

# Ghandi's walk changed India

By JOAN MAYO

Mahatma Gandhi was assassinated Jan. 30, 1948. Shot during his nightly prayer meeting by a fanatical high caste Hindu who opposed his efforts to obtain equal rights for minority groups.

For 55 years Gandhi had struggled to convince the authorities both in South Africa and India of his philosophy, that to divide by reason of religion or social bearing was wrong.

*My religion has no geographical limits*

*My religion is based on truth and non-violence*

*My religion forbids me to hate anybody*

*Religion is not for separating people—*

*It is to bind them.*

Born into a high caste Hindu family, Gandhi's humiliating experience with racial prejudice in South Africa in 1893, started him on a path of social reform. Although his African assignment was for only one year, he remained 21 years, fighting for equal rights for Indians. In all his efforts to unite and strengthen the Indian community, Gandhi stressed the point that rights involved obligations. His emphasis was on good citizenship.

When the Boer War broke out in 1899, he had enough support to offer the natal government the support of the Indian community, whose right it had largely denied. He was allowed to organize an ambulance corps of over 1,000 men whose conduct and particularly his own won praise.

Gandhi's affluent lifestyle as a

lawyer contradicted his inner feelings. He had long since accepted the idea that we are our brother's keepers. As a result he gave up his material possessions and moved to a small farm, where he formed his first ashram. The Indian Relief Act was passed in 1914 and Gandhi and his family returned to India.

Within five years he was embroiled in a struggle for Indian home rule and social reforms. But first he travelled the country learning the needs of the people. It was on this epic journey he discovered the real India, the starkness of its 700,000 villages caused him to write, "I dare not possess anything which I do not want." But Gandhi denied he was a socialist, saying, "I do not want to dispossess those who have got possessions."

What he advocated for the relief of poverty was the revival of rural life by the recovery of the village industries. One of the chief of these was the spinning and weaving of cloth in the home. Before long he was embroiled in workers disputes, tax burdens and better living conditions.

Negotiations with the British government for a new constitution for India failed to offer fair provisions for the untouchables who Gandhi had renamed "Harijans — Children of God." Even though he was in prison he entered upon a fast which nearly ended his life. Amendments were finally agreed upon and as a result the Yeravda Pact decreed that "no one shall be regarded as untouchable by reason



of his birth."

Upon release from prison Gandhi continued his plan of civil disobedience. He walked barefoot back and forth across India, quelling anti-government riots. The Moslem League under the leadership of Jinnah, was pressing for a separate country for the Moslem minority. Violent battles broke out between Hindus and Moslems. The rioting became so severe that the Prime Minister in England sent Sir Stafford Cripps to India with the

proposal that if the violence would stop now, Great Britain would begin negotiations for independence as soon as the war in Europe ended. The British proposal included the right for any province to withdraw on their own which would have resulted in a divided India, which Gandhi and the congress refused to accept.

By 1947 the war had ended but the situation within India was getting worse. Finally the British government took control of the situation and proposed to divide India into a smaller country for the Moslems and the larger one for those who desired to remain in India.

Even though Gandhi was hurt and disappointed at the plans to divide the country, he realized that a divided India was better than anarchy, so he announced at his regular prayer meetings that neither the Viceroy nor the British were to be blamed for partition but only the disunity of Indians themselves.

The new constitution had no provision for the poorer classes as he had stipulated. On Jan. 13, 1948, at 78 years of age, Gandhi entered his final fast. As a result the government guaranteed the future safety and behavior of all communities and agreed to turn over to Pakistan the money due them under the terms of the agreement.

On Jan. 30, as he reached his nightly prayer meeting, Gandhi was shot dead by a young Hindu extremist who opposed his ideals of equality for all.