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# Introducing Mahatma Gandhi to Children Through Narratives

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**Abstract**

*From time immemorial, children have loved listening to stories—of faraway lands, of battles, of adventures of heroic figures, both legendary and real. Oral narration was followed by written script, later expressed in printed form and multimedia. Literature emerged in various genres: drama, poetry, biography, novel, and short story. However, literature written specifically for children is relatively recent, especially biographies written for children. Narratives and biographical sketches, detailing the life of an individual must take into account all available evidence to create the illusion of a life actually being lived in a certain context and age. The task becomes even more challenging when one sets out to create a book for children, as they have not yet been exposed to that depth of history which would facilitate their imagination.*

*While commemorating the birth anniversary of the Mahatma Gandhi, one begins to reflect on his thoughts and ideas for self and society. What then is Gandhiji's vision? More importantly, how do children perceive this vision? What is the understanding of children, in India as well as in other countries, on Gandhiji's concepts of non-violence, of Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam, and world peace?*

*This paper provides an overview of selected narratives on Mahatma Gandhi, each of which provides unique glimpses of his life and a message, examined within the parameters of children's literature.*

## Introduction

Storytelling basically evolved from oral traditions of explaining natural phenomena and transmitting survival information. These early narratives strengthened social bonding within a community: the heroic exploits of legendary figures, of celebrating resilience and fundamental human experience.

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Children in all countries and cultures have always loved to listen to stories—of lands far away, of gods and demons, and of magic. The stories were generally narrated by grandparents and elders, and passed down from generation to generation. With the invention of scripts, oracy gradually gave way to literacy. Narratives were expressed in written script (juxtaposed by the oral) in printed form. The invention of the printing press, and decades later, the emergence of digital media added more dimensions to narration. Literature emerged in various genres, from classical drama, poetry, and biography, followed by the novel and the short story.

However, literature written specifically for children is comparatively recent. Print began with the same stories that children were familiar with: mythology, fairy tales, and folktales. In India too, a similar pattern was followed. Soon came magazines in multiple languages that catered solely to young readers. It was not long before biographies for children were published, showcasing the lives of remarkable people.

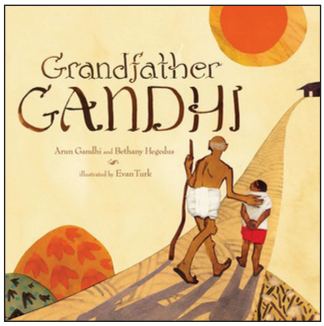
## Biographies for Children

The task becomes even more challenging when one has to create a book for children. A biography provides the life of an individual in detail— childhood, family, significant events, relationships, education, career, and death. The earliest biographies were unappealing to young readers, as the content would be too dense, and the tone was that of an adult preaching to them. Recognising this, biographies for young readers began to employ some flexibility; they may include only some events, and not necessarily ending in death. Furthermore, the author has to sieve through the collected material, and through selection of facts and structure of events, create the illusion of a life actually being lived in a certain context and age. In addition, and although not explicitly stated, a well-written biography uses an individual's life as a vehicle inter-alia to illuminate broader historical issues.

While the idea of a true story, about a real person, appeals to young minds, such narratives have a way of turning dry and pedantic. To condense an entire life within the attention span of young readers while at the same time keeping it informative and interesting, requires sensitive handling and a child-friendly approach.

This paper provides an overview of selected narratives of Mahatma Gandhi, each of which provides unique glimpses of his life and messages. They are examined within the parameters of children's literature—interesting content, attractiveness of illustrations, clarity of language, and age-appropriate vocabulary. They are also studied in terms of authenticity of the time-period portrayed, the avoidance of stereotypes and prejudice, and their relevance to contemporary times.

***Grandfather Gandhi***




**Author** : Arun Gandhi and Bethany Hegedus
**Illustrator** : Evan Turk
**Year of Publication** : 2010
**Publisher** : Atheneum
**Target Readership** : 6–8 years

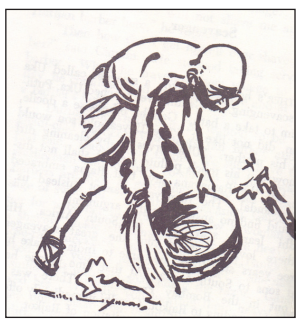
This is a beautifully illustrated narrative by Arun Gandhi the fifth grandson of Mahatma Gandhi, along with co-author Bethany Hegedus. The text is minimal. The author's ability to tell the story using simple words and short sentences in a way that would be readable and interesting to children, yet without dumbing down anything is indeed praiseworthy. The work is age-appropriate in terms of vocabulary and content.

The book describes young Arun's visit along with his family to his grandfather Mahatma Gandhi's village. Arun's initial shyness is overcome by his grandfather's welcome. He praises Arun for walking the distance from the railway station, which makes the young boy happy. Arun is good at football, and played every day with the village boys. But one day, a boy pushes him in the football field, and Arun feels overwhelming anger. He confesses to his grandfather immediately, expecting disapproval and disappointment. But Gandhiji explains that anger is like lightning. You can use it to destroy or you can use it with a sense of purpose.

Through this intensely personal narrative, a complex issue has been put into child-friendly terms. It shows how Gandhi's anger went on to lead his people to freedom. As author Bethany Hegedus says in the 'Note from the Authors' at the end, "The world we live in needs to heal—to heal from the wars that are fought, to the bullying epidemic, to mass killings by lone gunmen, to poverty, to hunger, and to issues that contribute to internal anger being outwardly expressed in violent actions". Gandhi's message never grows old.

The illustrations are the highlight of this book. Using the technique of mixed media illustrations, they are rendered in watercolour, paper collage, cotton fabric, cotton, yarn, gouache, pencil, tea, and tin foil. The art doesn't just support the text here. It weaves itself into the story, becoming impossible to separate from the story.

***Bahuroope Gandhi***



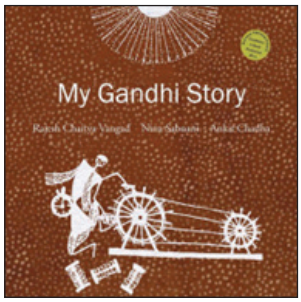
**Author** : Anu Bandopadhyaya
**Foreword** : Jawaharlal Nehru
**First Publisher** : Popular Prakashan
**Year of Publication** : April 1964
**Reprint Edition** : NCERT, 2014
**Target Readership** : 8–10 years

The simple yet flowing language adds to the book's appeal. The vocabulary used is age-appropriate, which can be quite refreshing, unlike many history books filled with jargon. The chapters are short, with headings that portray the different roles of Gandhi, such as scavenger, author, washerman, weaver, etc.

As the author says, "I wanted to present Gandhi as a willing sharer in many such labours which others do to earn their livelihood, not for the love of the work. I definitely do not want to add more persons to the band of blind worshippers of Gandhiji. But I would very much like the young of today to know that Gandhiji was not merely the Father of the Nation or the Architect of Freedom, and then criticise him."

The foreword is penned by Jawaharlal Nehru, who states that "Gandhiji functioned in a variety of ways, quite apart from politics and the public scene. The book will perhaps give us a greater insight into him." Such insights are essential for a generation that may have seen only photographs of Gandhiji in the principal's office, or in government offices, or as busts/ statues in public parks or crossroads. The book is available in other Indian languages as well.

***My Gandhi Story***




**Author** : Nina Sabnani, Ankit Chadha
**Illustrator** : Rajesh Chaitya Vangad
**Year of Publication** : 2010
**Publisher** : Tulika
**Target Readership** : 6–8 years

This book is the result of three minds—an artist of the Warli tradition, an animation filmmaker, and a storyteller, all of whom come together in a unique collaboration to create a very visual Gandhi story, tracing his journey from Mohandas to Mahatma.

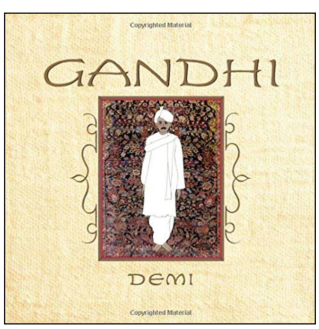
There are three voices that tell the story—Rajesh the narrator; a child who asks questions; and Gandhiji, or Bapu himself. The book talks about young Mohandas, whose mind was impacted strongly by the tale of Harishchandra, the righteous king who always upheld truth.

It recounts incidents from his childhood and the strong influence of his honest God-fearing parents. The depiction of small-town life makes young readers feel that he is 'one of us'.

Warli art is an ancient Indian tribal folk art painted on walls, often showcasing scenes of farming, playing,

or travelling, reflecting the joy and routine of everyday life. The illustrator Vangad has utilised Warli art, with its seemingly simple strokes, to make it relatable to the content. There are recurring themes of everyday life in book—of buying a ticket and going on a journey by ship and by train, of physical work, of crowds gathering to hear a speaker, a villager spinning a charkha, and so on. (In an interview, the authors recalled with amusement that during the book launch, many children initially mistook the charkha on the cover page to be an old kind of bicycle!) Additionally, photographs are juxtaposed with the illustrations, such as Gandhiji's ouster from the train in Africa, his interaction with the common people, and his determination to win justice through Satyagraha. The idea of discrimination, based solely on the colour of one's skin, is objectively presented. Readers can relate it to ideas of peace and truth, and that non-violence does not mean cowardice.

***Gandhi***




**Author and Illustrator :** Demi
**Publisher :** Margaret K. McElderry Books
**Year of Publication :** 2001
**Target Readership :** 7–9 years

The book opens with an apt quotation from Chapter 5 of Bhagavad Gita. It then chronologically states his birth, upbringing, education, and moves on to his experiences in Africa and the Indian freedom struggle.

The short attention span of young readers, along with their limited knowledge of the world, makes for special demands on the text and illustrations. The author is conscious of the average age of the target audience of the book and has taken care to state facts of history clearly.

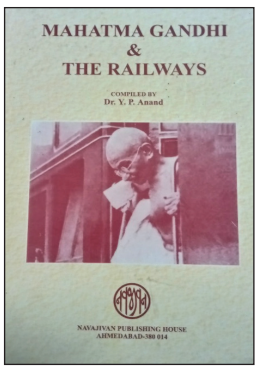
Demi's artwork is breathtaking—she designs every page with intricate illustrations incorporating gold ink to create a subtle illumination. The illustrations greatly enhance the narrative; in fact, they may be studied as paintings on their own merit.

For readers, this is a unique advantage that the book has to offer—only an author who is also the illustrator could have brought out the fantastical quality of an artistic and literary imagination merged as one.

The Author's Note gives information to young readers on how Gandhiji's idea of non-violence was an upshot of his religious upbringing. It also speaks of the admiration he evoked among world leaders. Further, it mentions his autobiography *The Story of My Experiments with Truth*, where he states that civil disobedience must be respectful and restrained. Through such statements, the book investigates the puzzle of claims and

plausible counterarguments. As such, it is different from most biographies written for children, which would treat the young reader as a passive recipient of facts. This book recognises the ability of a child to read critically.

***Mahatma Gandhi and the Railways***




**Compiler** : Y.P. Anand
**Publication** : Navjivan Publishing House, Ahmedabad
**Year of Publication** : 2011
**Target Readership** : 10–12 years

The book is compiled in 2001–2002 by Y.P. Anand, the Director of National Gandhi Museum, New Delhi, who was also a former chairman of the Railway Board, Government of India. He firmly believed that most of the writings of Gandhi, who was a distinguished traveller, is as relevant today as it was in his time. Anand has provided an introduction and context to each extract in such a manner that the whole text reads like a continuous narrative.

Children are fascinated by trains—engines, the track, crowds, railway stations, signals, etc. The National Rail Museum, for instance, is a place of interest for school excursions and sometimes family outing as well.

This book was first brought out in April 2002, when the Indian Railways was celebrating its 150th year in India. As part of the celebrations, the Ministry of Railways decided to publish a compilation of the extracts of Gandhiji's writings related to the railways, as well as photographs.

Although the book was not written exclusively for children, it would be interesting to young readers aged 10–12 years.

Teachers and other elders are familiar with the humiliating experience that he suffered soon after his arrival in South Africa, when he was thrown out of the first-class railway compartment by a railway official, even though he had a first-class ticket. He was told by the Indian traders that such humiliating discrimination was their daily lot. This incident was a turning point in his life as he resolved to fight against injustice.

Gandhiji's experience of rail travel over the years is graphically narrated in this book. While he was still in his thirties and a practising barrister in Natal, South Africa, he came to India.

After returning to India in 1915, the primary mode of his journey across the length and breadth of the country was through trains. He has written quite extensively about his experience and observation during these journeys.

It would be of interest to children to know that rail travel was once a novelty! However, the conditions in trains were not quite good—the

compartments were overcrowded, only the strongest obtained seats, bribing railway officials for the tickets, and passengers would spit in the compartment, which Gandhiji would clean up himself; he also advised his followers to do so uncomplainingly. To young readers, this would be an eye-opener, and introduction to the concepts of cleanliness and non-violence. Furthermore, it would also evoke in their minds a sense of gratitude for the things and services they enjoy now, and not to take anything for granted.

The National Rail Museum, New Delhi had a photo exhibition on 'Mahatma Gandhi and the Railways'. Around 50 photographs have been interwoven in the extracts that find place in the book.

The extracts are taken from various references, most of them primary sources, which are listed in the end of the book.

The titles of the chapters are interesting too. For example, 'The Journey from Mohandas to Mahatma', 'Gandhiji's Romance with the Railways', 'The Incognito Traveller', and so on.

Gandhiji's last journey alive by train was from Kolkata to Delhi on 7–9 September 1947. But truly, his last journey was in the special train which carried his '*asthis*' (ashes) from Delhi to Allahabad on 11 February 1948 for immersing at the holy confluence (the *sangam*) of the Ganga, Yamuna, and the mythical Saraswati.

## Conclusion

A large number of books have been written on the life of Mahatma Gandhi and his message for humanity. They have appeared in several languages of the world. On a parallel note, there have also been questions about his ideas, their utility, suitability, and whether they can be applied in today's context. However, glimpses of his life and snippets of his message may be provided to young readers. At the very least, it would enhance their knowledge and perhaps later provide a base for studying the trajectory of a national figure. Children's literature can, to a large extent, influence the thinking of impressionable minds. Concepts such as truth and non-violence are eternal. One only needs to discover the Gandhi within oneself.

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