



Gandhi Before India

By Ramachandra Guha

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Here is the first volume of a magisterial biography of Mohandas Gandhi that gives us the most illuminating portrait we have had of the life, the work and the historical context of one of the most abidingly influential—and controversial—men in modern history.

Ramachandra Guha—hailed by *Time* as “Indian democracy’s preeminent chronicler”—takes us from Gandhi’s birth in 1869 through his upbringing in Gujarat, his two years as a student in London and his two decades as a lawyer and community organizer in South Africa. Guha has uncovered myriad previously untapped documents, including private papers of Gandhi’s contemporaries and co-workers; contemporary newspapers and court documents; the writings of Gandhi’s children; and secret files kept by British Empire functionaries. Using this wealth of material in an exuberant, brilliantly nuanced and detailed narrative, Guha describes the social, political and personal worlds inside of which Gandhi began the journey that would earn him the honorific Mahatma: “Great Soul.” And, more clearly than ever before, he elucidates how Gandhi’s work in South Africa—far from being a mere prelude to his accomplishments in India—was profoundly influential in his evolution as a family man, political thinker, social reformer and, ultimately, beloved leader.

In 1893, when Gandhi set sail for South Africa, he was a twenty-three-year-old lawyer who had failed to establish himself in India. In this remarkable biography, the author makes clear the fundamental ways in which Gandhi’s ideas were shaped before his return to India in 1915. It was during his years in England and South Africa, Guha shows us, that Gandhi came to understand the nature of imperialism and racism; and in South Africa that he forged the philosophy and techniques that would undermine and eventually overthrow the British Raj.

Gandhi Before India gives us equally vivid portraits of the man and the world he lived in: a world of sharp contrasts among the coastal culture of his birthplace, High Victorian London, and colonial South Africa. It explores in abundant detail Gandhi’s experiments with dissident cults such as the Tolstoyans; his friendships with radical Jews, heterodox Christians and devout Muslims; his enmities and rivalries; and his often overlooked failures as a husband and father. It tells the dramatic, profoundly moving story of how Gandhi inspired the devotion of thousands of followers in South Africa as he mobilized a cross-class and inter-religious coalition, pledged to non-violence in their battle against a brutally racist regime.

Researched with unequaled depth and breadth, and written with extraordinary grace and clarity, *Gandhi Before India* is, on every level, fully commensurate with its subject. It will radically alter our understanding and appreciation of twentieth-century India's greatest man.

From the Hardcover edition.

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Editorial Review

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Starred Review For many Westerners, the mention of Gandhi evokes stock images of the frail, scantily dressed Indian spouting tomes about peace and brotherhood while leading a noble, nonviolent struggle for Indian independence. Relatively few realize that Gandhi spent decades living outside of the subcontinent, in Britain and especially in South Africa. Guha, who has taught courses on Gandhi at Stanford and Yale, covers his life from his birth in British India, in 1869, up to his departure from South Africa and return to India in 1915. There is much that is familiar here, including Gandhi's asceticism, his passion for justice, and his gift for savvy political maneuvering. But Guha's account is full of surprises. In Britain, as a young barrister, Gandhi moved freely with a liberal and racially diverse crowd and proudly viewed himself as a "citizen of the Empire" while dressing stylishly. In South Africa, the rigid racial divisions shocked him, and it was here that he developed the tactics that he employed so effectively later in India. This is an outstanding opening volume of a planned two-volume biography of one of the most widely revered but often misunderstood figures in world history. --Jay Freeman

Review

"Remarkable. . . . [A] moving portrait." —*The New York Times Book Review*

"Guha is a brilliant historian who combines the gift of a storyteller, the discipline of an academic and the critical ability of seeing Gandhi as a fascinating human being, by not placing him on a pedestal. . . . [He] has re-created the past by connecting scattered dots . . . to weave a rich tapestry." —*San Francisco Chronicle*

"Striking. . . . Guha ably shows, for all that Gandhi influenced events in South Africa, it was he who experienced the greater change." —*The Economist*

"Deeply contextualized, dexterously researched, and judiciously written, this deserves to become the landmark biography of the early Gandhi." —Maya Jasanoff, *New Republic*

"Fascinating. . . . A biography with a remarkable ear for the resonances of Gandhi's work and time—for the fan-mail and hate-mail; for overheard disagreements with family and colleagues; for his exchanges with political acquaintances, including his enemies. . . . As exhaustively researched a biography of the African Gandhi as we will have for some time." —*The Independent* (London)

"[A] magisterial study. . . . Guha summarizes the traits of Gandhi's character and the stages during the first half of his life that prepared him for the much more difficult journey he would undertake once he returned to India. . . . I was rewarded beyond all of my expectations [by *Gandhi Before India*]." —Charles R. Larson, *Counterpunch*

"Substantial enough to be comprehensive, yet concise enough to be approachable by the general reader. . . . Sharp, insightful, balanced and impeccably researched." —Alex von Tunzelmann, *The Times* (London)

"A work of vivid social history as well as biography. . . . One of the surprises in *Gandhi Before India* is just how much fresh material it contains. Guha has a gift for tracking down obscure letters and newspaper reports and patching them together to make history come alive." —Patrick French, *The Guardian* (London)

"Fascinating. . . . [*Gandhi Before India*] reveals how an impossibly shy young man, who donned top hat and

tails as a student at Inner Temple, transformed himself into Churchill's 'half-naked fakir,' dedicated to his spinning wheel while simultaneously challenging the might of the Empire." —*The Sunday Times* (London)

"The portrait offered in historian Ramachandra Guha's biography is of Gandhi as a human being, not just a hero." —*Financial Times*

"*Gandhi Before India* should be required reading for the student of contemporary affairs. . . . Guha's carefully rendered observations about class, religion, and ethnicity—how they divide people and how they can be bridged by common concerns and simple decency—are the heart of this book. . . . Remarkable." —*The Christian Science Monitor*

"A magisterial history. . . . In Ramachandra Guha, a great man has found a great biographer, a wise, persistent and elegant historian who has done justice to perhaps his nation's greatest story. . . . One senses, in the author's approach, something of Gandhi's own intensity and rigour. . . . [The] book never ceases to inform and intrigue." —*Sydney Morning Herald*

"What sets [*Gandhi Before India*] apart from other recent biographies . . . is Guha's resolutely non-scurrilous perspective. . . . What emerges in the end, with the slow magic of a film being developed in an old fashioned dark room, is a sharp picture of the intellectual growth of a remarkable man." —*The Hindustan Times* (India)

"Many will come to this biography wanting to know more about Gandhi himself. . . . Guha relates all this wonderfully. His book is clearly a labour of love, though not of uncritical infatuation. What distinguishes it is the breadth of the context—Indian, British and South African. Guha marshals his material sensitively and empathetically in order to give shape, colour and depth to the life of this saint-like figure." —Bernard Porter, *The Literary Review*

"Excellent and exhaustive. . . . Guha has done heroic work in reconstructing this period of Gandhi's life . . . Gandhi emerges here as a fascinatingly complicated and contradictory figure . . . rich and absorbing, it will doubtless serve as the fundamental portrait of Gandhi for many years to come." —*The Sunday Business Post* (Ireland)

"Guha is India's best-known historian, who marshals his wide scholarship in contemporary and modern history with a raconteur's lucid felicity." —*DNA Mumbai*

About the Author

Ramachandra Guha has taught at Yale and Stanford universities, the University of Oslo, the Indian Institute of Science, and the London School of Economics. His books include a pioneering environmental history, an award-winning social history of cricket, and the award-winning *India After Gandhi*. He writes regularly on social and political issues for the British and Indian press, including columns in *The Telegraph* and the *Hindustan Times*, and his work has also appeared in *The New York Times*. He lives in Bangalore.

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