

Gandhi Bionotes

In Gujarat and Bombay:

- 1869: He is born (on October 2nd) in Porbandar, a town of ca.70,000 on the coast of Gujarat. He is the youngest child of the diwan (prime minister) of a small and fairly prosperous Indian state. (His mother is so devout religiously that she observes stringent vows about eating. She is a member of a religious sect which (according to Gandhi in his autobiography) would derive “the best of both Quran and Gita”.)
- 1876: For the sake of his father’s career, the family moves 120 miles east to Rajkot. Sometime in the late 1870s or early ‘80s the boy is deeply impressed by a drama, *Harishchandra*, extolling truthfulness.
- 1880: He enters English-language secondary school (in December). Sometime in the early 1880s he is routinely present as his father conducts the bureaucratic and diplomatic work of governing.
- 1881: He is married (in May, and thus before becoming 12 years old) to Kasturba. He continues to attend school.
- 1883: With encouragement from a Muslim schoolfriend, he furtively eats some goat’s meat, but then resolves to adhere, as long as he continues to live with his parents, to their vegetarianism so as not to deceive them again. In the course of this year the family’s income is reduced as his father resigns his post and becomes bed-ridden with an illness.
- 1884: He experiments with smoking, pilfers some money and a piece of gold jewelry, repents, and is tearfully forgiven by his father.
- 1885: Upon his father’s death (at the age of 62 or 63) on 16th November, Gandhi feels remorse for having left the bedside a few minutes beforehand in order to lie down with his wife. Kasturba’s and Gandhi’s first child is born on 20th November and dies within a few days.
- 1888: He attends college in Bhavnagar, but cannot follow the lectures as they are in advanced English. Kasturba’s and his first surviving child, Harilal, is born. Gandhi departs for England in order to study law and thus become qualified by ‘modern’ standards for a government post such as his father and grandfather had held. His caste excommunicates him for going abroad.

Mainly in London:

- 1888: He enrolls in London as a law student (he is 19 years old), begins to adapt to British culture (for instance by taking music and dance lessons) and to waste money, but he honors a vow, which he had made to assuage his mother’s anxiety about him going abroad, not to ingest wine or meat and not to commit adultery.
- 1888-90: He curbs his spending, and joins the London Vegetarian Society. He regards England as “the very center of civilization”. He attends various church services, hears clever debates in the House of Commons, reads the British newspapers, and reads also most of the Bible and yet also an English translation of the Gita and some books on Theosophy. He visits Paris briefly (and admires the Eiffel Tower).
- 1891: He is licensed to practice British law, and sails immediately for Bombay.

Mainly in Bombay and Rajkot:

- 1891: He learns that his mother had died the year before. He becomes a personal friend of a Jain seer, ‘Srimad’ Rajchandra Mehta. The caste elders at Rajkot, but not those in Bombay, end his excommunication after he performs some rituals of repentance. (This makes it difficult for him to get gainful employment in Bombay.)
- 1892: In Bombay, he fails as a courtroom lawyer. He applies unsuccessfully to work as a part-time school-teacher. Kasturba’s and his second surviving child, Manilal, is born. They move to Rajkot and Gandhi finds work drafting legal documents. In calling upon the local British political agent, Gandhi offends him and is forcibly ejected – thus dashing his hopes of a bureaucratic career.
- 1893: He receives and immediately accepts an offer of employment assisting an Indian-owned business firm in South Africa in some legal litigation with another Indian-owned firm there.

Mostly in Africa, but with visits to London and to India:

- 1893: In Africa he is soon subjected to the color bar in various ways (such as being thrown off a train because he refuses to leave the first-class seat for which he has a ticket). He resolves to stay there and fight against this kind of oppression.
- 1893-94: He studies the Bible, the Koran, Tolstoy’s *The Kingdom of God is Within You* and some 80 other books on religion and mysticism, and he attends Bible classes, but decides not to convert to Christianity.

- 1894: He founds an Indian cultural-political association. He becomes the first Indian allowed to argue legal cases before the local high court. And, he persuades the litigants in his big case to submit their case to an arbitrator, who decides in favor of his client – thereby initiating his prosperous career as a lawyer in South Africa. He then founds the Natal Indian Congress, to struggle for civil rights.
- 1895: He is impressed by the way of life of some vegetarian Christian monks and nuns. He writes and publishes a political booklet, *The Indian Franchise: An Appeal to Every Briton in South Africa*.
- 1896: He sails to India to agitate there in behalf of his South African cause, and he sets sail – this time together with his wife and sons – back to Africa.
- 1897: Upon his return to Africa, he is lynched and nearly killed at shore by non-Indians influenced by a misleading newspaper account of a pamphlet he had written in India. He declines to prosecute the attackers (but he sends to the appropriate Cabinet secretary in London an account of the incident). His third son, Ramdas, is born.
- 1897 or '98 (the exact date is not known): He quarrels with Kasturba on account of her opposition to their cleaning personally the chamber-pot of an Untouchable-born guest in their home.
- 1899-1901: During the Boer War, he organizes and leads an ambulance corps (on the British side) of more than a thousand Indian volunteers, and he is awarded a British war medal for this service.
- 1900: His fourth (and last) son, Devadas, born. (Kasturba's labor begins very suddenly and then becomes unusually difficult; Gandhi himself performs the services of a midwife; this experience deepens his regard for her.)
- 1901: He returns to India to practice law there and to win support for the political cause of Indians in South Africa (for instance by proposing – successfully – a resolution at a meeting of the Indian National Congress).
- 1902: He meets Gopal Krishna Gokhale, who immediately becomes his political mentor. He receives a telegram from Indians in South Africa urging him to return there, and so he moves back to Africa.
- 1903: He founds a political weekly, *Indian Opinion* (with various articles in various different languages – four in all). He begins to learn the Gita by heart (in Sanskrit).
- 1904: He reads John Ruskin's *Unto This Last* and, deeply impressed, founds Phoenix Settlement – 100 acres in a rural area – with facilities to produce *Indian Opinion* and with residential housing etc. for the staff and their families.
- 1905: He delivers a set of lectures on Hindu religion, and is obliged to deny that anything in them was critical of Islam.
- 1906: He organizes and leads an Indian Ambulance Stretcher-Bearing Corps (assisting the British) during a Zulu rebellion. He vows chastity (with Kasturba's consent; they are now 36 years old) and introduces a rule of chastity at Phoenix Settlement. He organizes in Johannesburg a protest meeting where everyone vows, to God, to fight (to death if need be) by means of "passive resistance" against a proposed South African law unjust to Indians. (This Gandhian undertaking will prove to be very complex, with many phases, broken promises, beatings, jail terms etc., but with a negotiated compromise settlement in 1914.)
- 1907: Dissatisfied with the phrase "passive resistance", he conducts a public contest for a better term. The result of this is the coining of the term "satyagraha". He then organizes the first satyagraha campaign.
- 1908: He is jailed but then is released upon negotiating a verbal compromise with General Smuts. He is attacked and wounded (for having agreed to this compromise) by an Indian extremist. Smuts then does not keep his part of the agreement, so Gandhi organizes another satyagraha campaign, and is jailed for two months (this time with hard labor). He meanwhile decides to engage no longer in gainful employment as a lawyer.
- 1909: He is jailed for three months (alone in a narrow cell). He then visits England for political negotiations, which are unsuccessful. During that sojourn he reads Edward Carpenter's *Civilization, Its Cause and Cure*, and as a cordial but vigorous political debate with Savarkar (who will, in 1948, host in Pune a meeting with a little group of men who are about to depart for New Delhi in order to assassinate Gandhi). On shipboard returning to South Africa, he writes *Hind Swaraj*, condemning modern Western civilization. (The first biography of Gandhi is published. More than thirty subsequent editions will be published in the next dozen years.)
- 1909-10: He corresponds with the great Russian novelist and pacifist ideologue, Leo Tolstoy.
- 1910: He establishes (near Johannesburg) "Tolstoy Farm", a self-supporting commune for the families of jailed satyagrahis.
- 1913: He closes Tolstoy Farm. He meanwhile fasts (taking only one meal daily) for four months against someone's lapse from the rule of chastity at Phoenix Settlement. He conducts another political satyagraha, and is jailed but then released for negotiations.
- 1914: He fasts for two weeks against another lapse from chastity at Phoenix Settlement. He negotiates a written compromise with Smuts and leaves South Africa for England and thence India. (The First World War begins.)

Mostly in India, but with visits to England:

- 1915: He establishes Satyagraha Ashram in Gujarat. He admits a family of Untouchables to the Ashram. He travels throughout India (Gokhale has suggested this to him) and finds extreme poverty.
- 1916: He declines to participate in Home Rule League, because he hopes that India's loyalty to Britain during the Great War will induce Britain to grant home rule to India.
- 1917: He helps bring an end to the recruiting of Indians to become indentured laborers in South Africa. Now at the age of 47, he campaigns successfully for a modicum of economic justice for peasants on indigo plantations in a remote district of north India. (Arrested and put on trial, he explains in court his role, and refuses to post bail for the privilege of not being jailed; this impresses a sharp lawyer in Ahmedabad, Vallabhbhai Patel, who will soon become one of his assistants; government withdraws its case against him for the sake of legal propriety and moral decency. Indians (including Rabindranath Tagore) generally take to addressing him as "Mahatma".
- 1918: He advises striking cotton-mill workers at Ahmedabad (the leading industrial city of Gujarat), and arbitrates a voluntary compromise settlement. He campaigns for peasants in a poor district of Gujarat. He urges Indians to fight for England and hence against Germany in the First World War. He becomes very painfully ill and is cured by MDs (by administering an antibiotic plus a chemical pain-killer while telling him that it is just a fresh-water enema; he is never informed of this deception). During his convalescence (1) he learns spinning, (2) the MDs persuade him that he cannot survive on a diet of oranges only (this is a big step forward in his understanding of nutrition), and (3) Kasturba persuades him that his vow not to drink milk was only about cow's milk and so it is permissible for him to drink goat's milk. He deeply influences Motilal Nehru (Jawaharlal's father).
- 1919: (Britain grants very little to India in the way of home rule, instead curtailing civil rights even more than during the war.) He organizes a brief national satyagraha, and then fasts against the ensuing violent anti-British protests; he says, apropos, that he had made a "Himalayan miscalculation". He becomes the editor of *Young India* and of a similar Hindi weekly, *आज*. (Soldiers under British-command carry out a massacre at Amritsar, and some other brutalities are perpetrated by the Raj.)
- 1920: He is elected president of the All-India Home Rule League. He plans and initiates a massive Hindu-Moslem satyagraha, the "Non-Cooperation Movement", calling for Indian independence (which he predicts will be won within a year; Jawaharlal Nehru participates in this campaign, but Jinnah warns against the danger of mob violence) and for restoration in Istanbul of the caliphate. (Gandhi is ignorant of conditions in Turkey.) He founds a university at Ahmedabad, Gujarat Vidyapith.
- 1921: He launches campaign for everyone in India to make homespun cotton daily, and presides at a bonfire of British-made clothing. He resolves to wear henceforth only a loincloth (plus a cape if the weather is cold), and has his head shaven. (There is mass civil disobedience, and thousands are jailed.) He fasts against anti-British violence in Bombay. He is invested by Congress with "sole executive authority".
- 1922: He suspends the satyagraha campaign altogether as he cannot maintain non-violence among some of his millions of ostensible followers. He is arrested for writing seditious articles in *Young India*; in court he eloquently pleads guilty and is sentenced to six years in jail. (Writers in Europe and in India (Romain Rolland, Sarojini Naidu) soon begin to describe his moral stature as comparable with that of Jesus. He is now 52 years old.)
- 1924: He is hospitalized and hence released from jail. He fasts for three weeks against religious violence. He is chosen president of the Indian National Congress (for a normal one-year term; but he will thereafter remain pivotal in its deliberations, and indeed even after his resignation altogether from the Congress in 1934).
- 1925: He undertakes a year of political silence (yet still urging that everyone spin cotton daily). He starts writing his autobiography. He fasts against a lapse from chastity at the ashram. He formulates a list of seven "deadly" (in his opinion) sins: "wealth without work [i.e. without having done physical work yourself to deserve the wealth], pleasure without conscience, science without humanity, knowledge without character, politics without [good] principle[s], commerce without morality, and worship without sacrifice."
- 1928: He moves an Indian-National-Congress resolution calling for a satyagraha campaign if independence isn't granted within a year. He warns against Humankind causing ecological crises: "God forbid that India should ever take to industrialization after the manner of the West. The economic imperialism of a single tiny island kingdom [Britain] is today keeping the world in chains. If an entire nation of 300 million [the population of India back then] took to similar economic exploitation, it would strip the world bare like locusts." He fasts against another moral lapse at the ashram.
- 1929: On December 31st he moves a Congress resolution declaring complete independence as national goal.
- 1930: In March, he begins his brilliant anti-salt-tax march. In April he illegally picks up some salt at seashore. In May he is jailed without trial. (Some 90,000 other satyagrahis are jailed in this year. British methods of torture are described in the 12 June issue of *Young India*.)

- 1931: He is released from jail, reaches a hopeful agreement with the viceroy, and participates in an unsuccessful "Round Table Conference" in London (where he claims that he (and thus, implicitly, not Ambedkar) represents the Untouchables). He visits Mussolini in Rome, and tells him, "You are building a house of cards."
- 1932: (Because of Gandhi's consciousness-raising in India, only a fourth of British exports of cotton clothing are now to India, instead of half as before the war.) In January he is jailed until 1933. In July he disbands Satyagraha Ashram. In September he fasts to obtain the "Poona Pact" whereby (1) a British proposal (supported by Ambedkar) to establish separate electorates for Untouchables" is revised and (2) conservative religious leaders say that Untouchability will no longer be practiced. (But this declaration has slight effect in reality.)
- 1933: He founds a new periodical, *Harijan*, to succeed *Young India*, and begins (in November) an 8-month "Harijan-uplift" tour.
- 1934: In August he fasts for a week to atone for having aroused hatred toward religious conservatives. In October he resigns from Congress. (The resignation is precipitated when a drafting committee replaces his terms "truthful" and "nonviolent" with "legitimate" and "peaceful".) He meanwhile launches, together with J.C. Kumarappa, the All-India Village Industries Association.
- 1935: (In the wake of the "Poona Pact" and with a new administration in London, the British accept a degree of Indian self-rule with provincial elections to be held in 1937.) He rejects a personal appeal from Margaret Sanger (founder of the NGO, 'Planned Parenthood') to sanction the use of contraceptives for birth control.
- 1936: He makes his home (later named "Sevagram Ashram") in a poor village (Segaon) near Wardha, a town where the Madras-Delhi and Bombay-Calcutta rail lines cross in central India.
- 1937: After Indian National Congress candidates win most of the provincial elections, he rejects a suggestion from Jinnah that the two of them meet in order to plan future cooperation with each other. (This was a mistake!)
- 1938: He is furious when Kasturba attends a temple closed to Harijans.
- 1939: (Britain declares India to be at war with Germany. The provincial government ministers from the Congress resign *en masse*.)
- 1941: In May and again in June, he fasts against religious strife. In November he devises a campaign of "individual satyagraha" by selected representatives walking unaccompanied to villages and saying: "It is wrong to help the British war effort with men and money. The only worthy effort is to oppose war with non-violent resistance."
- 1942: (Japan conquers Burma. Britain proposes that India – after the war if Britain wins – may devise a constitution, provided that every province and princely state can have "full status" of independence from India. Gandhi disdains the proposal.) At his urging, the Indian National Congress adopts a "Quit India" resolution; he and the other leaders are immediately detained and prohibited from communicating with their followers.
- 1943: He fasts (while in detention) to protest British allegations that Congress is responsible for the current widespread anti-British violence in India.
- 1944: (In February, Kasturba dies in detention.) In May he becomes so sick that the British, afraid that he may die while under their care and that this would cause a lot of trouble, release him from detention. (In June, the Allied armed forces invade France from England; Paris is liberated in August. The viceroy in New Delhi meanwhile receives from Churchill "a peevish telegram to ask why Gandhi had not died yet".)
- 1945: (Germany and Japan surrender. Churchill is voted out of office. The UK, now with a Labour Party prime minister, seeks "an early realization of self-government in India". Jinnah proposes that Pakistan as an independent nation should include a fourth of the territory then comprising India.)
- 1946: He urges "every Brahmin girl" to marry a Harijan, and vows to attend only weddings between a Harijan and non-Harijan. (In the latter half of the year, a storm of religious violence, launched by Jinnah, makes inevitable the establishment of Pakistan.) Gandhi fasts to atone for having caused a misunderstanding in negotiations with the Moslem League. He imagines that the reason why his appeals to Jinnah haven't succeeded is that he himself is not completely pure at heart, so he undertakes (successfully) some private chastity experiments ("If I can master this, I can still win Jinnah") with some female disciples of his: sleeping next to them. (They as well wanted, for reasons of their own, to engage in this kind of exercise in chastity.)
- 1947: On Independence Day (15th August) he fasts to lament the separation of Pakistan. In September he fasts, successfully, against religious violence in Calcutta. (The viceroy says: "In the Punjab we have 55 thousand soldiers and large-scale rioting on our hands. In Bengal our forces consist of one man, and there is no rioting.")
- 1948: In New Delhi he fasts (in the name of Truth but not in the name of God since so many people in India are still killing each other in the name of God) to obtain pledges from Hindu leaders to stop the violence against Muslims. On January 30th he is assassinated by a member of a Hindu group opposed to his "pro-Islamic" activities.