir from his cabin for much of the voyage.

London was Gandhi's home until 1891. Having enrolled at the Inner Temple, he studied law and was eventually called to the Bar. But this professional status, important though it would be for a considerable part of his life, was not the only legacy of his time in London. He honed his knowledge of the English language – a key to his future professional and political career in South Africa and in India, where command of the imperial language was of crucial importance, and where it was the one common language for educated people on the subcontinent. He joined the Vegetarian Society and, despite his natural shyness and nerves, began to acquire experience of public speaking. He began to mix with different sorts of English people and to gain some knowledge of the Christian tradition, of which he knew virtually nothing before. Largely out of necessity because he had little money, he also refined habits of very simple living and regular physical exercise, which were to be important aspects of his later life.

The status of a barrister was insufficient to guarantee the young man professional success on his return home, and he failed to make a living as a lawyer in Bombay and to fulfil his family's hopes of their investment in his future. Rescue from this situation came in the form of an invitation to go on a year's contract to South Africa to work for a Gujarati trading firm that needed a lawyer who knew English and Gujarati. What should have been a year's visit in 1893–4, enabling him to send money home to his family, turned into half a life's sojourn. He returned several times to India briefly, but only returned permanently early in 1915. By this time, he was a genuinely imperial figure, known in South Africa, Britain, and India as the champion of the rights of Indians in South Africa in the face of growing white discrimination. He had initially set himself up as a Westernized lawyer, but increasingly was drawn into politics in defence of Indians who were subjected to controls on entry, places of work, and residence, and were denied political freedoms and rights due to them as British subjects. They were also subjected to social harassment – as he was himself when he was thrown out of a first-class railway carriage at Pietermaritzburg soon after arriving in the country

because a white passenger objected to travelling with him. Drawn into political activism in South Africa by the needs of Indians, he developed skills that would eventually be vital to his work in India. He became a newspaper editor and journalist, using a journal, *Indian Opinion*, as his mouthpiece. He learnt the arts of political organization, of creating and presenting petitions to authority in Africa and Britain, and of negotiation with local and imperial political authorities. But above all, he began to experiment with a new mode of resistance to wrong – nonviolent resistance, which he called satyagraha, truth force. The pursuit of this idea and strategy was to land him in prison, but was eventually to mark him out on his return to India as a public activist with both a message of moral politics and a method to sustain it.

Perhaps more important than the external transformation of the failed lawyer into a successful lawyer, publicist, and political activist was the inner change in Gandhi, as his new environment and its challenges forced him to consider his ultimate values and goals. By the first decade of the new century, he was divesting himself of the trappings of a Western lifestyle and had gathered round him an international group of like-minded men and women dedicated to the simple life and to a search for Truth or God in two communities like Hindu ashrams, groups of devotees clustered round a spiritual teacher. Increasingly, he was drawn to value the many insights in the religious traditions of Christianity and Islam to which he was now exposed, to question and evaluate his own Hindu upbringing and traditions, and to speak of religion as beyond all specific religious traditions, and as, at its root, a search for Truth. This confirmed him in his simple lifestyle, and led him ultimately to take a vow of celibacy in 1906 as a way of affirming his search for Truth and his life as one of service to humanity at large, particularly the poor. By this time, he was the father of four sons, as well as the long-standing husband of Kasturba, his childhood bride. Although at least one of his sons rebelled against the life his father now chose to lead, his wife remained steadfastly at his side until her death with him in prison in 1944. As Gandhi matured into middle age, it was clear he had become a singular type of 'politician', one prompted by ideals and beliefs more than the pursuit of power, and that he had moulded his life to match his message.

Although Gandhi's campaigns in South Africa were becoming known in India and he was honoured for them by his compatriots and indeed by the British rulers of India, there was no natural home for him among the highly Westernized political leaders in India itself. Indeed, when he did return, many of them found his demeanour and social

practices disquieting for they did not share his values. Moreover, when he returned to the homeland from which he had been absent for two decades, he did not seem to have in mind a political career for himself, but rather intended to pursue his own spiritual journey. He had, however, already made one intervention in the politics of his homeland, through the publication in 1909 of a pamphlet entitled *Hind Swaraj* (Indian Home Rule). In this, he had made it plain that, for him, India's swaraj was not political independence from the British, but a radical return to her moral roots and what he saw as the values of her traditional civilization. His main concern was not with British rule but with the divisions among Indians that had made this possible from the eighteenth century and with what he interpreted as India's moral crisis, as so many of its leaders in politics and the modern professions seemed to be enslaved to the values of Western civilization and to be intent on creating an Indian version of a Western state. This extraordinary document – intriguing and thought-provoking even today – indicated that the newcomer on the Indian scene was likely to be a disruptive force to Indians and the British alike, just as his commitment to satyagraha presaged new styles of political action if Indians were to follow him.

Gandhi's first years back in India during World War I saw him concentrate on establishing his family, kin, and small group of followers from South Africa in his first Indian ashram in Ahmedabad, the premier city of his home region. This was the place where he 'experimented with Truth' (to use the phrase with which he subtitled his partial autobiography), where he practised simplicity, prayer, and nonviolence, and aimed to create new Indian men and women who would spearhead his broad work for swaraj. It was to become the powerhouse of his personal and political life until he moved to found another community in central India in the mid-1930s, which was to be his home and his base of operations until his death. Despite appearances, he believed that these two communities were his best work, the heart of what he was trying to do for India.

Gandhi's Indian career is assessed in detail in Chapter 3. Here, it is necessary to recognize that, despite his great reputation as a nationalist leader, he was always an ambiguous figure in Indian politics, and few ever shared his core values and goals. It was for this reason that so much of what he hoped and worked for never materialized in independent India, and why at the end of his life he felt that most of his countrymen had never understood or shared the ideal of satyagraha but had merely used nonviolent resistance as a temporary and disposable strategy. Gandhi first introduced his idea of satyagraha in India in the

context of local issues where he felt it would be of use in righting specific 'wrongs'. It was not until 1919–20 that he suggested it might be used on a national scale in response to British policies, which many came to feel demeaned Indians and undermined the prospect of serious political reform that many had hoped would be the outcome of World War I. In 1920, the premier Indian political organization, the Indian National Congress, adopted a form of satyagraha, Non-cooperation with many aspects of British rule, and this was the start of Gandhi's meteoric rise to all-India leadership. However, leadership may be the wrong word to use. Although he remained a figure of major significance right up to his death in 1948, the number of those who were truly Gandhian in ideology and lifestyle remained very few. Many political activists were deeply moved by his political creativity and his fearless resistance to the British. But most remained unconvinced by his core ideology or by his insistence that satyagraha was the only moral mode of political action, and that cooperation in the politics of British institutions such as legislatures and local councils was a snare and deviation from the work of radical reconstruction of Indian society and the body politic. Consequently, the Congress never permanently committed itself to satyagraha, but only reverted to it when it seemed that more regular modes of politics were failing to pressurize the British into more constitutional reform, more devolution of power into Indian hands through expanding legislatures, and a widening franchise. The major campaigns of satyagraha occurred in 1920–2, 1930–4, and 1940–2. The first two ended when Gandhi recognized that they were degenerating into violence or that his contemporaries in politics felt that they were a drag on their legitimate political aspirations and activities. The final one petered out as the British struck hard to control the resistance seen as a major danger in war time, and imprisoned the whole Congress leadership.

When India achieved its independence in August 1947, Gandhi did not join the celebrations. His deepest sadness was that the subcontinent had been divided on religious grounds into India and Pakistan after Indian politicians failed to find a formula for a united India incorporating those of all religious affiliations. This was totally contrary to Gandhi's belief that Hindus and Muslims were brothers, or like two eyes in one Indian face, and indicated that his tireless work for religious unity had failed. Moreover, the partition was accompanied by large-scale violence, hundreds of thousands of murders in the name of religion, and the terrible displacements of more than a million people who fled across the new international borders to escape violence but at the cost of losing virtually everything they owned. Ironically and tragically, Gandhi was

himself murdered by a Hindu who believed him to be responsible for agreeing to the partition. In Gandhi's eyes, the failure of many of his hopes for India also lay in the persistence of many of the socio-economic problems whose resolution he saw as fundamental to the creation of true swaraj – the many ways in which women were treated as second-class citizens and of less value than men, the multiple burdens of exclusion laid on those at the base of Hindu society who were known as Untouchable, the issues of poverty, dirt, illiteracy, and ill health for many rural people, and the determination of the new government under Jawaharlal Nehru to build a strong industrial India on the pattern of modern Western economies. He was also deeply suspicious of the modern nation-state with its potential for control bordering on violence, and the fact that it took from citizens the moral requirement to order their personal and public lives and interactions.

Gandhi's assassination led to widespread national mourning, and indeed a global recognition that one of the greatest men of his generation had passed away in tragic and undeserved violence. The way in which the new nation state appropriated Gandhi as national founder, hero, and martyr masked the fact that, in his lifetime and since, people have understood his life and role in many different ways. As we have noted, for many in Congress, he was strange, even unworldly, but nonetheless very important because of the way he inspired so many people to support the nationalist movement, and his capacity to cohere so many loose movements of resistance to imperial rule. But to many Muslims, he was a Hindu Mahatma who stood for majoritarian Hindu rule. Similarly, to many Untouchables, he seemed to represent a patronizing caste Hindu stance, which offered them no real change in their deprived situation in the future. To some Hindus, like his assassin, he spoke of unity with Muslims in a new India, whereas they felt that Indian national identity should be built entirely on Hindu bonds of race, birth, and belief. To the left wing in politics (and to later left-wing historians), he was a man who tied Congress and nationalism to the propertied and business classes, and shied away from radical politics to redistribute wealth and address poverty. To the British, he was an enigma, for though he had the appearance of a holy man, he often seemed to be a consummate politician and a committed enemy. It is hardly surprising that historical interpretations of his life have followed as many trajectories as these critiques while he was living. What is clear is that no one interested in modern India can ignore Gandhi's life and contribution to the making of the new nation state. While anyone who considers many of the fundamental issues of human life, its goals, its capacities, and the nature of men and women

in public communities, issues of violence and cooperation, and of ends and means, will find that Gandhi has been there before, and struggled with them. This volume is offered without a particular agenda or single interpretation of Gandhi shared among the authors, but with the hope of providing an entry point into a deeper understanding of Gandhi's life and the multiple issues it raised and continues to raise.