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MEMPHIS



*In the footsteps
of the master*

A chat with Mahatma
Gandhi's grandson

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Chat with grandson

By JEMIMAH MWAKISHA

As the great Mahatma Gandhi lay dead on a mattress in a friend's house in New Delhi on January 30, 1948, a little boy sobbed prayerfully by his side.

Rajmohan Gandhi, aged 12, knew his grandfather was the greatest man on earth and believed he had authority over death the way he had sway over India.

Rajmohan was right in a way: The giant of Indian liberation struggle has been declared by many institutions worldwide, such as the CNN, the Man of the Century.

Rajmohan was wrong in a way: India's Father of the Nation was stone dead, felled by three bullets by an assassin that tore through his body.

"India mourned a man who had shown such immense love and I have met people who say they were so heartbroken they went hungry," recounts the man who — had he not been taking part in a school athletics tournament that evening — would have been by his grandfather's side during the inter-denominational prayer meeting at which he was fatally shot by a Hindu fundamentalist who felt he was giving away too much concession to Muslims at Hindus' expense.

Rajmohan, now a moralist, peace-maker and scholar aged 65, relives the sombre events of that dark day: "I came back home from school to find a friend waiting for me. He told me that my grandfather had been shot and injured and that he had been asked to take me there. Inside the house, the mood was sorrowful. My grandfather was lying on a mattress with Prime Minister Nehru, his deputy Sardar Patel, my parents and a large crowd gathered around him mourning.

"While the death shocked me, in fact, I believed that my heroic grandfather would defeat it."

However, Rajmohan feels that painful as Mahatma's death was, out of it sprang a spontaneous reconciliation between Hindus and Muslims and there was reasonable peace for at least 25 years after January 30, 1948.

Rajmohan's personality and physical appearance don't conjure up the image of the great man of slight build who upstaged the mighty British imperial power in the struggle for India's independence.

Both wear glasses but Rajmohan is far taller. Where the master orator and debater Mahatma would not yield a smile, Rajmohan lets an easy grin and a humble laugh brighten up his face.

Like his grandfather, the soft-spoken Rajmohan courts peace and reconciliation. He is moralist in word and deed.

Rajmohan still treasures the time he spent with his grandfather. "I had a precious time with him in the last six

months of his life. Every evening at 5 pm, I would join him, talk with him and accompany him for the inter-faith prayers that he had initiated to help unite the nation fragmented by religious and social caste segmentation.

"My family and I would join him and we would walk together to the rallies. On the way, he would joke and laugh heartily, but immediately we got to the prayer ground, he was serious in readiness for prayer."

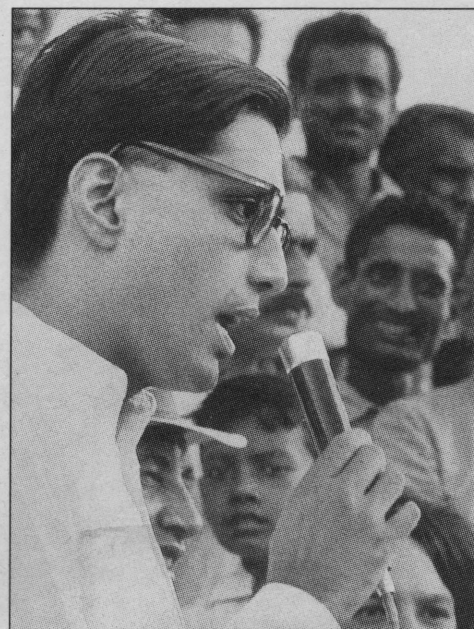
The family joined him again for 15 minutes before he slept at 9 pm, and again have a light moment. "He would be dressed lightly, with a bare chest and a loin cloth (*dhoti*)."

Mahatma had moved from Calcutta to New Delhi in 1947 to help the government gear up efforts at reconciliation between Muslims and Hindus and smooth relations between the prime minister and his deputy. "He spent most of his time talking to people for the sake of peace. He always slept at 9 pm and woke up at 3.30 am to pray."

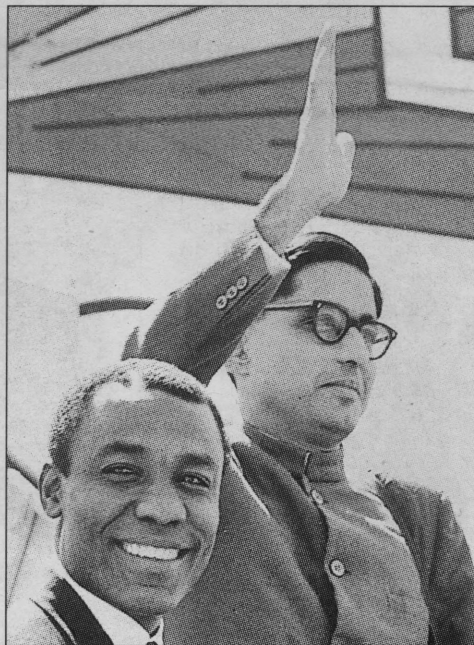
Rajmohan remembers the prayers vividly too. The many religious groups — Sikhs, Hindus, Buddhists, Muslims, Christians — came together to pray with a representative from each reciting their own prayer while the others listened in turns.

But these were often interrupted by a few angry individuals who could not tolerate others reciting their prayers or who would have genuine complaints about having lost their relatives due to the differences between one group and another.

'If I met Mahatma today, I would be happy to tell him that as he obeyed his conscience, I also obeyed mine'



Radiant Rajmohan Gandhi (left) shows off one of his historical titles, *Patel*, at his hotel suite in Nairobi, where he is attending a meeting of the Moral Re-Armament movement. Above is Rajmohan during a visit to Nairobi in 1965 for a similar meeting. Below, he is received by an official in Nairobi during a visit in 1961. (Cover picture by YUSUF WACHIRA)



"I was scared by such angry protests, but my grandfather always had a way of persuading the aggrieved person or party to listen to the other. He would say: 'You must distinguish between Islam on the one hand and some Muslim individual who has done a bad thing on the other.'"

Rajmohan is one of the 14 grandchildren from Mahatma's four children. The Mahatma had married at age 13 through a traditional arrangement. His bride was also 13.

A journalist, author and scholar in history and politics, Rajmohan modestly describes himself as "a humble man who can never fit in my grandfather's shoes. My identity is intertwined with his and I feel blessed because of this. However, I strive to live in such a way that I can touch the hearts of other people I meet and help them achieve the greatest thing they are capable of."

Who would fit in Mahatma's shoes today? Rajmohan pauses, deep in thought: "I think the Dalai Lama and Nelson Mandela in many ways remind us of him."

Through both coincidence and choice, his career and life have turned out to be a testimony that Mahatma's principles are still as relevant today as they were when he lived. "Reconciliation is mainly what drives my life's path and I deeply believe in the reconciliation of India and Pakistan as well as Muslims and Hindus and other groups in my country."

He was brought up in a humble home with three other siblings in New Delhi and studied Economics at the university even as he aspired to be a journalist like his father, Devadas, who was an editor of *Hindustan Times*. His mother was a housewife.

Rajmohan holds an honorary doctorate from Calgary University in Canada where he is often invited to lecture in history and politics.

But it's an experience while on apprenticeship at the *Scotsman* newspaper in Scotland that changed his life entirely.

"While there, I stayed with a family that believed in a movement called Moral Re-Armament and I found it so fascinating I adopted its principles."

Moral Re-Armament initiates change in difficult situations for an individual. It's based on the principles of absolute love, honesty, purity and unselfishness.

He says the movement also reminded him of his grandfather and what he stood for. He says these principles inspire and guide his choices in life. Inspired by peace, he helped build a conference centre near Bombay which has hosted numerous reconciliation and dialogue conferences.

Rajmohan's association with Moral Re-Armament gave him an independent commitment to God. "If I met him (Mahatma) today, I would be happy to tell him that as you obeyed your conscience, I also obeyed mine."

He says that each of Mahatma's grandchildren and relatives have their own understanding of what

their grandfather stood for. However, "because of the high standard my grandfather set, there are always expectations for us to live up to it and we are gladly reconciled to that.

Each manifests those values in various ways, he adds. "I think he gave us something to live up to in our lives."

However, Rajmohan adds: "You know, my grandfather inspires and moves me, but he is not my God. My life's aim is to figure out what God wants me to do."

He has championed the fight against corruption in India. "I do it at two levels. One; to ensure that individual citizens recognise that mini corruption is as large as mega corruption, and two; for the public to fight corruption through concerted campaigns. He has led a march across India and mounted a crusade against corruption and dishonesty.

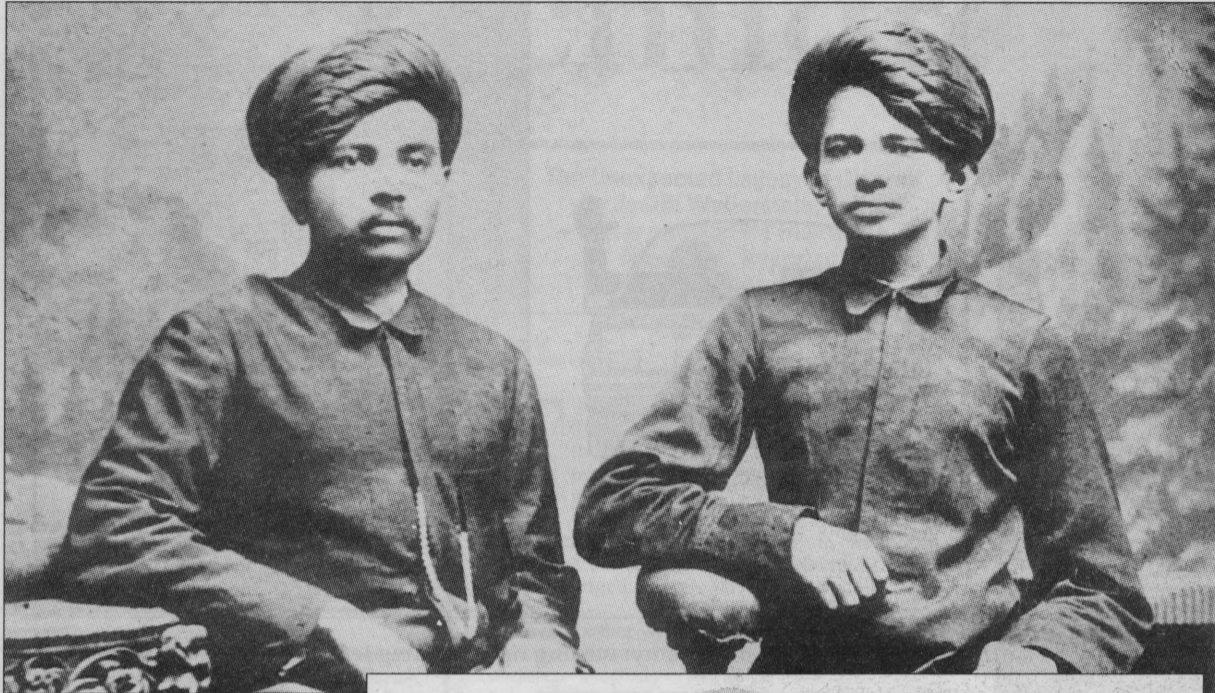
Rajmohan fought corruption through the newspaper *Himmat* (means courage) which he established and ran from 1964 to 1981.

He has sustained that campaign through his books — three biographies, one book on the Hindu/Muslim relationship and one on the history of India.

One of them, titled *Patel*, is the story of former deputy prime minister Sardar Patel, who served under Prime Minister Nehru after India gained independence. Rajmohan says that Patel was a great leader but was not accorded due recognition.

The two other biographies are on his two grandparents. *The Good Boatman* is the story of Mahatma Gandhi. The other book is on his maternal

of Mahatma Gandhi



grandfather, Rajagopalachari C, who was a freedom fighter and became the first Indian governor-general after independence.

His latest book, *Revenge reconciliation, understanding South Asia*, is an interpretation of the history of South Asia against the backdrop of constant conflict between India and Pakistan. It tackles the twin spectre of peace-making and violence in the region.

"I am aware that violence is a reality in the modern world but so is reconciliation," says Rajmohan. "Though peace is sometimes crushed by violence, the peace flame still remains in people's hands. India will not be India unless it gives priority to reconciliation within itself and with its neighbours."

All his books are based on research and he says his wife Usher, who is a research associate, has contributed immensely to their success. They have two children aged 22 and 19.

"I enjoy people and writing and I am committed to make a difference in our world the way God wants me to," says Rajmohan, who is Hindu.

In all his efforts and challenges, he strives to fulfil God's will and to live true to his conscience. As a member of the Moral Re-Armament's International Council, Rajmohan finds himself pretty busy. The council is holding its meeting in Nairobi, which ends today.

Rajmohan was a Member of Parliament between 1990 and 1992 and has worked for the Centre for Policy Research in New Delhi (a think tank organisation).

To many people, Mahatma Gandhi may have been the Man of the Century, but Rajmohan is under no illusion that everyone loved or adored his grandfather. "Some complain that he made Hindus soft

and weak, while others criticise the simplicity of his life as having made a virtue of poverty. Still, others say he was not modern enough. But the majority are proud of him and revere him as the father of the nation."

He says the Mahatma's principle of non-violent resistance (called *Satyagraha*) could still be applied in many situations today. *Satyagraha* means truth force, or hanging on to your truth no matter what. "The way he wanted it to be is that those who practise it must be law-abiding citizens, disciplined, tolerant and with the right attitude."

Rajmohan feels his grandfather's greatest contribution to humanity was "the fact that he kindled consciences which



Top: Mohandas Gandhi (right) as he posed for a photograph with his brother Laxmidas in 1886. Above: The Mahatma in his sunset days after his liberation struggle had won independence for India.

helped human beings to become more sensitive to the pain and suffering around them."

He helped those who fight for justice to make a distinction between oppression and the individual oppressor. Oppression must be opposed fearlessly, but the oppressor must not be hated, killed or hurt."

He says his grandfather suffered a lot when he fought apartheid, especially for the rights of Indians in South Africa, but that helped him get a great purpose for his life. "He found God through his wounds," he adds. The Mahatma spent seven years in prison in total for his fight against colonial oppression.

What does Rajmohan see as the way forward for India? "It needs reconciliation (of religious, linguistic and caste groups) and good governance (of rulers and citizens working towards this goal)."

Why Gandhi is in a class of his own

By OGOVA ONDEGO

The closest many people have come to knowing Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi is through *Gandhi*, the epic film by British producer-director Sir Richard Attenborough who admired and respected the Indian nationalist and freedom fighter. It took Attenborough two decades to make the film.

Actor Ben Kingsley (pictured) played the role of Gandhi as an English-trained lawyer in South Africa fighting for the rights of Indians and as a bespectacled balding man in a *dhobi* sitting with his feet crossed and bare-chested fasting, praying and meditating during the gruelling 27-year passive resistance to the British rule that eventually freed India from the shackles of colonialism on August 15, 1947.

The eloquent speaker used his oratorical skills to unite the people of the Indian sub-continent in an alliance transcending religious, caste, gender and other petty considerations.

Advocating civil disobedience, Gandhi was opposed to violence. While foes accorded him grudging respect, friends deified and called him Mahatma (the great soul).

This is what comes through Attenborough's 1983 film.

Born of *Vaisya* (merchant) caste Hindu parents on October 2, 1869, in Porbandar, Gandhi is described by *The World Book Encyclopaedia* as one of the foremost spiritual and political leaders of the 20th Century.

Guided by the love of truth, he taught that how people behaved was more important than what they achieved. Gandhi believed that it was wrong to kill animals for food or clothing.

He married Kasturba, an agemate at 13, and they had four children. Having studied law in England from 1888, he returned to India in 1891 to practise but two years later moved to South Africa, where he suffered discrimination by the white peers for being an Indian.

Initially on a one-year law contract in South Africa, he stayed on for 21 years in order to champion the rights of Indians in that British colony.

Gandhi edited the *Indian Opinion* newspaper through which he propagated his *Satyagraha* (non-violent resistance to oppression) campaigns. He organised a strike by Indian miners. He was arrested on numerous occasions but he trudged on, also working for the British when he felt justice was their cause. The British decorated him for his work as a paramedic during the Boer War (1899-1902) and the Zulu Rebellion (1906).

He returned to India in 1915 and was by 1920 leader of the Indian nationalist movement.

When the British introduced bills forbidding opposition to the government in 1919, Gandhi successfully lobbied in and outside Parliament.

Gandhi began a programme of hand spinning and weaving in 1920 to aid economic freedom by making India self-sufficient in cloth making, promoting social freedom through the dignity of labour, and advancing political freedom through challenging the British textile industry and by preparing Indians for self-government.

Ten years later, he protested the Salts Act which forbade possession of salt not bought from the government. He symbolically led a 320-kilometre march to the sea to make salt from the water.

He continued agitating for independence from the British during the Second World War and for this he was jailed on several occasions, spending seven years in prison. To him, it was honourable to be jailed for a good cause.

When India gained independence, the Mahatma refused to become President or Prime Minister and preferred to serve India from the midst of ordinary folk.

According to Rajiv Bhatia, the Indian High Commissioner to Kenya, Gandhi "championed democracy and decision-making through dialogue and consensus. He advocated respect for all religions. He stood for liberty, ethics in public life, equality and humanism."

His message had universal appeal and inspired leaders like Martin Luther King and Nelson Mandela.

Although Gandhi had fought for a united country, the British divided it into India and Pakistan just before independence, something which grieved him. Soon followed erratic violence pitting Muslims against Hindus. He fasted to end the feuding. Five days after commencing the fast on January 13, 1948, leaders of the fighting groups pledged to end their differences and Gandhi broke the fast. He was assassinated 12 days later while going to a prayer meeting. He was felled by three bullets from a Hindu extremist who opposed the spirit of tolerance of other religions and creeds.

