

# Gandhi

## *Introduction*

Gandhi's is perhaps the most private and introspective of the best-known Indian autobiographies. At the same time, it is also the most influential. Gandhi's explanation of his practice of *satyagraha* ('truth force') influenced freedom movements across the globe, including those led by Martin Luther King and Nelson Mandela. We also must keep in mind that it was originally written as weekly instalments for a Gujarati-language journal and that it ends in 1920, when Gandhi's greatest achievements still lay ahead of him.

'Experiments with Truth', however, is not a standard narrative of one's life. Rather than a chronology of events, it is an intense self-examination, and at times self-condemnation, of the author's adherence to his philosophy of 'truth force.' These moral lessons do not always add up to a 'good read,' and their puritanism about dress, food and sex will put off some readers today. Although its 'confessional' tone often prompts comparison with Rousseau and other western autobiographies, and although Gandhi was indeed influenced by Christianity, this book burns with a singular flame. The author's fierce honesty, as a man, a husband and a political leader, is remarkable. Perhaps a narrative failure, this book nevertheless succeeds in revealing how the passion of a single man led to the political independence of an entire nation.

## *Themes*

Indian Independence; politics v philosophy; confession as autobiography

## *Essay Questions*

- 1 Identify and discuss what you consider to be the three most important influences on Gandhi's life.
- 2 What does Gandhi mean by 'experiments with truth'?
- 3 Describe how childhood helped to shape the author's life.
- 4 Politics might appear to be an odd field in which to seek spiritual truth. How does Gandhi reconcile this apparent incompatibility?

## *Readings*

Gandhi, *An Autobiography: The Story of my Experiments with Truth*

## *Supplementary Readings*

Arnold, 'The self and the cell'  
Robinson, *Cambridge Encyclopaedia of India*, pp. 116-147  
Metcalf, *A Concise History of Modern India*, pp. 167-202  
Bose and Jalal, *Modern South Asia*, pp. 109-119, 128-134  
Erikson, *Gandhi's Truth*