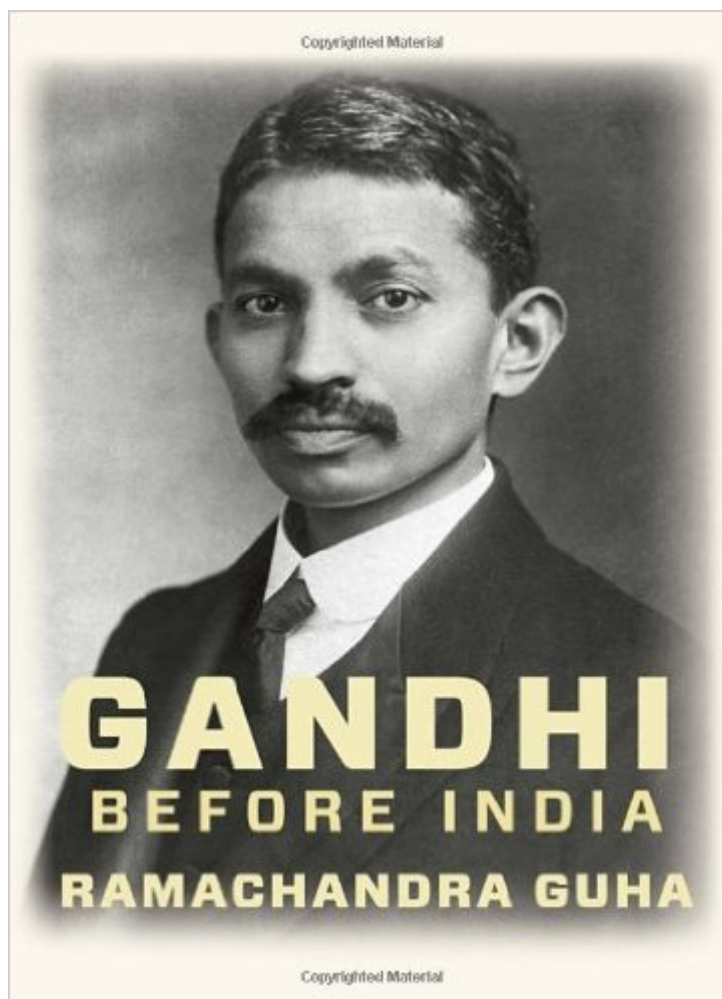


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Gandhi Before India



Synopsis

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. Ravi S. Chandra Guha—hailed by Time as “the 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.

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Customer Reviews

I was hesitant to buy this book because I was skeptical as to what more that is new can be written about Mahatma Gandhi. After all, the Govt of India had published 100 volumes of his collected works after nearly 40 years of sustained effort in assembling them. Still, the title kindled my interest because I realized that I know little about Gandhi's first 45 years of life, which were spent substantially outside India. In fact, for most of us in India, the window into Gandhi's life before he came back to India, was provided only by Richard Attenborough's film 'Gandhi'. As I finished reading this book, I am amazed that Dr.Guha is able to show us so much about Gandhi's life that I have been completely unaware of. The book shows how Gandhi was born a Gujarathi bania, grew up in Gujarat with all the prejudices and quirks of his caste and gradually transformed himself into a hero in the eyes of the larger world through his tireless struggles in politics, spirituality and practice of non-violent, passive resistance to racial injustice in South Africa. Many of us in India have the image of Gandhi as one who was born a Mahatma, lived as a Mahatma and died as THE Mahatma. This book shows that Gandhi was actually a work in progress and how South Africa shaped him into becoming the man that he was to become later in the eyes of the world.I was broadly conversant with Gandhi's struggles in the period 1893-1914 for the civil and political rights of Indians in South africa and his approach to working within the British empire and that of his belief in gradual rather than revolutionary change. But what I learnt new from this book was that in this African endeavour, there was deep and passionate participation from Tamils, Parsees, Muslims, Christians, European Jews, and the Chinese.

As a long time fan of the writer and having picked up this book in Berkeley, I was pleased to read that the book was born in Ram Guha's mind when teaching a course on Gandhi at Berkeley in 1998. The title of this book is not just a play on words after his famous book *India After Gandhi*, it truly is 550 pages of the largely unknown story of Gandhi starting at birth (1869) and before returning to India after 20 years in South Africa (1894-1914). With a rigor that only Ram Guha is capable of, he arduously reconstructs the story of Gandhi's first 45 years from contemporary records of his years in Porbandar, Rajkot, Bombay, London, Durban and Johannesburg. While earlier works are a collection of writings by Gandhi or secondary works thereof, this book also referred letters written by others to Gandhi, papers of Gandhi's friends and associates in South Africa, records of governments of India, South Africa and England, and archived newspapers and publications of the time. It is a miracle that all these sources were stitched so perfectly in chronology and diligently edited to re-create a deeply personal story spanning his early childhood, relationship with his parents, relationship with Muslim friends from school and then abroad, relationships with his wife and children, relationships with Christians, Jews and Parsis in his life in London and South Africa, besides Hindus from different states, speaking different languages and from different socio-economic conditions. For a pious Indian bania, his work with women was far ahead of his time as well.

What an interesting title. It's the "before" that at once catches the eye. While India and Gandhi are inextricably linked, this book derives its principal interest from how South Africa prepared Gandhi for his future role. As Jon Stewart remarked right away when he introduced author Ramachandra Guha on his show, Gandhi is truly a "global" figure in the highest sense of the phrase even in this era of mass celebrities where he stands taller than pretty much everyone else to date. Indeed, whatever may be the future of humanity, and, however and whoever writes it, Gandhi will always be an essential player in that account. In simple, clear, enthusiastic prose Guha charts the evolution of Gandhi from a modest young lawyer with unremarkable speaking skills, one who had yet to find his real *māṇṁ*, to someone who became self-charged with a mission of fighting injustice in his own unique and now immediately, famously, recognizable way. In time to come, he was able to hold the attention of millions when he spoke. From what I gather reading this book, in the second half of the nineteenth century, racism in South Africa was raw and unspeakably vile. How on earth a shy young man coming from a subcontinent away, ostensibly to practice law on behalf of a small Indian community in its diaspora, stepped up to a huge challenge involving the very foundations of justice

as applicable to all (if it is to be just) while still maintaining decency, dignity, kindliness vis-a-vis the aggressive Boers and British is nothing short of revolutionary - in the best sense of that word. The thing is Guha (if I understand correctly) suggests that nothing in Gandhi's background probably predisposed him naturally to fight the battles that he met/chose.

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