

Do or Die

The enigma of Mahatma Gandhi

by SUGATA BOSE

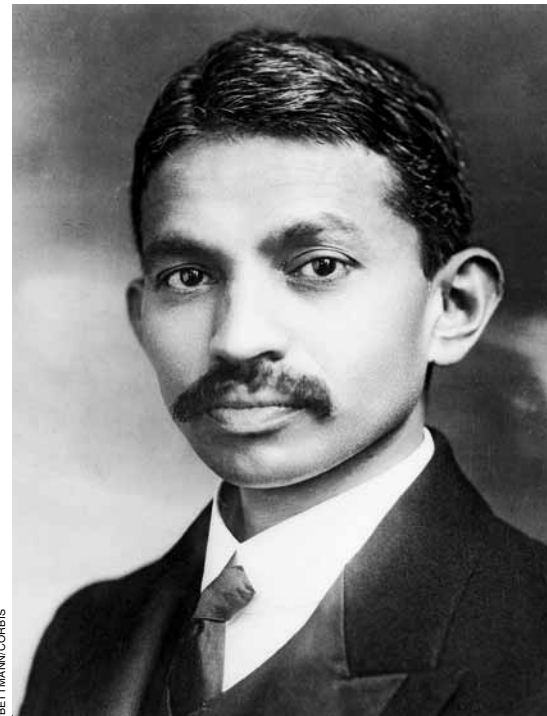
WHEN INDIA won independence at the famous midnight hour of August 14-15, 1947, Mahatma Gandhi stayed away from the festivities in New Delhi. Instead, he fasted in a predominantly Muslim neighborhood of Calcutta, quietly mourning the great human tragedy that accompanied what he called the vivisection of his motherland. The “great soul,” having been unable to prevent the subcontinent’s partition into two countries along ostensibly religious lines, was afflicted with a sense of failure.

Joseph Lelyveld, *Great Soul: Mahatma Gandhi and His Struggle with India* (Knopf, \$28.95)

The supreme leader of India’s struggle for freedom from British rule had struggled with India to transcend its

myriad differences of religion and caste. It is the latter struggle that forms the subject matter of this absorbing new book by Joseph Lelyveld ’58, A.M. ’60, the Pulitzer Prize-winning former executive editor of the *New York Times*.

“I merely touch on or leave out crucial periods and episodes,” Lelyveld tells us in his author’s note, “in order to hew in this essay to specific narrative lines I’ve chosen.” The spotlight is trained on Gandhi the social reformer, rather than on “the generalissimo of *satyagraha*,” as the Mahatma described himself—especially *satyagraha* (his technique of passive resistance) in the sense of a quest for truth through mass political activity. Lelyveld’s journalistic postings in New Delhi and Johannesburg sparked an intellectual curiosity that enables him to probe the deep connections in



BETTMAN/CORBIS

A formal, undated portrait of Gandhi as a young man

Gandhi’s life that spanned two widely separated shores of the Indian Ocean.

V.S. Naipaul once described Gandhi as the least Indian of Indian leaders. Lelyveld

I CHOOSE
HARVARD...

because an undergraduate housing
assignment can lead to friends who will
cheer you on for a lifetime



JON CHASE/HARVARD UNIVERSITY

**AN UNPARALLELED
STUDENT EXPERIENCE**

Support the
Harvard College Fund



ADAMS HOUSE RESIDENTS SHOW THEIR SPIRIT
ON HOUSING DAY.

JOIN US!

Enjoy these coming events
for the
**FRIENDS OF
HARVARD MAGAZINE**

Spring Event **MAY 11, 2011**

A reception and book signing
with **JOANNE CHANG '97**,
chef, restaurant owner,
and author of

*Flour: Spectacular Recipes from
Boston's Flour Bakery + Cafe*

MURR CENTER LOUNGE
Harvard University



Fall Event **2011**

Check our website:
harvardmagazine.com/friends
for details about our fall
FRIENDS event. *Coming soon!*

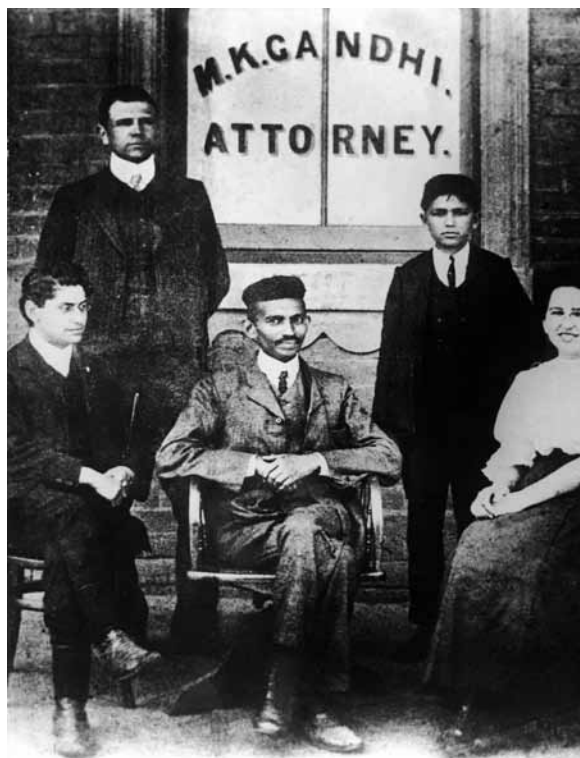
For more information about the
**FRIENDS OF
HARVARD MAGAZINE**,
please contact Felecia Carter
at 617-496-6694 or visit us at:
harvardmagazine.com/friends



MONTAGE

deftly explores this paradox, focusing on the ways in which Gandhi's early South African experience formed the later Mahatma. It was a slow transformation. The young man who arrived in South Africa as a lawyer in 1893 to represent an Indian Muslim mercantile firm did not take up the cause of the hapless Indian indentured laborers in that country until 1913. It took time for this campaigner for Indian rights to shed the racial prejudice that he harbored toward Africans. Gandhi's views on the evils of caste-based untouchability took shape in South Africa. His first political speeches were delivered within the precincts of South Africa's mosques, a sign of the commitment of this Hindu leader to making common cause with the Muslims.

That Gandhi honed satyagraha, and his approach to crafting Indian unity across lines of caste and religion, in South Africa between 1906 and 1913 is well known. He would deploy both on a much wider scale in India from 1919 onward. What is new in Lelyveld's treatment of Gandhi's South African years is the analysis of "the most intimate, also ambiguous relationship of his lifetime": with Hermann Kallenbach, an architect of German Jewish background, with whom Gandhi set up Tolstoy Farm in the Transvaal, leaving his wife behind. Sifting through the letters that "Upper House" (Gandhi) wrote to "Lower House" (Kallenbach), Lelyveld seeks to answer the question, "What kind of couple were they?" He devotes an entire chapter to this relationship, but its relevance to the overall aim of the book is unclear. Key cultural differences between American and Indian attitudes to same-sex friendships make Lelyveld's suggestion of a homoerotic and possibly homosexual relationship speculative at best. Whatever its nature, it is a huge exaggeration to see the relationship as the "most intimate" of Gandhi's life. After parting ways in 1914, Kallenbach briefly returned to India in 1937 to make an unsuccessful attempt to enlist Gandhi's support for the Zionist cause. Gandhi consistently supported the rights of Palestin-



Gandhi (center) as a practicing attorney in South Africa.

ians to their land from 1919 onwards.

The satyagraha of 1913 leading to the repeal of the £3 annual tax on indentured workers provided the perfect finale for Gandhi's two decades in South Africa, firmly establishing, on the eve of his return to India, his reputation as a leader of passive resistance. As an expatriate patriot himself, Gandhi was quite comfortable with a conception of India that transcended the territorial limits of the subcontinent. Lelyveld ably recounts the story of Gandhi's ascent to the leadership of the Indian National Congress with the support of Indian Muslims distressed about the fate of the Turkish Khilafat (Caliphate) and the loss of Ottoman territories at the end of World War I. The Mahatma fused the symbols of Indian nationalism and Islamic universalism—the spinning wheel and the crescent—together in the anti-colonial mass movement of non-cooperation between 1920 and 1922. Mohammad Ali Jinnah, the votary of a transnational Islamic movement with a lasting legacy, was his closest Muslim comrade in those years. Lelyveld notes that the remote cause of the Khilafat was important in the rise of Gandhi, even though he adds the unnecessary clarification that "it would be simply wrong, not to say grotesque, to

KEystone: FRAnCE/GAMMA-KEystone VIA GETTY IMAGES

set up Gandhi as any kind of precursor to bin Laden.” During later years of religious conflict, Gandhi would often look back nostalgically on the “glorious days” of Hindu-Muslim unity during the non-cooperation and Khilafat movement.

Gandhi led mass agitations against the British raj in roughly decennial cycles. Lelyveld mentions the civil disobedience movement launched in 1930 with the salt satyagraha (protesting the government’s tax on salt) as its centerpiece, but his narrative thread for the Depression decade is supplied by the debates on the caste issue between Gandhi and B.R. Ambedkar, a member of and spokesman for the “Depressed Classes.” Ambedkar, who stood for the destruction of the caste system, found Gandhi’s attitude toward the “untouchables”—Harijans, or children of God, as he dubbed them—a trifle patronizing. Lelyveld skillfully unravels the story of Gandhi’s fast in 1932 against separate electorates for the “Depressed Classes,” his anti-untouchability campaign of 1933, and his stunning characterization of the Bihar earthquake of 1934 as divine chas-

possessed ‘do or die’ Gandhi, the fervent commander.” “Your president,” Gandhi had said to Louis Fischer, a young American journalist and future biographer, in June 1942, “talks about the Four Freedoms. Do they include the freedom to be free?” The fervent commander of the Quit India movement (described by Gandhi as “the biggest struggle of my life”) is not the person of primary interest to Lelyveld. He turns quickly instead to the struggle within and Gandhi’s final efforts to grapple with the Hindu-Muslim question.

Gandhi was prepared to be more generous toward Mohammed Ali Jinnah and Muslim political aspirations than his erstwhile lieutenants, Nehru and Vallabhbhai Patel, who by then were at the helm of the Indian National Congress. Yet by the summer of 1946, once the British had decided to quit India, Gandhi was not needed any more and those who had for decades been his “yes-men” had turned into “no-men.” “If he’d pushed his case forcefully and publicly,” Lelyveld argues plausibly, “the Congress might have found it difficult to proceed without him.” But Gandhi chose not

Gandhi would often look back nostalgically on the “glorious days” of Hindu-Muslim unity.

tisement for the sin of untouchability. The unreason inherent in that statement elicited a rebuke from none other than Rabin-dranath Tagore, the poet who had granted Gandhi the “Great Soul” epithet.

Lelyveld’s analysis of Gandhi on caste and of the vexed Gandhi-Ambedkar relationship is brilliant. But his lack of interest in covering what he describes as “the political ins and outs of the movement” entails a loss and a missed opportunity to explore Gandhi’s ties with younger radicals like Jawaharlal Nehru and Subhas Chandra Bose. Gandhi was, after all, primarily the leader of India’s anti-colonial movement and had vigorous debates with these compatriots on the social and economic reconstruction of free India.

Lelyveld is right on the mark in suggesting that Gandhi was “never more elusive or complex” than in the final decade of his life, as he sought to balance his values with “the strategic needs of his movement.” The decision to call upon the British to “quit India” in August 1942 reveals, in Lelyveld’s words, “a flash of the fully

to do so. Instead, in the autumn and winter of 1946, he put himself “almost as far in an eastward direction as he could get in what was still India from the center of political decision making in Delhi.” This was the district (now in Bangladesh) of Noakhali, where the Muslim majority had attacked Hindu inhabitants in October 1946, and where Gandhi wished to prove the two communities could still live in amity.

Lelyveld gives the reader a moving description of a tragic lonely figure walking for peace from village to village in Noakhali. Gandhi’s trial by fire in restoring a semblance of Hindu-Muslim unity, which had been one of his life’s missions, was connected in complex ways, Lelyveld contends, to a renewed experiment with his vow of celibacy. (This experiment took the form of his sharing a bed with his grand-niece Manu, much to the consternation of some of his devoted followers.) By “any secular this-worldly accounting,” Gandhi’s four months in Noakhali did not yield any political or social gain. He could not avert partition. Yet Lelyveld is right in

A Unique Employee Benefit Program for All Faculty, Staff and Retirees of Harvard University and its Affiliated Hospitals.

With the *Real Estate Advantage Program*, you will receive a cash-back bonus, outstanding service, and the support that you need throughout the buying, selling, downsizing and moving processes. For more information about our program and to find out about upcoming real estate seminars and webinars, please contact

Beth Duncan at

800-874-0701 x4932

Beth.Duncan@NEMoves.com

Harvard Real Estate Services at
617-495-8840

www.facultyrealestate.harvard.edu



©2011 Coldwell Banker Real Estate LLC. Coldwell Banker is a registered trademark licensed to Coldwell Banker Real Estate LLC. An Equal Opportunity Employer. Equal Housing. Owned and operated by NRT LLC. 25287RL 03/11



ADMINISTERED BY

Harvard Real Estate Services

IN PARTNERSHIP WITH

Coldwell Banker Residential Brokerage

observing that in a more intangible way, the Mahatma's final stand remains to this day a source of inspiration—as was brought home to Lelyveld during a visit to Bangladesh in 2008. In Dhaka and Noakhali, Lelyveld found people who remembered the Mahatma with reverence.

Gandhi's final fast was *not* directed against the British raj; rather, it was de-

signed to pressure the government of independent India to be less mean-spirited in sharing assets with Pakistan, and to treat its own Muslim citizens with dignity and honor. The Mahatma had long had a premonition that he would be killed by an assassin's bullet. When that moment finally came, it was a Hindu extremist who pulled the trigger, believing Gandhi to be

pro-Muslim. The "great soul" fell with the name of the god-king Ram on his lips. ▢

Sugata Bose is Gardiner professor of history. His books include A Hundred Horizons: The Indian Ocean in the Age of Global Empire and the new His Majesty's Opponent: Subhas Chandra Bose and India's Struggle against Empire, a study of his great-uncle.

Poetic Paschen

The Chicago poet has spread the good wordings via book, CD—and subway.

POET ELISE PASCHEN '81 certainly grew up in an artistic home. Her mother, Maria Tallchief, was the first American prima ballerina: from 1947 to 1960 the beautiful daughter of an Osage Indian father and a Scots-Irish mother was the star of the New York City Ballet. Tallchief and principal choreographer George Balanchine were married from 1946 to 1952, but Paschen is the only child of Tallchief and her second husband, Chicago contractor Henry "Buzz" Paschen. As a girl, Paschen did try ballet, briefly, but "knew at a young age that I wanted to be a writer," she says. She recalls reciting Blake's "The Tiger" for her mother at the age of eight. "I lived in my imagination," she says, "and loved writing poems, short stories, plays."

As author of the collections *Infidelities* (1996) and *Bestiary* (2009), Paschen has evoked poignant moments, feelings, and ideas in lines crafted with lapidary care, working in traditional meters and forms and often using rhyme. Among poets she

admires is Richard Wilbur, A.M. '47, JF '50 (see "Poetic Patriarch," November-December 2008, page 36); he returns the regard, writing that Paschen's poems "draw upon a dream life which can deeply tincture the waking world." He observed of "Oklahoma Home"—a quiet, haunting verse that draws on the poet's Osage ancestry—that it "magically and movingly enters the consciousness of another person in another time and place."

Paschen also helped bring the poetic art to millions of listeners and readers through her work as executive director of the New York-based Poetry Society of America (PSA) from 1988 until 2001. In

1991 she secured an international grant from the National Endowment for the Arts to send two poets, both Native American women, to England on a reading tour, and went with them. While traveling by Tube in London, Paschen looked up to see a seventeenth-century sonnet by Michael Drayton—"Since there's no help, come let us kiss and part"—displayed in the car, and imagined something similar in New York City subways and buses. She dismissed the idea as unrealistic, but several months after her return to New York, got a call from New York City Transit: its president had been traveling in London, seen the Poems on the Underground displays, and wondered

This Poetry in Motion poster offers a Chicago-specific version of Paschen's poem "Taxi."



Elise Paschen



JENNIFER GILFORD

COURTESY OF THE POETRY SOCIETY OF AMERICA