

Gandhi's Invisible Hands

A dust-caked library left behind by his inner circle shows how Mahatma Gandhi's saintly, putatively solitary crusade for peace was made possible by a well-honed enterprise of resourceful supporters.

BY IAN DESAI

ON SEPTEMBER 4, 1915, IN THE STICKY HEAT OF late summer, Mahadev Desai and Narahari Parikh walked without speaking along the Sabarmati River, on the outskirts of Ahmedabad, a city in northwestern India. Desai and Parikh were best friends who shared everything, so the silence between them was uncharacteristic. Their day, however, had been highly unusual, and they were both lost in reflection on what had transpired. When they reached the Ellis Bridge, which spanned the surging waters of the Sabarmati and supported a steady flow of carriage, mule, foot, and, occasionally, car traffic from the bustling city, they stopped and faced each other. They were both thinking about a meeting they had had a few hours earlier with a 46-year-old lawyer who had recently returned to India after living for two decades in South Africa.

Desai finally broke their prolonged silence: "Narahari, I have half a mind to go and sit at the feet of this man."

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This statement, in which Desai contemplated abandoning his nascent legal career in order to devote himself to the service of someone he had met for the first time that day, changed the course of his life. It also helped change the course of history for a colonized nation seeking freedom and its entrenched imperial rulers. With these words, the 23-year-old Desai began a journey that would produce one of the most important partnerships the modern world has known. The lawyer they had met had extraordinary ambitions that were growing by the day, and he had started to assemble a team of gifted individuals to help him achieve his visions. That lawyer's name was Mohandas Gandhi, and in Mahadev Desai the future Mahatma had found a crucial partner for his historic cause.

In March 2005 I was in Ahmedabad, now a major industrial metropolis. It had not rained for nine months, and the temperature hovered above 100 degrees. Although the room I was in felt like an oven, it happened to be a library housed in a museum on



The iconic Great Soul: Mahatma Gandhi leads the way during his historic Salt March, gathering new followers as he moves toward the Arabian Sea.

the site of Gandhi's former residence, the Satyagraha Ashram. Wiping my hands clean, I reached for a book from the rusting metal case in front of me. Gently brushing off dust, cobwebs, and an insect from the surface of the volume, I opened it and examined the elegant signature on the inside cover identifying its owner as "Mahadev Desai." What the signature didn't tell me was that this book, along with several thousand others, was read, used, and shared jointly by Desai (no relation to me) and his boss, Mahatma Gandhi.

As I explored the old, dust-caked books in this startling collection over the following weeks, months, and years, a story of Gandhi's life and work unfolded before me that diverged from the accounts I knew. The very presence of such a substantial collection of books in proximity to Gandhi—who famously espoused a philosophy of non-possession—suggested that the image of simplicity and detachment long associated with the Mahatma, or "Great Soul," was misleading: There was clearly a hidden degree of complexity to Gandhi's life.

From the heart of this library, I began to learn that the common conception of Gandhi as a solitary, saintly hero who stood up to the British Empire and led India toward independence was incomplete. Gandhi was actually an energetic and effective director of one of the 20th century's most innovative social enterprises. He was, in essence, an exceptional entrepreneur who relied on a tight-knit community of coworkers—and an extensive store of intellectual resources—to support him and his work.

The origins of Gandhi's enterprise stretch back into the 19th century, well before he became known as the Mahatma. Gandhi was born in 1869 in Porbandar, a city on the Kathiawar Peninsula in Gujarat Province, facing the Arabian Sea, 250 miles west of Ahmedabad. The youngest child of a

Africa. He resolved to fight the racial injustices around him, and by the time he finally moved back to India in 1915, two decades later, he had transformed himself from a relatively unknown provincial barrister into a political powerhouse and social reformer with an international reputation.

It was during a campaign for the rights of the Indian community in South Africa that Gandhi first came to rely on the support of a cohort of eccentric and talented men and women. Most of these collaborators—who were of both Indian and European backgrounds—were volunteers, and were housed at Gandhi's two experimental communities in South Africa, the Phoenix Settlement and Tolstoy Farm. These institutions, loosely based on ancient Indian religious communities called ashrams, became the headquarters for Gandhi's activism, which was based on his philosophy of Satyagraha, or "truth force," and its attendant practice of civil disobedience.

Gandhi's collaborators not only assisted him with the practical elements of his political campaigns and residential communities; they also served as his intellectual companions and introduced him to the

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successful political administrator, Gandhi grew up in a part of India shaped by a rich tradition of cross-cultural exchange. Despite being a shy and diffident student, the young Gandhi made a dramatic decision to leave his homeland and seek his future abroad by enrolling in a law program in London in 1888. Almost immediately following his return to India three years later, he accepted a job as a lawyer for a Gujarati trading firm in South Africa.

At the turn of the 20th century, South Africa was home to a sizable population of Indian immigrants, primarily indentured laborers, who were often treated as second-class citizens. Accustomed to respectful race relations from his time in London, Gandhi was startled and outraged by the racial discrimination he experienced and witnessed while living in South

writings of a variety of authors. Although he was busy juggling his legal career and increasingly high-profile political work, Gandhi took advantage of his frequent travels around South Africa to immerse himself in books on religious history, literature, politics, and other subjects of interest to him.

Though philosophically he disavowed material possessions, Gandhi became a savvy and serial collector of books and people. When he returned to India, he brought a number of his coworkers from South Africa with him as well as almost 10,000 books and pamphlets. Once in India, he chose a secluded spot outside Ahmedabad on the banks of the Sabar-mati River as the site of a new ashram. The Satyagraha Ashram quickly became the focal point of Gandhi's social and political endeavors around India

and a hub for his burgeoning community of coworkers.

Gandhi's nephew Maganlal had been a linchpin of his communities in South Africa, and he continued to serve as a foreman of sorts for Gandhi in India, leading his experiments in agriculture and other fields involving physical work that were key components of his ideal of self-sufficient living. Yet Gandhi still needed someone who could match his tremendous intellectual, social, and spiritual capacities, who would work for him and sustain his causes. He found such a person later that year, when he met Desai. Despite the rapport immediately felt on both sides, Gandhi instructed the young man to wait a year before joining his movement: The work he was about to start would be all-consuming.

Desai officially joined Gandhi in 1917, fulfilling the vision of his future he had first shared with Narahari Parikh on their walk by the Sabarmati River. From the outset, Desai's daily routine was grueling. He woke before Gandhi arose at 4 AM in order to work on the Mahatma's schedule and make other preparations. He was by Gandhi's side throughout the day, taking notes on his meetings and various activities and helping him draft correspondence and articles. (Desai's son Narayan, who grew up working with Gandhi and his father, recalled a number of occasions when Gandhi had only one change to make to Desai's articles: He replaced Desai's authorial initials, M.D., with his own, M.K.G.) Finally, after Gandhi had retired, Desai wrote a diary account of the Mahatma's day so that no important detail went unrecorded.

In addition to Desai, who performed his role under the title of personal secretary, and Gandhi's family members—especially his wife, Kasturbai—the Mahatma's inner circle in India came to include a second secretary named Pyarelal; an English admiral's daughter who abandoned life in Britain to live in the austere environment of Gandhi's community after reading a biography of the Mahatma; and Columbia University-trained economist J. C. Kumarappa, among others. As many as 200 people lived with Gandhi at the Satyagraha Ashram at the institution's zenith.

Ever since reading *Unto This Last*, John Ruskin's 1877 paean to the dignity of manual labor, in South Africa, Gandhi had had a credo to match his Victorian

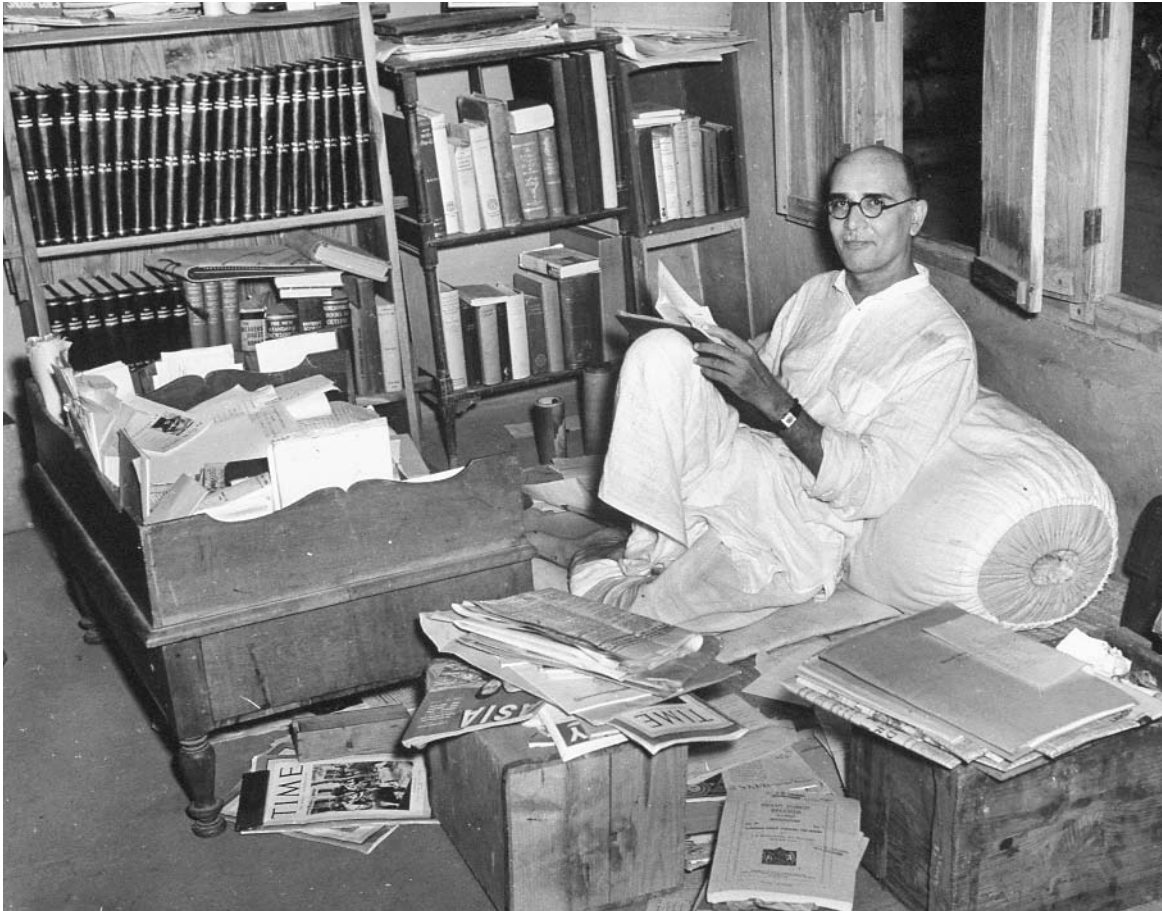
attitude of industriousness. Accordingly, he transformed his ashram into a workshop where each member engaged in substantial amounts of communal service, from working in the community's kitchen to teaching in the ashram school to cleaning the shared latrines. The latter task was one of Gandhi's favorite chores, both to do himself and to assign to others. He saw a person's readiness to clean latrines, a major taboo in India, as an indication of a willingness to transgress deeply embedded social values in service of his movement's larger ideals.

This regimen underscored Gandhi's central philosophical tenet: For India to achieve true independence, it needed a widespread ethos of service. More than political freedom from the British, independence to Gandhi implied the ability of a society's system of self-governance to serve the interest of its citizens completely and without corruption. Gandhi was determined to show India (and the British) exactly what he meant by such service. A demonstration of selflessness and self-sufficiency, then, was the first crucial responsibility of Gandhi's enterprise. However, given the nature of his social and political campaigns, it was by no means the only one.

Of all the political events in Gandhi's life, perhaps none is more famous than the Salt March of 1930. That theatrical act of defiance—in protest of the heavy tax on salt imposed by the British in India—catapulted Gandhi to new heights in his political career, as the image of this frail individual challenging a mighty empire captured the hearts and imaginations of millions of people around the world.

Yet like many popular conceptions of Gandhi, this image is incomplete. Absent are the 78 members of the Satyagraha Ashram who accompanied him on his march, as well as numerous aides, lieutenants, and volunteers who worked behind the scenes to stage the historic event. There would have been no Salt March, no iconic Gandhi images, without them.

A month before the march, Gandhi's colleague Vallabhbhai Patel led a team that canvassed arid Gujarat Province to determine the best route. Chief among their considerations were the route's proxim-



The Mahatma called his longtime secretary Mahadev Desai, pictured here at his periodical-laden desk in 1940, his “alter ego.”

ity to salt deposits and to towns where local government officials would be likely to resign their posts on Gandhi's arrival in support of the protest, as well as easy access for the news media so that it could report on the march's progress. Gandhi had become a master of employing media coverage to make his efforts successful, and he and his team orchestrated the march so that it would be a sustained media event. They plotted a trail for a three-week trek from Gandhi's ashram in Ahmedabad south toward the Arabian Sea, paralleling the railway line, which would be the primary means for maintaining communication—by both post and messengers—between the marchers and the ashram headquarters, as well as the conduit for the media covering the march.

Meanwhile, at the Satyagraha Ashram, Gandhi's secretariat was busy marshaling evidence demon-

strating the link between the salt tax and the degradation of Indian society, and publishing it in Gandhi's weekly journals *Young India* and *Navajivan*, where the arguments could be picked up by mainstream media outlets. Parikh and Desai scoured the vast print resources in the ashram—not only Desai's personal library, but the main library, which housed the thousands of books that Gandhi had brought back from South Africa—for statistics about salt and the Salt Act. Desai used these figures in articles in *Young India* as well as in Gandhi's communications with the imperial government and the speeches he helped Gandhi draft. Gandhi himself contributed to the information-gathering efforts, urging associates to send him publications and other sources of information on salt and related subjects.

Gandhi's personal accounts and other articles from

the Salt March and Desai's pieces in *Young India* and *Navajivan* detailing the narrative drama of the march, along with reports and photographs in the mainstream news media, put the Mahatma and his cause before a growing audience in India and around the world. Yet the organizational sophistication behind Gandhi's dramatic march never got a mention in the headlines the enterprise worked so hard to produce. Its invisibility was partly by design: By effacing their own efforts, Gandhi's associates reinforced his image as a simple and self-reliant crusader.

While most traces of Gandhi's enterprise were indeed erased from the historical record, Mahadev Desai's library is a notable exception. Gandhi's team compiled and utilized an extensive variety of intellectual resources to support the Mahatma's mission. Desai was the heart of this intellectual operation, helping Gandhi refine his philosophy over the course of his career and providing him with concrete information to use in his ideological struggle with British imperialism.

As I studied Desai's library, it became clear to me why these books were important to Gandhi: If you were living in the first part of the 20th century and your goal was to oust the Raj from India and establish *swaraj*, or self-rule, on a national scale, these would be the books you would want on your shelves.

Desai's library covers almost the full spectrum of human topics, and the books in it were used as general references on particular subjects as well as sources for specific facts. First are books that represent the collective knowledge the British had amassed about India since the beginning of their engagement with the subcontinent in the 17th century. The second category of material comprises volumes that convey Britons' knowledge about their own society and history. Understanding how the British understood India as well as how the British understood them-

selves was a vital component of Gandhi's strategy. A third category within Desai's library embraces thousands of works that might come under the heading of "indigenous knowledge": by Indians, for Indians, and about India. These books were especially relevant to Gandhi's mission of building a self-sustaining and self-governing Indian nation in the wake of imperial rule.

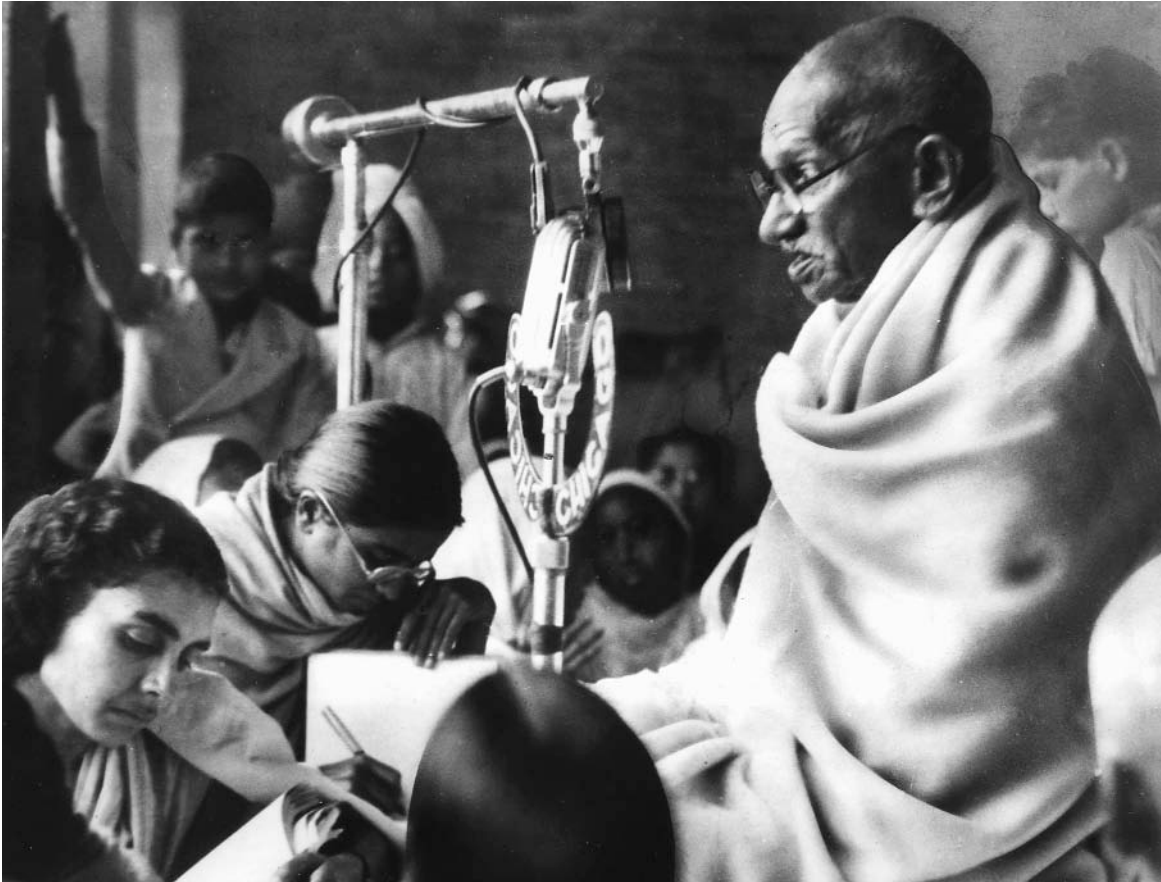
Rounding out the collection is a dizzying assortment of books on subjects close to the heart of Gandhi's work: imperialism and counter-imperialism, health and nutrition, education, religion, literature, philosophy, economics, and world history. Scanning the shelves of Desai's library, I picked out works as diverse as the writings of Winston Churchill, the plays of William Shakespeare (in a beautiful miniature vellum set), the poetry of Percy Bysshe Shelley, Vincent Smith's *History of India* (1907), Reynold Nicholson's *Mystics of Islam* (1914), and William James's *Varieties*

DESAI WAS THE HEART of Gandhi's intellectual operation, helping him refine his philosophy.

of Religious Experience (1911) alongside titles such as R. D. Ranade's *A Constructive Survey of Upanishadic Philosophy: Being a Systematic Introduction to Indian Metaphysics* (1926), Tulsidas's version of *The Ramayana* (in an edition published in 1922), and S. R. Narayana Ayyar's *Experiments in Bee-Culture* (1938).

Once I grasped the scope of the collection before me, I was puzzled by two questions: When did Desai and Gandhi have time to read all of these books, and how did they get them in the first place?

The answers to both questions were, in fact, inside the books themselves. A variety of dedications from friends and admirers in India and around the world, stamps of Indian and British booksellers, and other notations revealed a staggering number of sources. These books were the fruits of the transnational intel-



Gandhi speaks at a prayer meeting during his fast protesting communal violence in January 1948. Gandhi persuaded Indian religious leaders to halt their hostilities, but passions were again inflamed when Gandhi was assassinated 12 days after he ended his hunger strike.

lectual network in which Gandhi and company were active participants.

Still, what good is a great library if its contents are never consulted? Given how little free time Desai and Gandhi had, it is hard to imagine when they found the opportunity to read in this vast collection.

Two important types of evidence shed light on not only when but how these books were read. On the inside covers of hundreds of the volumes are small indigo stamps surrounded by a series of dates and signatures. These are Indian prison stamps, recording when each volume entered and exited the penitentiary. Here was the missing time needed to read so many books: when Gandhi, Desai, and their coworkers were locked in jail for acts of civil disobedience. As Gandhi himself noted, "In this world good books make up for the absence of good companions, so that all Indians,

if they want to live happily in jail, should accustom themselves to reading good books."

Because Desai, in particular, was an active reader, we can follow his progress through many of the books in his library and see how he mined these intellectual resources for material useful to Gandhi's movement. Furthermore, writing in the margins and other parts of the books indicates that many of them were read by more than one person within Gandhi's circle, including the Mahatma himself. Indeed, Gandhi's political colleagues, including Vallabhbhai Patel (who became independent India's first home minister) and Jawaharlal Nehru (India's first prime minister), sent books to Desai while he was in one prison and they were each in another. Far from stymieing the work of Gandhi's enterprise, by repeatedly arresting Gandhi and his coworkers the British unwittingly supported it.

In his lifetime, Gandhi was arrested 14 times on two continents. By the time of his final incarceration, in August 1942, at the start of the Quit India movement to force the British out of the subcontinent once and for all, his enterprise and stature had grown to such an extent that the British had to take special care to keep him and his assistants confined without further agitating the public. Gandhi was imprisoned along with his wife, Mahadev Desai, and several other aides in the Aga Khan Palace in the city of Pune.

The strain of organizing Quit India agitation had taken a toll on the entire group, as the demand for complete and immediate independence had brought a swift and heavy response from the British around India. Desai particularly worked himself into a frenzy of concern about the 73-year-old Gandhi's fragile health. Nevertheless, after settling into the palace prison, Desai and Gandhi got back to their regular work routine of reading and writing. Eight days after their arrest, following a morning spent taking Gandhi's dictation, Desai began to feel lightheaded. Within minutes he suffered a massive heart attack, and died shortly thereafter in Gandhi's arms. Just 50 years old, he had spent half of his life serving Gandhi and his mission.

By the time Gandhi was released, in 1944, Kasturbai—his life partner and wife of 64 years—had also died. Without Kasturbai and Desai, Gandhi's enterprise lost its twin engines, and sputtered as it tried to support the Mahatma during the dramatic run-up to independence in 1947 and the accompanying chaotic partition of the subcontinent into two countries, India and Pakistan. As tensions increased over the issue of dividing the subcontinent, Gandhi assumed the responsibility of mediating between the vying political factions while also trying to calm an increasingly anxious and aggravated citizenry. While the first part of Gandhi's vision of *swaraj* was fulfilled with the peaceful transfer of power and the departure of the British, India's political freedom did not free it from religious strife. Violent episodes of communal antagonism erupted as millions of people migrated in both directions across the new borders separating the eastern and western

halves of the Muslim state of Pakistan from Hindu-majority India.

Gandhi spent most of the last part of his life—both before and after independence—traveling from one fractious part of India to the next, attempting to halt outbreaks of violence, particularly between Hindus and Muslims (and often succeeding, in ways the government could not, leading the last viceroy of British India, Lord Louis Mountbatten, to call him a “one-man boundary force”). As he walked through devastated villages, he was often physically assisted by his two grandnieces, who supported him on either side and whom he called his “two walking sticks.” Although they helped him stand until the end, his grandnieces and the other remaining members of his entourage could not replace the likes of Kasturbai and Desai, and the Mahatma's power was accordingly diminished. The girls, Abha and Manu, were at his side when he was shot and killed in New Delhi in 1948 by a Hindu extremist who believed that Gandhi was being too conciliatory toward Muslims.

Despite the contributions of Gandhi's enterprise to his life and work, it continues to be overlooked in both popular and academic studies of the Mahatma. Consequently, we often draw the wrong lessons from Gandhi's story. The real magic of the Mahatma was not a trick of popular charisma, but in fact a deft ability to recruit, manage, and inspire a team of talented individuals who worked tirelessly in his service. Gandhi himself was one of the few people to recognize how this phenomenon worked. “With each day I realize more and more that my mahatmaship, which is a mere adornment, depends on others. I have shone with the glory borrowed from my innumerable co-workers,” he wrote in 1928 in *Navajivan*.

Recognizing this fact does not diminish the rare and valuable qualities Gandhi himself possessed. Rather, it acknowledges that great work is the product of collaborative processes, and that many hands working together toward a common purpose can achieve monumental results. In Gandhi's case, it was the relationship between a visionary leader and the team supporting him—and their collective use of the right resources, such as the books in Mahadev Desai's library—that paved the way for extraordinary and lasting accomplishments. ■