

Between Two Worlds: Gandhi's First Impressions of British Culture

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THE Gandhi the world knows was the Mahatma, the 'great soul' who led India's drive for independence from British domination, the prophet of non-violent revolution, and the practitioner of civil disobedience. The Gandhi the world does not know was the spindling lad from Kathiawad, so determined to see England that he defied his sub-caste's chief and cheerfully accepted outcasteing as the price of making the polluting voyage to an impure land. The Gandhi the world has forgotten was the shy young lawyer who sang 'God save our gracious Queen' as fervently as any other subject of Her Majesty Queen Victoria—even after suffering the bitterest insults and beatings in South Africa because of his brown skin and his loyalty to his Indian heritage. Mahatmas are made, not born, and the making of this Mahatma was a long and often painful process. We can add to our understanding of that process by piecing together hundreds of bits of information about the first eighteen years of Gandhi's life—information from his own writings and from the Indian environment which shaped his evolution from infancy to young manhood.

The family into which the future Mahatma was born in 1869 ranked at that time as one of the most respected in the comfortable city-state of Porbandar. The times, at last, were peaceful. From obscure beginnings, through hard work, thrift, and proud adherence to principle, this Bania line had moved upward in status from trade to office work to the responsibilities of *dewans* or prime ministers to the Rajput rulers of peninsular Gujarat. Even before Mohandas Gandhi came into this world, however, the winds of change had begun to blow—winds from the Western world, with their storm centre in the British Isles. Young Mohandas was soon to feel the challenge of these winds, first as they decisively affected his father's career, and then as they swept into his own life and mind.

Twelve years before Mohandas K. Gandhi was born, the tranquil

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life of mid-nineteenth century India was suddenly shattered by a series of explosions from one end of the vast Ganges plain to the other. In the hottest month of 1857, Indian *sepoys* troops mutinying against their British officers, captured Delhi, Lucknow and Cawnpore in the heart of Northern India. Dispossessed landowners and disaffected aristocrats joined in local uprisings, their support enabling the mutineers to hold out for many weeks. By the time the last embers of the conflagration had been stamped out the British community in India gave thanks to God, but knew in their hearts that they would never again feel secure as masters of an alien population outnumbering them almost four thousand to one.

The shock of the 'Mutiny' and Rebellion in Northern India galvanized the British Parliament and the Government of India into swift action, aimed at preventing another such uprising. The East India Company was stripped of all power, Parliament took direct responsibility for governing India, and experts were sent out from London to tighten up the chain of command. 'Efficiency' became the watchword in all departments: military, financial, judicial and administrative. Not at once, but gradually, the new spirit worked its way downwards from the Viceroy to the lowest echelons of government and outward from the major coastal cities to the remotest villages of the hinterland. Within a few years of the events which convulsed the North Indian plains in 1857, even the far away and sleepy town of Porbandar by the waters of the Arabian Sea felt the shock waves.

The Gandhi family, like most families in Kathiawad, was at first shielded from the galvanic electricity of the 'efficiency' doctrine by the fact that they lived in that two-fifths of India where native princes still sat on their thrones. Had it not been for the era of reforms inaugurated in the 1860s, Karamchand Gandhi and his family would probably have remained peacefully in Porbandar for the rest of his days. But not even Porbandar could escape the tightening net of administrative efficiency and technological improvement. Karamchand's very success as a *dewan* of unquestioned probity evidently brought him to the favourable attention of the political agent for the Kathiawad states, Colonel Keatinge, who asked that Karamchand Gandhi be given leave to come to Agency headquarters at Rajkot to serve on a special court of appeals.

Karamchand may have had mixed feelings about exchanging the security, isolation, and peace of Porbandar for the anxieties of working under high-strung British officials. But he may have been aware that the position he was called to fill was one of great responsibility and influence. When he finally moved his household from Porbandar to

Rajkot in 1876 he and his family joined millions of others held firmly in orbit around the greatest imperial power on earth, the far-flung British Empire, represented in Kathiawad by the Government of India's Political Agent.¹

Karamchand must have known that the change from Porbandar to Rajkot would bring him more firmly under the Political Agent's control. But he may have felt it impossible to refuse the appointment. He had, after all, been nominated by his prince, Rana Vikmatji. And his brother Tulsidas would automatically take his place as *dewan* of Porbandar, so the family as a whole would gain. Perhaps Karamchand had in mind also the much better schools his sons could attend at Rajkot. For the old world of the princes, of hereditary offices, of unquestioned social status, was fast being replaced by a competitive, bewildering new world of British officials, of schools and law courts and railways and factories, all run on British lines. The father knew that his four sons would have to come to terms with this new world, and may have decided to move his family from Porbandar to Rajkot for precisely this reason. For Rajkot was clearly going to be the gateway through which the old Kathiawad would have to pass to enter the new world of British-governed India.

Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi was the sixth child of Karamchand Gandhi, actually the fourth child of his father's fourth wife. The youngest in the family, Mohandas was also the brightest, most active, and his mother's pet. He did well in school, obeyed his parents (except for some secret rebellions of which he soon repented), idolized his father and nursed him in his final years of illness. When someone asked Karamchand on his death-bed who would carry on the Gandhi tradition of service as *dewans* to the Rajput princes, he is said to have predicted that Mohan would 'bring honour to the family name'.²

But to live up to these high expectations meant coming to terms with the dominant political power on the Indian subcontinent, the British *raj*, and with the entire panoply of scientific, economic and cultural advances that in that day was unblushingly called 'civilization'. Young Mohandas saw British representatives of this civilization only at a distance, except for the occasional appearances of an inspector of

¹ For details of Karamchand Gandhi's career and Gandhi's childhood, see Chandran D. S. Devanesen's forthcoming book, *The Making of the Mahatma: An Interpretive Study of M. K. Gandhi's First Forty Years*, Calcutta, etc.: Orient Longmans, 1969. I am grateful to Dr Devanesen for permitting me to consult his book in manuscript.

² Prabhudas Gandhi, *My Childhood with Gandhiji*, Navajivan Publishing House, Ahmedabad, 1957, p. 24.

schools in his classroom. His second eldest brother brought him into a circle of friends who knew English ways somewhat better: they were chiefly impressed by the physical strength of the ruling race and decided to acquire that strength for themselves by breaking the Hindu and Jain taboo and eating meat. (Two of the group, a Muslim and a Zoroastrian, were not bound by this taboo and presumably egged the Gandhi brothers on.)

To prove that meat-eating was the secret of British success the boys recited the lines of the Gujarati poet Narmad:

Behold the mighty Englishman
He rules the Indian small
Because being a meat-eater
He is full ten feet tall.

Mohandas stopped imitating the English when he could no longer endure the deception entailed in concealing these ritual feasts from his strictly vegetarian parents, but he did not become a vegetarian by conviction himself until in London he read a pamphlet on the subject written by an Englishman.

Contrasting with this positive image of British culture was the sharply negative image imprinted on his mind by his first contacts with a Christian missionary. Protestant missionaries settled in Rajkot in 1883, when Mohandas was thirteen or fourteen. Despite the tolerance for all faiths inculcated in him by his father and mother, Gandhi recalled later, 'Only Christianity was at the time an exception. I developed a sort of dislike for it.'³

The two immediate reasons for Gandhi's aversion to Christianity were the intolerance toward Hindu beliefs displayed by the missionaries, and various rumours he had heard about conversions in Rajkot. On one occasion he says he stood at a corner near the Kattyawar High School—which he entered at the age of twelve—listening to a missionary. He concluded that the missionary must be attacking the Hindu religion and its gods. Chandran Devanesen has written of the missionaries' practice of preaching in a bazaar or under a village banyan tree as 'a familiar sight in India in the nineteenth century. Their faith in the efficacy of the spoken word had its roots in the Reformation and the Methodist revival of the eighteenth century. But a Wesley or a Whitfield preaching in the open fields to grimy-faced miners was a very different thing from preaching in India. The East India Company

³ M. K. Gandhi, *An Autobiography, or The Story of My Experiments with Truth*, tr. Mahadev Desai, 2nd ed., Navajivan Publishing House: Ahmedabad, 1940, p. 49.

banned it on more than one occasion and usually with good reason. Even one Mutiny for religious reasons was too many.⁴

The missionary whom Gandhi heard was the Reverend H. R. Scott, the sole representative of the Irish Presbyterians in Rajkot from 1883 to 1887. Scott's official report for 1888, the year young Gandhi left Rajkot for London, shows that the sympathy and converts he was gaining from his bazaar preachings in fluent Gujarati was stirring up a mounting opposition to the Irish Presbyterians and their work:

Regularly every Friday morning, I have taken my stand under a spreading banyan tree in the bazaar, and seldom have I failed in securing a large and attentive audience. . . . The organized opposition . . . has been kept up, and in some instances, has been very trying, but on the whole I have the best reason for believing that it has done good. Except when a group of turbulent schoolboys obey his call to create a disturbance, my opponent [a Brahmin doctor] fails now in his attempts, and he has had the mortification to stand opposite me shouting for a long time without being able to diminish my large audiences.⁵

Young Gandhi may not have been present at these gatherings in the bazaar, or have assisted in the 'disturbances', during school hours, but the same kind of preaching was done at a street corner near his high school. When he heard a missionary 'pouring abuse on Hindus and their gods', he writes, 'I could not endure this'.⁶

Most damaging to the missionaries were the rumours circulated privately to discredit them. Troubled by this, the Reverend Scott reported to his Belfast headquarters in 1888:

The Brahmans and Vaniyas are everywhere looked up to as the intellectual classes, and it is among them that we find frequently *bitter opposition to our work*. They do not scruple to circulate all sorts of false stories about us and our object, and they succeed I fear too often in persuading the more simple villagers that we are up to no good—that we are paid by Government for the express purpose of destroying their religion and caste. By some we are regarded as a kind of sorcerer whom to hear is dangerous.⁷

Scott was optimistic all the same. The four elementary schools run by the Irish Presbyterian Mission had a rising enrolment (192 in 1887, 222 in 1888, mostly boys and all but four scholars being non-Christians), and he was 'especially pleased with the thoroughness with which the

⁴ Devanesen, *op. cit.*, Chap. 2.

⁵ *Report of the Irish Presbyterian Mission in Gujarat and Kattiawar for 1888*. Printed at the Irish Presbyterian Mission Press: Surat, 1889, p. 13.

⁶ Gandhi, *Autobiography*, p. 49.

⁷ *Missionary Herald of the Presbyterian Church in Ireland*: Belfast, 1 May 1888, p. 128.

Scripture lessons are learnt, and the hearty way in which the boys join in the Christian hymns and prayers'.⁸ He viewed the opposition as a sign that his work was bearing fruit: 'It is when the people realize that their old faiths are in danger that they wax hot in opposing our work.'⁹ The heat which the Rev. Scott's preaching stirred up in the mind of the eighteen year old Mohandas Gandhi was to have much to do with his subsequent attitude toward the British missionaries and their civilization.

If he was repelled by the Presbyterian missionary's street-corner attacks on Hinduism, why did young Mohan develop by his eighteenth year a passionate desire to visit the Christian land from which the missionaries and the rest of the British community in Kathiawad had come? One answer is that of the pressures of political and economic necessity: tightening British control over the Kathiawad chiefs and princes was forcing the Gandhi family out of its hereditary occupational groove. This economic consideration weighed most heavily with Gandhi's eldest brother Lakshmidas, neither a bright student nor a promising successor to his father's *dewanship*. Two years after Karamchand's death, Mohandas, then eighteen, was the only son still in school, and clearly the family's best hope to recover their fallen fortunes. The eldest brother took him to a friend and adviser to his father, Mavji Dave, perhaps knowing in advance the advice he would give. It was to prove decisive in the making of the Mahatma.

'The times are changed', the wise old Brahmin began. 'And none of you can expect to succeed to your father's *gādī* [literally raised seat or throne] without having had a proper education. Now as this boy is still pursuing his studies, you should all look to him to keep the *gādī*.' The best way to get ahead would be to go straight to London to study law. 'Think of the barrister who has just come back from England. How stylishly he lives! He could get the Diwanship for the asking',¹⁰ added the Brahmin, whose son was a wealthy Rajkot barrister and an admirer of Western ways.

Young Mohan went for the idea like a dog for a bone, and held onto it just as tenaciously. Up to then he had considered himself a coward—afraid of ghosts and spirits and of bullying boys at school. 'But at that moment my cowardice vanished before the desire to go to England, which completely possessed me',¹¹ he records. Money does not appear to have figured at all in Gandhi's thinking at this point—except in so

⁸ *Report of the Irish Presbyterian Mission in Gujarat and Kattiawar for 1888*, p. 14.

⁹ *Missionary Herald*, July–August, 1888, p. 183.

¹⁰ Gandhi, *Autobiography*, pp. 52–3.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 54.

far as it would be necessary to get him to England. What moved him, he later wrote an English friend was, 'in a word, ambition'. Ambition to acquire two things: 'status in society', and first-hand acquaintance with 'civilisation'. The Brahmin adviser had 'as it were, fanned the fire that was [already] burning within me. I thought to myself, "If I go to England not only shall I become a barrister (of whom I used to think a great deal), but I shall be able to see England, the land of philosophers and poets, the very centre of civilisation".'¹²

It is not easy to understand why young Mohandas Gandhi so admired the civilization of the British, at the very time when their missionaries were insulting his family's religion and their officials were barring his path to the hereditary office and status occupied by his father and grandfather. Clearly these unfavourable impressions were offset in his mind by much stronger impressions favourable to England and its civilization. The origins of these positive images can be traced to one primary source—the English-style education being imparted at the schools of Rajkot in the 1880s.

Young Gandhi's positive attitude to English-style education seems to a great extent the product of his own father's wishes. Karamchand Gandhi had been working in Rajkot for three years by the time he decided to move his entire family there from Porbandar in late 1876. Young Mohan was then seven, just old enough to enter the first grade in the Rajkot school system. Karamchand was well aware that Rajkot offered educational opportunities far superior to those available in Porbandar. Nowhere else in Kathiawad was English-style education available at the secondary school level. Mohan's steady progress upward to his graduation from the Kattyawar High School and his entrance into the Bombay University system would have been impossible had his father been opposed to the new style education being introduced by the British.

Gandhi gives us a clue to his father's attitude in his own autobiography, where he recounts the crucial interview with the family's adviser, the wise Brahmin Mavji Dave. Gandhi's first reaction to the proposal that he study law in England was: 'Could I not be sent to qualify for the medical profession?' His elder brother interrupted to remind him that before their father died he had discussed the question of Mohan's future career, and had overruled his youngest son's preference for medicine. 'Father never liked it. He had you in mind when he said that we Vaishnavas should have nothing to do with dissection

¹² M. K. Gandhi, *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Government of India: Delhi, 1958, I, 54.

of dead bodies.' (Only outcastes should cut up carcasses according to Brahminical and Jain thinking.) The brother then drove home the point: 'Father intended you for the bar.'¹³ Practising law in British-ruled India was impossible without a knowledge of English, for the codes of law, although translated into the main languages of India, were all in English. Gandhi's father, who apparently knew no English, was evidently determined that his sons should learn it, most especially his youngest and brightest son, for without it they would be helpless in the courts of law and excluded from the higher posts in government administration. The thriving law practice of his Brahmin friend's son, Kevalram, may have reinforced Karamchand's desire to see his son become a successful barrister also.

English was not taught in the four lowest grades in the British Indian school system. Here the medium of instruction was the pupil's mother tongue, in Gandhi's case, Gujarati. Mohan's attendance at Rajkot in the first two grades (or 'standards' in the British terminology) may have been irregular, for he failed the examination required at the end of the second one. Despite his failure, he was allowed to enter the third standard, then the fourth. His record in the final examinations at the end of each year shows that he was near the top of his class of about fifteen students in grammar and near the bottom in history and geography. In his other two subjects, arithmetic and writing and spelling from dictation, he stood well below the average level. He must have studied hard for his entrance examination to the secondary school, however, for there his best performance was in arithmetic, in which he previously had been weak.¹⁴

Gandhi began the formal study of English at the age of eleven when he entered the lower division of the Kattyawar High School. His record for the four years in this division was erratic, due mainly to his marriage at thirteen, and to his father's illness, which required him to stay in Porbandar for several months after the wedding was held there. Mohandas eventually caught up with his class, but his brother Karsandas, in the same class even though three years his senior, did so poorly he had to drop out. So also did Karsandas' Muslim friend and classmate, Sheikh Mehtab, who led the three in experimenting secretly with goat's meat in a secluded spot by the river. Although he gave up meat-eating Mohan remained under Sheikh Mehtab's influence for a

¹³ Gandhi, *Autobiography*, p. 53.

¹⁴ These and other details of Gandhi's entire school career are taken from J. M. Upadhyaya, ed. and comp., *Mahatma Gandhi as a Student*, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Government of India: Delhi, 1965.

number of years, much to the distress of other members of his family, and particularly of his young bride, Kasturba.

At fifteen, Mohan was thrust into the mainstream of English-style education. Throughout his final three years of high school, all his subjects were to be taught in English. At first he couldn't follow the classroom lectures. Persistence—a quality he was to demonstrate throughout his life—and his native intelligence got him through. Geometry also baffled him until he discovered that it 'only required a pure and simple use of one's reasoning powers'. His anxieties were increased by the burden and worry of attending on his father, now bed-ridden and dying. He also was harassed by a guilty conscience. His meat-eating second brother had somehow fallen into debt and asked Mohan to chip away part of the gold on his armlet so he could clear the debt. Having done this, Mohan felt he was no better than a common thief. He wrote out his confession and gave it to his father, whose silent tears showed his forgiveness.¹⁵

At sixteen, in his next to last year at the Kattyawar High School, Mohan found his troubles multiplying. His father died of an ulcerated boil on his neck, having refused the operation that could have saved his life. Soon afterward, Kasturba gave birth to a child, which died a few days later. With Karamchand's pension gone, the family faced hard times. Mohan's courses were now more difficult than ever. The standard of English proficiency was being raised year by year by the demanding headmaster. That year the required work included memorizing 200 lines from Milton's *Paradise Lost* and the intensive study of 200 pages of Addison's *Spectator*. Mastering Sanskrit grammar posed another teeth-grinding task. Mohan almost dropped it to take the easier Persian course when his Brahmin teacher chided him: 'How can you forget that you are the son of a Vaishnava father? Won't you learn the language of your own religion?'¹⁶—advice for which the Mahatma was later to be grateful.

A photograph showing Mohan with his eldest brother Lakshmidas shows how seriously he regarded life at the age of sixteen or seventeen. Both brothers look saddened by the loss of their father, but Mohan's face shows determination as well—his mouth firmly closed, his jaw set, his eyes partly closed, both his fists lightly clenched. He looks as though he knows he must succeed in his examinations, because the future of the family depends on him. Lakshmidas, then twenty-five or twenty-six, appears to be concurring in this judgment, for his face is passive, his mouth half open, his eyes wide and wondering. Symbolic of their

¹⁵ Gandhi, *Autobiography*, pp. 29, 40–1.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 29–30.

closeness, the two brothers were photographed side by side, the knee of one touching the knee of the other.¹⁷ From this time on, Lakshmidas was to give his full support to Mohan's plans for continuing his education. No doubt their dying father, so full of experience and sound common sense, had charged the eldest brother with this responsibility. Karsandas, the middle of the three brothers, could not be expected to achieve much, for he had already dropped out of school. (Later he secured a job in the police forces of Porbandar State.) Only Mohan had the ability and the solid academic record that could take him to the top of the ladder of success in the swiftly-changing world surrounding the fatherless Gandhi family in the late 1880s.

Armed with his own determination and his family's full support, Mohan studied hard for the entrance examination to Bombay University, which he was to take soon after his eighteenth birthday. He had finished high school tenth in his class of forty boys. Only sixteen of the class were allowed to take the rigorous matriculation tests. The examination system followed that of London University: administered by Bombay University, it did not admit students to the University itself, but to one of its affiliated colleges. When Gandhi came up for the examinations in 1887, he was one of 3067 candidates from the seventy-seven accredited high schools in the Bombay Presidency and its associated Native States. So serious were these annual examinations that they required a total of fifteen hours to answer, spread over five days. Nor could they be taken anywhere in out-of-the-way Kathiawad. Young Mohan had to travel to Ahmedabad, the biggest city in mainland Gujarat and one of the four places in the Bombay Presidency where the matriculation tests were administered. This was the very first time he had ever been on the mainland, and the first time he entered a part of India under the direct rule of the British. He must have noticed at Ahmedabad the faster pace of daily life, the diversity and noise and some of the ugliness of the city, the smarter fashions in dress, and the many signs in English on the shops—a foretaste of things he would see in the still bigger city of Bombay and in the biggest city of them all, London.

The matriculation examination tested proficiency in English (nine questions, of which one was 'Write an essay of about forty lines on the advantages of a cheerful disposition'); arithmetic and algebra; geometry ('Describe a parallelogram that shall be equal to a given triangle, and have one of its angles equal to a given rectilineal angle'); Gujarati ('Translate into Gujarati the following passage: "I shall,

¹⁷ Gandhi, *Autobiography*, facing p. 49.

therefore, rejoice if part of the fund to be raised to commemorate the Jubilee of the Queen Empress Victoria be devoted to enabling India to take her place in the new industrial world into which she has entered during the first fifty years of Her Majesty's reign . . ."); history and geography (eight questions, number three being: 'What events led to the American War of Independence? Describe the concluding events of the War. '); and natural science ('Give two of the most obvious and convincing proofs of the rotundity of the Earth, and state clearly why the days and nights are unequal in length in different parts of the world').¹⁸

It is a sign of the excellence of his own high school training, as well as of his own diligent preparation, that Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi ranked 404th in the list of 799 successful candidates. With this result he had found the key that would unlock the door of the small world of Kathiawad and allow him to pass into the wider worlds of the Bombay Presidency, the Indian Empire, and of the entire English-speaking world overseas, including both London and South Africa. In the process, however, the outer mind of this son of the late *dewan* of Porbandar and Rajkot was moulded by his teachers and his assignments into a very different shape from that of his father. We could even say that young Mohan, in order to pass the prescribed examinations, had to some degree to become a standardized product of the educational system designed by India's British overlords.

Like the lower echelons of the civil, judicial, and military establishments, this educational system was mainly administered by English-speaking Indians who served as intermediaries and interpreters between the thin upper crust and the vast and multiform layers of Indian society. Rajkot in the 1880s was becoming a more cosmopolitan centre, capable of attracting well-educated men from the towns and cities of the mainland, and even from as far away as Bombay City. The higher Gandhi rose through the grades in the Kattyawar High School, the more educated his teachers were, the larger and more distant the cities from which they came, and the more Anglicized their outlooks. In the fourth standard, his last year of instruction in his mother tongue, the three teachers whose native towns are known all came from mainland Gujarat (Goga, Nadiad, and Bardoli). In the last three standards, where only English was used, two of his teachers were graduates of Bombay City's Elphinstone College, the oldest (founded 1827) and the best in the Presidency. Two other teachers, and

¹⁸ Upadhyaya, *Gandhi as a Student*, pp. 60–72.

the headmaster himself, shared an important characteristic: all three were Parsis.¹⁹

The Parsis formed a small but extremely influential minority in the affairs of nineteenth century Bombay City and mainland Gujarat. Their ancestors had emigrated from Persia to Western India in the eighth century A.D., fleeing as religious refugees before the Arab Muslim conquerors. They got along well with the British ever since the latter acquired Bombay City from the Portuguese in 1660 and extended complete religious toleration and limitless commercial opportunities to all who wished to settle there. Acquiring fluency in English, they became pioneers in every field of modern endeavour—commerce, industry, education, medicine, newspaper publishing, social reform, and political organization, serving as catalysts of change for the vast and conservative Hindu society of Western India. The strong representation among Gandhi's teachers of this creative minority is not surprising, nor is the fact that the headmaster of the Kattyawar High School for the last of Gandhi's seven years there was a Parsi, D. E. Gimi. Gimi's strictness provoked Gandhi into his first recorded campaign to reverse a decision he regarded as unjust. One of Gimi's reforms as headmaster was to require all students to take part in gymnastics and cricket at the end of the school day. 'I disliked both', says Gandhi. 'I never took part in any exercise, cricket or football, before they were made compulsory.' When his father lay on his sick-bed, growing progressively worse, he needed Mohan to nurse him.

As soon as the school closed, I would hurry home and begin serving him. Compulsory exercise came directly in the way of this service. I requested Mr Gimi to exempt me from gymnastics so that I might be free to serve my father. But he would not listen to me. Now it so happened that one Saturday, when we had school in the morning [only], I had to go from home to the school for gymnastics at 4 o'clock in the afternoon. . . . Before I reached the school the boys had all left. The next day Mr Gimi, examining the roll, found me marked absent. Being asked the reason for absence, I told him what had happened. He refused to believe me and ordered me to pay a fine of one or two annas. . . . I was convicted of lying! . . . I cried in deep anguish.²⁰

Gandhi must have pleaded with his headmaster privately for he had 'a faint recollection that I finally succeeded in getting the fine remitted'. And his father wrote a note asking Gimi to exempt Mohan from exercise, whereupon the exemption 'was of course obtained.'

¹⁹ Upadhyaya, *Gandhi as a Student*, pp. 40, 48.

²⁰ Gandhi, *Autobiography*, pp. 27–8.

This minor incident shows how sensitive Gandhi was to any reflection on his integrity. 'I very jealously guarded my character.' In this case, his character was vindicated by a combination of his own suffering, his use of argument, and the interposition of his father's influence. The incident shows us the adolescent Gandhi caught in painful tension between two conflicting authorities—one representing the new world of English-style education, the other the old world of Kathiawad politics. This in a sense was to be the dominant theme throughout the rest of Gandhi's life: the tension between English and Indian civilizations. His success in resolving the tension in this case was a token of many other successes to come—likewise achieved after painful struggles, protracted arguments, and appeals to the authority of Indian traditions.

English cultural influences were stronger still at the college to which Gandhi was admitted in the autumn of 1887 at the age of eighteen. Samaldas College, located in the port city of Bhavnagar, was the only college in Kathiawad and a new one at that—only four years old when Gandhi joined it. A single building was all that was needed to hold its three classes, seven faculty members, and sixty students. The principal of the college was that rare and exalted creature, an Oxford graduate. Principal R. N. Gurion also taught English literature and history. The professor of mathematics was Fardunji M. Dastur, a Parsi, who later became the registrar of Bombay University.²¹ Young Gandhi found the standard of English required was considerably higher than that of the Kattyawar High School, and the college courses much stiffer than he was prepared for. What happened is best told in his own words:

I went, but found myself entirely at sea. Everything was difficult. I could not follow, let alone take interest in, the professors' lectures. It was no fault of theirs. The professors in that college were regarded as first-rate. But I was so raw. At the end of the first term, I returned home.²²

These three months at Bhavnagar placed the future Mahatma under greater stress than he had ever experienced previously. For the first time he was living away from home. He rented a room, bought some furniture, and was looked after by a very kind landlady. But the heat and humidity of Bhavnagar gave him constant headaches and nosebleeds. The difficulty of his studies was the most painful part of the whole Bhavnagar episode—he did not expect to pass the examinations at the end of his first year. Not that he would have given up trying, for he had failed before at school and had made good by virtue of

²¹ Upadhyaya, *Gandhi as a Student*, p. 57.

²² Gandhi, *Autobiography*, p. 52.

diligent application to his work. What troubled him, by his own account, was the slowness of his progress toward the goal of upholding the family's high social status. Three years later, near the completion of his legal studies in London, he explained to his English friend why he had come to their land:

. . . Unless you graduate at the Bombay University you get no status in society. If you want any employment before that, you cannot secure, unless, of course, you have a very good influence to back you up, a respectable post, giving a handsome salary. But I found that I would have to spend three years at the least before I could graduate. . . . And, after all, I could not, even after graduating, expect any very great income. While I was incessantly brooding over these things, an old friend of my father saw and advised me to go to England and take the robe. . . .²³

Gandhi's instant adoption of Mavji Dave's plan shows us not only how determined he was to succeed in life despite all obstacles, but also how deeply his eight years of English-style education had imbued him with admiration for England, which he then saw as 'the very centre of civilisation'. Even his miserable time at Samaldas College seems to have whetted his appetite for still more and better English education. Had his professor of English literature and history, Principal Gurion, the first Oxford graduate he had ever met, inspired him with a special measure of ardour, an excess of zeal that made him so impatient to see England for himself that he resolved to vault the walls of the Bombay University system and head directly for the land from which its curriculum had come?

The desire to see the world and to seek one's fortune in distant lands has moved ambitious men from prehistoric times to the present. Gandhi's determination to leave Kathiawad for England is reminiscent of the boy Warren Hastings' motivation when in 1739 he formed the resolution which led him to seek his fortune in India, and to become the first Governor-General of the East India Company's possessions there. Macaulay's description of Hastings' decision might be transposed with minor changes to young Gandhi's almost 150 years later:

The daily sight of the lands which his ancestors had possessed, and which had passed into the hands of strangers, filled his young brain with wild fancies and projects. He loved to hear stories of the wealth and greatness of his progenitors, of their splendid housekeeping, their loyalty, and their valour. On one bright summer day . . . [there] rose in his mind a scheme which, through all the turns of his eventful career, was never abandoned. He would recover the estate which had belonged to his fathers. . . . This

²³ Gandhi, *Collected Works*, I, pp. 53-4.

purpose, formed in infancy and poverty, grew stronger as his intellect expanded and as his fortune rose. He pursued his plan with that calm but indomitable force of will which was the most striking peculiarity of his character.²⁴

The similarity ends when we consider that Hastings' relatives placed no impediments in the way of his rise to fortune, no restrictions as to where or how he should pursue it. One of them even obtained for him the job which gave him his start in the Company's service in India. When Hastings, an orphan since childhood, sailed for India at seventeen, his guardian is said by Macaulay to have reasoned: 'Whether the young adventurer, when once shipped off, made a fortune, or died of a liver complaint, he equally ceased to be a burden to anybody.'²⁵ Not so young Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi. Formidable objections were raised, his mother's consent was withheld for several months, and before he boarded his ship at Bombay in September 1888, his sub-caste had excommunicated him and all who helped him to leave India. Altogether, these months before he sailed were to him 'a time of terrible anxiety and torture'.²⁶ That he persisted and ultimately triumphed in his ambition was a tribute not just to his own force of character, but to the craving for 'civilization' sweeping over young men from one end of India to the other in the 1880s as soon as they were touched by the wand of English-style education.

The zeal with which Gandhi hurled himself into the project of going to London to take a law degree was matched later in his life by an equally passionate rejection of the entirety of modern civilization. As so often happens with young men and women who embrace the vision of 'a new heaven and a new earth' centring in some distant, and therefore tremendously exciting, land, so in Gandhi's case his youthful infatuation with British culture gradually faded, his attachment to the traditions and values of his native land grew ever stronger, and long experience and reflection brought him to a personal interpretation and synthesis of the new and the old, the native and the foreign, that is the task and the reward of every human generation.

²⁴ Thomas Babington Macaulay, 'Warren Hastings', in his *Critical and Historical Essays Contributed to the Edinburgh Review*, new ed., London, 1866, vol. III, pp. 289–90.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 292.

²⁶ Gandhi, *Collected Works*, I, 61.