WITHIN five years of his return from South Africa Gandhi became the dominant figure in Indian public life. By 1920 most of the front-rank politicians had joined his banner and the others had practically ceased to count. Rarely had a political conquest been more spectacular or more complete. During the next three decades there were periods when his opponents wrote him off as a spent bullet. But this proved to be a case of the wish being father to the thought; Gandhi staged a resounding come-back at a moment of his own choosing and with his influence undiminished.

Part of the explanation for his meteoric rise and enduring influence lay in the impact which he made upon the imagination of the Indian masses. The cult of the Mahatma had its practical inconveniences; it turned his tours into a terrible ordeal for him, but it also made his prestige independent of the immediate success or failure which attended his movements.

There were also other reasons for this pre-eminence. The struggle in South Africa had matured him; he had outgrown the diffidence which had dogged him as a student in England and as a young lawyer in India, and learnt to combine a tremendous confidence with a disarming humility. Those who came under his spell and changed the very texture of their lives included men and women of vastly dissimilar talents and temperaments: great lawyers and parliamentarians like C. R. Das and Motilal Nehru, humanitarians like Madan Mohan Malaviya and Rajendra Prasad, realists like Vallabhbhai Patel and Rajagopalachari, idealists like Jawaharlal Nehru and Jayapra-kash Narayan. They saw in his non-violent technique the only practical alternative to speech-making and bomb-throwing between which Indian politics had so far ineffectively oscillated.
They turned their backs upon personal comfort and professional ambitions and spent the best part of their lives in railway trains or in British prisons. They did not share all his ideas on politics and economics; few of them shared his religious outlook, but they were tied to him by a deeply emotional bond. He was not only the leader, but the Bapu, the father who deserved affection and respect. With his immense appeal to the masses, and his peculiar relationship with Congress leaders, Gandhi symbolized in his own person the basic unity of Indian nationalism over a quarter of a century, thus providing a prophylactic against the fatal tendency of nationalist movements towards schism. With other political parties, he stressed the points of contact rather than those of conflict; he did not ridicule or denounce those with whom he differed. With the three Liberal leaders, Tej Bahadur Sapru, M. R. Jayakar and Srinivasa Sastri he corresponded frequently, often thinking aloud with them and seeking their candid reactions. ‘Your truthfulness,’ he wrote to Srinivasa Sastri, ‘is more important to me than your co-operation.’ If he could not develop a similar equation with the Muslim League leaders, it was not for want of trying.

The real significance of the Indian freedom movement in the eyes of Gandhi was that it was waged non-violently. He would have had no interest in it if the Congress had not adopted Satyagraha and subscribed to non-violence. He objected to violence not only because an unarmed people had little chance of success in an armed rebellion, but because he considered violence a clumsy weapon which created more problems than it solved, and left a trail of hatred and bitterness in which genuine reconciliation was almost impossible.

This emphasis on non-violence jarred alike on Gandhi’s British and Indian critics, though for different reasons. To the former non-violence was a camouflage; to the latter it was sheer sentimentalism. To the British, who tended to see the Indian struggle through the prism of European history, the professions of non-violence seemed too good to be true; their eyes were riveted on the stray acts of violence rather than on the
remarkably peaceful nature of Gandhi's campaigns. To the radical Indian politicians who had browsed on the history of the French and Russian revolutions or the Italian and Irish nationalist struggles, it was patent that force would only yield to force, and that it was foolish to miss opportunities and sacrifice tactical gains for reasons more relevant to ethics than to politics.

Gandhi's critics were too prone to apply to his non-violent campaigns yardsticks pertinent to violent warfare. Satyagraha was not designed to 'seize' any particular objectives or to 'crush' the opponent, but to set in motion forces which could lead to his conversion; in such a strategy it was perfectly possible to lose all the battles and win the war. In fact, victory or defeat inadequately describe the object of a Satyagraha campaign: a peace honourable to both parties.

The battles for Indian freedom under Gandhi's leadership were thus waged on the moral, or what is the same thing, the psychological front. 'Even under the most adverse circumstances,' he wrote in January 1920, 'I have found Englishmen amenable to reason and persuasion, and as they always wish to appear just, it is easier to shame them than others into doing the right thing.' The process of conversion was twofold. Indians, no less than the British, needed a change of heart. Gandhi said many hard things about British rule in India, but he said harder things about the evils which divided and corroded Indian society from within.

The final consummation in 1947, the transfer of power, was due to the interaction of numerous national and world forces, but there is no doubt that the timing and the method of British withdrawal were influenced by what Gandhi had said and done for a quarter of a century. In retrospect, it would seem that the three major Satyagraha campaigns in 1920-22, 1930-32 and 1940-42 were so well spaced that they gave time for second thoughts and for that conversion of the British conscience which was Gandhi's ultimate aim. And it is well to remember that in August 1947 it was not only that the Indian
felt a load had fallen off his back, but the Briton in India also felt really free for the first time.

Though his role in the political liberation of India inevitably loomed large in the eyes of the world, the mainspring of Gandhi’s life lay not in politics but in religion. ‘What I want to achieve,’ he wrote in his autobiography, ‘what I have been striving and pining to achieve these thirty years—is to see God face to face, to attain moksha. I live and move and have my being in pursuit of this goal.’ His deepest strivings were spiritual. Finding him in a political deputation, Montagu, the Secretary of State for India, had exclaimed, ‘How have you, a social reformer, found your way into this crowd?’

Gandhi explained that participation in politics was only an extension of his social activity: ‘I could not be leading a religious life unless I identified myself with the whole of mankind, and that I could not do so unless I took part in politics. The whole gamut of man’s activities today constitutes an indivisible whole. You cannot divide social, economic and purely religious work into watertight compartments.’ He did not know, he said, any religion apart from human activity; the spiritual law did not work in a field of its own but expressed itself through the ordinary activities of life. To be truly religious one did not have to retire to the Himalayas nor shrink into the security of the home or a sect.

The dissociation between politics and religion, between statecraft and ethics has lasted so long, however, that neat minds revolt against any mixture of the two. Truth, charity and love are considered virtues applicable only in the domestic and social spheres. In politics expediency seems to be the prime mover. Gandhi’s whole career was a protest against this double morality. He did not divorce the sacred and the secular. His interest in politics derived from the fact that he developed a technique—Satyagraha—which sought to introduce the spirit of religion into politics. The question was often asked by Western observers whether Gandhi was a saint or a politician; he was a saint who did not cease to be one when he entered politics.
Gandhi himself considered the word saint too sacred to be applied to him. He was ‘a humble seeker after truth’, who had caught ‘only the faintest glimmer of that mighty effulgence’. He was, he said, making experiments about some of the eternal verities of life, but could not even claim to be a social scientist because he could show no tangible proof of scientific accuracy in his methods nor such tangible results of experiments as modern science demands. He made no claims to infallibility, and let all the world know when he was groping in the dark. If he thought or spoke of himself as if he were an instrument of God, it was not as a chosen instrument with a special revelation of God’s will. ‘My firm belief is,’ he said, ‘that He reveals himself to every human being, but we shut our ears to the still small voice within.’ When someone represented him as an incarnation of Lord Krishna he described it as a sacrilege. He had often to restrain his admirers when their adoration outran their common sense. During one of his tours, the inhabitants of a village told him that his auspicious presence had made the village well miraculously fill with water. ‘You are fools,’ he reproved them, ‘beyond a doubt it was an accident. I have no more influence with God than you have. Suppose a crow sits on a palm tree at the moment when the tree falls to the ground. Will you imagine that the weight of the bird brought down the tree?’

His humility was not a cultivated virtue, but sprang from a ceaseless struggle for self-mastery in which he remained engaged from his childhood to the last day of his life. ‘For him,’ wrote his secretary Mahadev Desai, ‘the struggle with the opponent within is keener than with the opponent without.’ He described himself as an average man with less than an average ability. ‘I admit,’ he remarked ‘that I am not sharp intellectually. But I don’t mind. There is a limit to the development of the intellect but none to that of the heart.’ One cannot resist the impression that, in exalting the goodness of the heart at the expense of mere intellectual brilliance, Gandhi tended to foster the idea of his own intellectual mediocrity. He did not care much for book learning, but his occasional imprisonments helped him
to catch up with his reading, and what he read he turned to
good account. His autobiography and his history of Satyagraha
in South Africa are proofs of a retentive memory, and both
his colleagues and opponents bore testimony to his keen intellect.
Nevertheless, it is a fact that he considered reasoning a poor
guide beyond a certain point unless it was controlled and directed
by his intuition. The truth he sought was not a static but a
dynamic entity which endlessly continued to unfold its myriad
facets. When charged with inconsistency, he retorted that he
was consistent with truth not with the past. He went on
modifying, correcting and enlarging his ideas in the light of
fresh experience. One can discern a process of evolution even
in his daily prayers; beginning with recitations from Hindu
and Christian scriptures in South Africa, they came to incorporate
verses from the Zend Avesta, the Koran, and Buddhist and
Japanese scriptures. A few hours before his death he wrote out
his last exercise in Bengali, a language which he had started
learning a year earlier so that he could serve riot-torn Bengal
the more efficiently. To the end he retained the zeal and humility
of a student.

Since he was continually elaborating his ideas on every
subject, it was easy to confront him with his own earlier
pronouncements on caste, machinery or khadi and point out
the discrepancies. In the glare of the ruthless publicity in which
he lived, every one of his gestures and words was public property,
but he willingly shared with the world even an ignoble thought
if it happened in a dream to flash across his mind. What he
wrote of Tolstoy is equally true of him: ‘Tolstoy’s so-called
inconsistencies were a sign of his development and passionate
regard for truth. He often seemed inconsistent because he
was continuously outgrowing his own doctrines. His failures
were public; his struggles and triumphs private.’

Rabindranath Tagore once aptly described Gandhi as essentially
‘a lover of men and not of ideas’. Though he loved to reduce
all problems to his moral algebra, Gandhi did not ram his
opinions down anybody’s throat. ‘Never take anything for
a gospel truth,' he warned, 'even if it comes from a Mahatma.' Hind Swaraj, his first political testament, included a scathing attack on modern civilization and all its appurtenances of schools, railways and hospitals, but Gandhi no more tried to foist this philosophy on his followers than he compelled them to change into the loin-cloth. Agatha Harrison has recorded how he used to lecture her on the evils of tea drinking, but whenever she accompanied him on his tours, tea was invariably served to her at 4 p.m. Thousands of people in India and abroad who met him or corresponded with him treasured small acts of courtesy and affection for which, in spite of all his preoccupations he was never too busy. He aspired to identify himself with 'the least, lowliest and the lost'. He used a stone instead of soap for his bath, wrote his letters on little bits of paper with little stumps of pencils which he could hardly hold between his fingers, shaved with a crude country razor and ate with a wooden spoon from a prisoner's bowl. All this austerity, while it may have satisfied some of his own inner needs, was primarily a means to an emotional identification with the Indian masses whose poverty and misery always haunted him; it provided the motive power for all his political, social and economic activities; it gave him his unique hold over the people, and it also, not unoften, created barriers between him and the town-bred Indian intelligentsia.

Gandhi's asceticism sat lightly on him; it did not make of him a killjoy. He had the gaiety of a child. Every one of his visitors could expect to be entertained to a joke or two. 'Do you suffer from nerves?' he was asked by a woman visitor. 'Ask Mrs Gandhi,' straight came the reply, 'she will tell you that I am on my best behaviour with the world but not with her.' 'Well,' continued Mrs Miles, 'my husband is on his best behaviour with me.' 'Then,' retorted Gandhi, 'I am sure that Mr Miles has bribed you heavily.' Asked why he was uncharitable to those who drank, Gandhi answered: 'because I am charitable to those who suffer from the effects of the curse.' 'How many children have you,' he asked a sailor. 'Eight, sir, four sons and
four daughters.' 'I have four sons,' said the Mahatma, 'so I can race with you half-way.' He could extract mirth out of the most unpromising situations. In September 1932, when the Hindu leaders met in Yeravda prison under the shadow of his Poona fast, he sat at the centre of the table and chuckled, 'I preside'.

Gandhi devoted the best part of his life to one crucial problem: how to perfect and extend *ahimsa* (non-violence) in human relationships. On several occasions he declined invitations to tour Europe and America as he saw the absurdity of preaching non-violence abroad before there was a successful demonstration at home. And when at last the British decided to transform Indo-British relations on a basis of equality, as Gandhi had long urged, and a bloodless revolution was in the offing, India was caught in a vicious chain of communal fanaticism and bloodshed. Gandhi saw the fabric of national unity, which he had cherished, shiver into pieces before his eyes. Even as he struggled to guide the forces of violence into the paths of peace, he was haunted by a deep sense of failure. His popularity had not diminished. He was hailed as the Father of the Nation. The leaders of the Government paid him homage. He continued to draw huge crowds which shouted 'Victory to Mahatma Gandhi'; these words had always grated on his ears but now they cut him to the quick. For there could be no victory for him when parts of India were given over to fear and violence. The tragedy stemmed from several causes, some of them rooted in recent Indian history and others in a political-cum-religious movement which had temporarily unhinged the minds of men. Gandhi lived long enough to witness two spectacular triumphs of his method; his fasts shamed Calcutta and Delhi into peace. And his death achieved, what he had tried so hard in his last days to achieve, the return of sanity to the Indo-Pakistan sub-continent.

For Gandhi, however, the validity of non-violence was even independent of his own success or failure. His criticisms of Western materialism and militarism in *Hind Swaraj* were made six years before the outbreak of the First World War, when
Europe was at the zenith of its prestige and power. These criticisms may have appeared quixotic fifty years ago; today, as the world trembles on the brink of a Third World War, they seem prophetic. By spurning material progress at the cost of moral values, and by irrevocably renouncing violence, Gandhi took a line in direct opposition to the two dominant ideologies of the twentieth century, capitalism and communism. He visualized and worked for a society which would provide for the essential needs of the community (and no more), and in which the decentralization of economic and political structures would minimize the incentives for exploitation within and conflict without. Such a society could, he believed, dispense with the coercive apparatus of the modern state, and depend upon non-violent techniques not only to maintain order but to protect itself against external aggression.

It is difficult to say whether Gandhi's dream will come true. Nations, like individuals, are tempted to continue along the beaten path, even though it may end in a blind alley. Gandhi knew the difficulties of translating his non-violent dream into the world of reality. But he refused to compromise on what he held to be the fundamentals. To the last he affirmed that even good ends do not justify dubious means; that our real enemies are our own fears, greeds and egotisms; that we must change ourselves before we can change others; that the laws of the family, of truth and love and charity, are applicable to groups, communities and nations; and above all, that 'non-violence is the law of our species, as violence is the law of the brute'. To those who are charged with the destinies of nations, all this may sound a very desirable but a very distant ideal. Yet, in the thermo-nuclear age, if civilization is not to disintegrate into a mass of torn flesh and molten metal, the premises of Gandhi have an immediate relevance.