

F O R E W O R D

The life of Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi (Mahatma, meaning "great soul," was an honorific title) is abundantly documented; perhaps no life in any period has been more so. Certainly it was an extraordinary life, fusing, as it did, ancient Hindu religion and culture and modern revolutionary ideas about politics and society—from any viewpoint, a strange combination of perceptions and values. There are at present about four hundred biographies of Gandhi, yet, as Jawaharlal Nehru wrote in the foreword to one of the weightiest of them, D. G. Tendulkar's eight-volume work "Mahatma," "no man can write a real life of Gandhi, unless he is as big as Gandhi." In Nehru's view, the best that anyone could hope to do was to conjure up some pictures of that life: "Many pictures rise in my mind of this man, whose eyes were often full of laughter and yet were pools of infinite sadness. But the picture that is dominant and most significant is as I saw him marching, staff in hand, to Dandi on the Salt March in 1930. Here was the pilgrim on his quest of Truth, quiet, peaceful, determined, and fearless, who would continue that quest and pilgrimage, regardless of consequences." Leaving aside the riddle of who but Gandhi could write his "real life," the writer's task would have to be to discover and truthfully portray the heroic but human pilgrim amid the myths that began proliferating around him when he started his quest and that have inevitably become more numerous because the quest ended in martyrdom. In fact, the very core of Gandhi's thought, presented and developed in tens of thousands of his writings and speeches—his search for God through celibacy and cleanliness, through mastery of all human needs and functions, mental and bodily, and through insistence on personal hygiene and public sanitation—has been obscured by mythologizers fearful of debasing and sensationalizing their martyred hero. Perhaps because Indians rely for information more on the spoken than on the written word, and because they still live close to the soil, with an awareness of the mystery of the land, myths can become established in India as