

A child of the Gandhi era

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BORN In 1922, I consider myself a child of the Gandhian era as I spent the first twenty-five years of my life in Mahatma Gandhi's reign. The British were there, of course, but for us they were usurpers and oppressors. My first glimpse of Mahatma Gandhi was in December 1929 at the Lahore session of the Indian National Congress. I had gone there with my father who - like thousands of other young people at the call of Mahatma Gandhi - had abandoned his university education. Those were days of great excitement for me and many of my age (I was barely eight!). I may have seen Gandhiji again during the 1930, but of this I have no clear recollection.

An event of great magnitude that I can recall from the memory of my childhood days was the hanging of Sardar Bhagat Singh by the British in early 1931. It created great anger amongst us.

There were many elderly people - including several religious and pious individuals - who held the opinion that we would not be able to do without the British and that we would be overrun by other foreign invaders if for some reason the British were no longer around. For this reason they felt we should remain loyal and obedient to them.

However, to most of us--whether we had seen him or not--Gandhiji was an *avatar*, come to liberate us from the oppression of a foreign ruler and to enable us to live once more in our own way.

My most vivid memory of Mahatma Gandhi is of seeing him over two full days--though from a distance--and listening to a two and a quarter hour speech that he made late in the evening on 8 August 1942. Millions of people in India as well as many in various parts of the world had been waiting to hear him speak. And so thousands heard him with rapt attention at the Gowalia tank maidan in Mumbai (on the occasion of the Quit India session of the All India Congress Committee). The speech itself is somewhat sketchily reported in the *Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*.¹ It needs to be published verbatim. If a film of the session exists, it should be closely studied, for it would recreate not only his words and his argument, but the expectations, emotions and fervour of the huge audience.

From about 1946 onwards, I saw Gandhiji many times, along with others. I sat near sometimes and once--on being introduced to him by Susri Mirabeen--he even spoke a few words directly to me.

Any intimacy I had with Gandhiji arises thus from having lived in his times, being moved by the ideas, beliefs and emotions that welled up in me due to what he said and did, and in being fortunate to listen to that historic speech on the late evening of 8 August, 1942. This intimacy has in a sense continued in recent decades from having access to the actual text of what he said and wrote (compiled in the 100 volumes of the *Collected Works*), or to what numerous other authors--beginning in 1909 with *Joseph Doke's Gandhi, An Indian Patriot in South Africa*²--have been writing about him now for over ninety years.

While the excitement of youth may have also contributed to my interest in public life and political ideas, it was largely the ideas and call of Gandhiji that led me--as it did countless others in India and elsewhere -- to participate in the 'Quit India' Movement. Later on, in 1944, I happened to join Susri Mirabehn's newly started Kisan Ashram located midway between Roorkee and Haridwar. In the years following, I occupied myself with various similar matters, all with the vague idea of some-how participating in the overall regeneration of Indian society.

But as the years passed by, and especially by about 1960, I had got somewhat disenchanted--like several others--with our efforts in this direction. I had come to the conclusion that we in fact appeared to know very little about the society or the people about which we assumed we felt deeply concerned. It was perhaps a sheer accident--or may be the obsessive nature of the quest that I had acquired from my understanding of Gandhiji and of life in general as well--that brought me in the early sixties into intimate contact with our ordinary village people and the ways in which they functioned or thought. Other fortuitous circumstances allowed me to become familiar with the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries British and other European textual material that reported on the people of India and their institutions, particularly around the period 1800.

All this was some forty five years ago. Since then, while continuing to be engrossed in the textual narratives of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries and with the life and society of people in India two hundred years ago, I have moved more and more to the sphere of what Gandhiji said and wrote. I find the two preoccupations connected in several significant ways.

When I First began poring over British archival records on India, I came across official British correspondence on a prolonged Indian protest against the imposition of a tax on dwelling houses in Varanasi and several other cities in Bihar and Bengal during the period 1810-1811. This research material made me feel quite strongly that I was reading about some major civil disobedience movement led by Mahatma Gandhi in our own times, and not about an event that had taken place over one hundred and fifty years ago. The information stimulated me to go through some of Mahatma Gandhi's writing all

over again. I found references to earlier events of passive resistance in *Hind Swaraj*. Defining passive resistance in that book written by him in 1908, Gandhiji had observed:

I remember an incident when, in a small principality, the villagers were offended by some command issued by the prince. The former immediately began vacating the village. The prince became nervous, apologized to his subjects and withdraw his command. Many such instances can be found in India. Real home rule is possible only where passive resistance is the guiding force of the people. Any other rule is foreign rule³.

The paragraph provided added authenticity to the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries material I was looking through at that time. I noticed similar perceptions expressed by Gandhiji on other major issues as well. In fact, it was a statement made by him in 1931 on the increase of illiteracy in India under British rule that led me to pay also greater attention to material on indigenous Indian education as it had functioned during the same period.⁴

In a speech during his visit to Britain in 1931 to attend the conference organised by the British government on Indian constitutional reforms, Gandhiji had taken the opportunity to comment on the extensive decay and decline of India during British rule. He had also on that occasion said that India had been more literate prior to British rule than it was at the time he was speaking. The observation set me on a new path of research. From 1966 onwards I began collecting data pertaining to the state of education and literacy in India around 1800. By 1980 I had collected sufficient material that appeared to buttress Gandhiji's views. In the year that followed, while staying at the Sevagram Ashram of Mahatma Gandhi, I began organising this data in the form of a book on indigenous Indian education in the eighteenth century. As Gandhiji had referred to the earlier Indian education system as 'a beautiful tree', I retained this as the title of the new book.⁵

During the four months that I spent in Sevagram, I also happened to see some of the pre-1940 paper and proceedings of the Gandhi Seva Sangh.⁶ I had known of the Sangh but only in an elementary way. Till I saw these papers and proceedings, I had no idea that the Sangh had undertaken in 1923 to promote, develop and spread the ideas and institutions proposed by Mahatma Gandhi or that it used to meet--during the period from 1934 to 1940--in week-long annual conferences that gave rise to serious public debates. I came to discover that these annual conferences were accompanied by exhibitions and demonstrations on Indian craft and industry, and that at least twice--in 1936 and 1938--

even the production of iron and steel by the fairly widespread (and now famous) Indian method of manufacture was demonstrated at these exhibitions.⁷

In 1940, Gandhiji decided to suspend the activities of the Sangh as its powerful presence appeared to be dividing the Congress: modernizers like Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru and Sri Subhas Chandra Bose in fact wanted it to be wound up. He was happy if it could continue to function in future as an institute of research on ideas and institutions associated with him.⁸

This literature on the Gandhi Seva Sangh that had now come into my hands incited me to look for more material on these institutions. I even examined reports in some of the Indian news-papers of this period. Finally, in February 1982, I wrote a short narrative titled 'Restructuring Hind Swaraj: Mahatma Gandhi in Action 1932-1940'. I was under some sort of compulsion at this time to put together what I had gathered and to communicate what I had learnt to others: the information--it appeared to me at least--had great public significance. A Hindi version of this article was published by the Hindi weekly *Dinman* shortly thereafter.⁹ That essay is the first of the several pieces that finds place in this small book.

Having completed 'Restructuring Hind Swaraj', from 1982 onwards I wrote a few more essays on the life and work of Mahatma Gandhi based on my reading of parts of the *Collected Works*. These included: (i) 'Towards a Reappraisal of the Gandhian Era: An Approach' (July-September 1982); (ii) 'Society and Technology according to Mahatma Gandhi' (IIT, Kanpur, December 1982); (iii) 'Reconsidering Gandhiji:1915-1948' (September 1984); (iv) 'Some Reflections on Mahatma Gandhi' (A Note for Comments, October-November, 1985); (v) 'The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi: A Note' (October 1986, published in part by the Illustrated Weekly of India); (vi) 'Sevagram--Possible New Beginnings' (A dialogue with J.K. Bajaj, originally published in Hindi in *Jansatta*, Delhi, as *Sevagram se phir nai shuruat ho*, on 2.10.1986); and (vii) *Sahas aur atma-samman, swayam-prairit smurudhi aur alipptata: Mahatma Gandhi par ek manan* (Pavnar, 12 February 1996).

The various chapters in this book are edited versions of the essays mentioned above. Some reorganizing of the material was called for in order to avoid needless repetition of facts and quotation, and to assemble together material dealing with similar issues in a single chapter rather than having it distributed across several. I hope this reorganisation will enable the reader to move from one aspect of Gandhiji's life and work to the next with greater clarity and ease.

II

The publication of *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi* has been one of the major welcome achievements of modern India. This collation of Gandhiji's writings now comprises some 50,000 pages in one hundred volumes. The magnum opus provides in very large measure most of what Mahatma Gandhi said and wrote and includes over 30,000 letters, publicly spoken or dictated from about the age of eighteen upto the final day of his long and eventful life.

Gandhiji was a prolific and indefatigable writer. For example, from about 1906 up to 1948, he more or less continuously published one or more weekly papers.¹⁰ Thus the material published by Gandhiji himself is fairly large. The hundred volumes of the *Collected Works* include three volumes of subject index, name index and the prefaces to the ninety-seven remaining volumes. These volumes are also being simultaneously published in Hindi and Gujrati (all Gandhiji's words are either in Gujarati, Hindi or English). Perhaps many of the states in India will bring out translations of the *Collected Works* in the other language of India in future.

While the decision to bring out the *Collected Works* was taken in the early 1950s, the major work on this incomparable publishing enterprise has been done since about 1960. The people of India and the Indian nation must express their thanks and appreciation to Prof. K. Swaminathan and his numerous colleagues for the work and devotion they have put into this great task. Thousands of other individuals as well as institutions have also helped this monumental documentation by giving to the *Collected Works* organisation whatever they possessed with them written in Gandhiji's own hand. Without their cooperation the production of the *Collected Works* would have been an impossibility.

Despite the painstaking and meticulous nature of the effort, it would still have been a miracle of every word that Gandhiji had uttered or written during his life was to be found included in these hundred volumes. There would be many records of what he wrote or of his public talks that have not survived to the present. Many other items existing here and there did not reach the editors and publishers of the *Collected Works*.

It is my firm impression that there is still a significant amount of what Gandhiji wrote that failed to reach the *Collected Works* organisation altogether. The major reason perhaps may have been that the *Collected Works* organisation--after some twenty years of constant hard work--felt too exhausted to attempt a second exploration, more or less on the lines of the first, that is, approaching various institutions and individuals once again for any additional material which they had acquired or discovered still in their possession since the first exploration was made. The other reason seems to be that individuals and

perhaps, even institutions have so far not appreciated the necessity of getting what they retain in their possession included in the *Collected Works*.

A fresh effort to locate the remaining unpublished writing of Gandhiji and to have them included in the *Collected Works* is essential.

This observation apart, it bears reiteration that what has been achieved by the publication of *The Collected Works* is perhaps unique in the history of such gigantic undertakings, even if compared with other projects of a similar nature like the publication of the voluminous writings of people like Voltaire or the American Philosopher Emerson. Few documents tell the story of India, its society and people--and the way the country was transformed from the period 1890 to 1948--better than the *Collected Work*.

For instance, it is true we still feel concerned about the discrimination continued to be faced by the Depressed *Jatis* and by those described as 'other backward castes' today. But when compared with their status and condition till about 1940 they would be considered relatively better off in our times.

The same could be said about the status of girls and women, although in some respects--for example, the willful elimination of the unborn female in the womb made possible by modern Western science--their condition has continually worsened since 1890. (According to Indian census data, we had an all-India average of 980 women to 1000 men in 1901, whereas this had actually worsened to 920 women to every 1000 men by 1991.)

The issue that now confronts us is the *use* of these hundred volumes and the millions of words they contain. At a recent meeting in Sevagram, an official of the Maharashtra Government observed that no one appeared to be interested in these volumes even when they were offered free to public libraries. The official may have been misinformed. Perhaps this is the situation in Maharashtra. It is also possible that the impressions gathered by the official from Maharashtra are shared by others in positions of authority in other parts of India.

Are the *Collected Works* then simply one more *samadhi*, only in this case constructed out of print and paper instead of stone and mortar? The way we have gone about the matter so far appears to confirm that we do indeed look upon these volumes as inert materials, similar to stone and mortar, or as museum pieces--like Gandhiji's watches, chappals, etc.--to be simply preserved as relics under secure lock and key. This is not to run down inert memorials like the statues of Gandhiji erected in public places. There is scope in future, for example, for a great temple of Bharatmata--built as a commemoration of this great and illustrious son of hers--in the style of the great Thanjavur or Chidambaram temples by indigenous Indian craftsmanship and from wholly

local materials. In their own way, such monuments do have great value when erected to represent a great idea, some great moment in time, or to commemorate a great hero.

But as I see it, with the publication of the *Collected Works*, Gandhiji's approach to life and to the human condition acquire a deeper, universal and perennial meaning. No longer is he to be treated as the mere originator of mass *satyagraha*, or as a great and heroic figure, even an austere *rishi* or the most illustrious son of India of the past two thousand years, a father to all or one of the most exemplary of men. He may have been all these but in the context of our times, in fact, in relation to human history, he would now have to be placed on par with Plato, or the great Gautam Buddha or Jesus of Nazareth or Confucius or the Chinese sage Lao Tse. At the least, his life and thought must be given as much serious study as Europe has given to the medieval church fathers, to Martin Luther, to Francis Bacon and Leibnitz and in more recent times, to Hegel and Karl Marx.

Even if we necessarily do not agree with everything that Gandhiji said or did, we ought to make a serious effort to appreciate his contributions in relation to very aspect or human Endeavour. The disciplines of science, politics, economics, philosophy and psychology, theories of the organisation or society and the state, all must come to terms with his ideas or challenge his thought, words and deeds in as thorough and rigorous a manner as has been done by modern academics with the thought of the great Gautam Buddha, Confucius, and Plato, or, at a slightly different level, of Hegel and Karl Marx.

It is unfortunate that those who were close to him when he was alive--at least the few that had a certain claim to scholarship and a capacity for intellectual analysis--did not attempt to pinpoint the essence and the core of his approach. Such an exercise would have initiated a serious discussion of Gandhiji's ideas some thirty or more years earlier. Perhaps their own timidity and their own Bhadrakok upbringings or a certain doubt that they retained till nearly the very end about the soundness of Gandhiji's logic or instincts or even the over--protectiveness that they quite naturally displayed towards him--or all of these elements together--appear to have made them poor analysts, and even poorer defenders of the man to whom they certainly had dedicated their all.

An illustration of this is to be found in Gandhiji's experiments in *brahmacharya*. These experiments that began from about 1906--when he took his vow of celibacy--and increased in frequency from 1936 to 1947 have been largely misunderstood and misrepresented by both scholars as well as laypersons. This unfortunate result was largely a result of the timidity and confusion of the men who tried at times to act as his mentors, or at least as guardians of his reputation. These experiments of Gandhiji would have been far better understood and appreciated--even when people continued to disagree with them--if an article that he wrote about them in June 1938 had not been withdrawn from circulation due to the pressures of love and devotion exerted on him by his close devotees

and by his secretariat. But in the context of what we then were, disoriented perhaps by prolonged political enslavement, and in constant fear of losing our moorings if the anchor--to which we held fast--was allowed to move as it liked, it was only natural that matters unfolded in the way they eventually did.

Even during his lifetime, the great masses of India's people who followed him in various ways--as when he gave the call of 'do or die' in 1942--seem to have treated his ideas and methodologies (though not his person) rather mechanically. We, there-fore, over-emphasised his constant reference to *Daridra-narayan*, his stress on the austere life, on treating the socially deprived and distressed as our very brothers and sisters, on the need for amity between groups of various kinds, etc and treated this as the sum total of his approach and philosophy. Some of the devout, even when he was alive, sincerely felt that the source of their newly acquired wealth was due to their following Mahatma Gandhi: did they not spin seven slivers of cotton daily, without fail, on the *charkha*?

This is not, however, to decry the life and work of the Gandhian ashrams and other institution. In relation to what obtains in the totality of India what they do has both moral and material value. But to conclude that their life and work can today be a model for the reshaping of Indian society is to ignore the present reality altogether.

The central point somehow got forgotten, perhaps more or less in the same way as the rather unthinking and sloganeering mind of the modern well-educated progressive seems to forget the original purpose which turned him to some revolutionary option. Two decades ago one of them, Tariq Ali, while reviewing a book on Mahatma Gandhi in a leading British newspaper described Gandhiji in the following words: 'Gandhi's real significance lay in his ability to both arouse the peasant masses of India and confiscate their social aspirations. It is this contradiction that helps explain his many eccentricities. In fact once we dispel the clouds of incense that surround Gandhi e can perceive him clearly: the mongrel offspring of Victorian liberalism and Indian mysticism.'

Such words may seem too jarring and would be considered unpardonable blasphemy by many in India and elsewhere. But basically the views which even modern Gandhians subscribe to, though couched in more reverent phraseology, have not been too dissimilar. Many among us seem to have got stuck with one or other personal fad in the name of Mahatma Gandhi: we take to an occasional ritual of cleaning of streets, or don *Khadi*, or recite without any reflection what is known as the standard Gandhian prayer, as it had emerged by about 1944, and which recited without reflection, is a mere jumble of words and utterances.

A few years ago, in Tamilnadu, when one of the principal leaders of the *Khadi* and village industry enterprise was asked by a person of some patriotic standing why the indigenous old Indian *charkha* had altogether been abandoned in the State, he was given

the reply that the old *charka* required twenty times the number of ledger pages. In contrast, the whole idea of the stress on the *Charkha*, as we well know, was to provide some little employment to as large a number as possible and not to ease the job of keeping accounts! To yet another question by another Gandhian worker on how village industries' soap could be sold at such low prices in Tamilnadu, and whether this implied that such soap used animal fat instead of oils of vegetable origin, the response was, why is such a question being asked?

III

How does one really describe Gandhiji's life, the things that moved him most, the way he looked at the world, his own country, his people, the ideas he expressed and the institutions and programmes he devised to ensure they were implemented in practice?

In his autobiography, *The Story of my Experiments with Truth*, started on November 24, 1925, Mahatma Gandhi wrote, 'What I want to achieve, what I have been striving and pining to achieve these thirty years, is self realization, to see God face to face, to attain *moksha*.¹¹ This intense desire to see God face to face seems to have gripped Gandhiji right from his boyhood days in Kathiawad and certainly after he began to live in South Africa from 1893.

The other major statement of this kind was made by Mahatma Gandhi in the form of *Hind Swaraj*, a small book in Gujarati written on the ship while he was returning from Britain to South Africa in November-December 1909.¹² In this older work (which we shall examine in greater detail in the following chapters), Gandhiji spelt out his ideas and views on the desirable society for India. He believed that till recent times India had such a society; in fact, it still did so, and that this form of society made India superior to other civilisation. He found the simple organization and material life he described in *Hind Swaraj* conducive to human well-being and to the right natural balance.

A month or so before he wrote *Hind Swaraj* he had answered several questions in London on his ideas and on modern Western civilisation, and had observed that much of the machinery and institutions of Western civilisation could be dismantled and discarded by people if they were determined to do so.¹³

Gandhiji must have had, in his early years, some indication of the widespread wreckage of Indian institutions, techniques and tools during British rule. He had a fairly vivid idea of the impoverishment and destitution of Indian life as a result of deliberate British policy. But he had also seen the great and willing response of his people to his message of courage, fearlessness and hope in South Africa, as well as in India, and the fact that they still retained their old manners and traditions. This led him to believe that the

damage to India's spiritual and material life had not gone too deep and that the Indian people and their tools and institutions could, with the right support and encouragement, renew their feeling for a new and vigorous life.

That he may also have been conscious (quite early) of the capacity of Indian to resist injustice if they wanted to is also apparent from the very first article he wrote in 1891 for *The Vegetarian*, the journal of the London Vegetarian Society. In it, besides drawing attention to the heavy British tax on salt, which was depriving to a large extent the people of this essential commodity,¹⁴ he also drew attention to the major movement against the slaughter of cows that was going on in India.¹⁵ The anti-slaughter movement that Gandhiji was referring to was indeed a major event that had started prior to 1880. According to the British Viceroy writing in 1893, it was comparable to the efforts made by Indians to push the British out of India during 1857-58.¹⁶ For Queen Victoria, this agitation against cow-slaughter was, in fact, aimed against the British and not at the Muslims.¹⁷ Gandhiji was just 22 years old then.

But besides seeking *moksha* and his advocacy of *Hind Swaraj*, Gandhiji remained engaged in hundreds of other issues from dawn until late at night. It could perhaps be said that after he returned from London in 1891, he never really had a vacation.

It is these hundreds of things that he did, initiated, helped or advocated that link Mahatma Gandhi intimately with his times (and ours), and with the thousands and crores of people who came to him to do his bidding. It is true that each and every things he did had its roots in his aspiration to 'see God face to face' and in his vision of *Hind Swaraj*. But for him 'God is neither in heaven' nor down below, but in everyone' and his Endeavour 'was to see God through service of humanity.'¹⁸

Gandhiji elaborated further on this in 1936 when he said: 'I am part and parcel of the whole, and I cannot find Him apart from the rest of humanity. My countrymen are my nearest neighbors. They have become so helpless, so resource-less, so inert, that I must concentrate on serving them. If I could persuade myself that I should find Him in a Himalayan cave, I would proceed there immediately. But I know that I cannot find Him apart from humanity.'¹⁹

In 1939 he was even firmer about this conviction and wrote, 'I claim to know my millions. All the 24 hours of the day I am with them. They are my first care and last, because I recognize no God except the God that is to be found in the hearts of the dumb millions. They do not recognize His presence, I do. And I worship the God that is Truth or Truth which is God through the service of these millions.'²⁰

Gandhiji's presence and appeal seem to have generated confidence and courage in these millions. It made them come vibrantly alive after their long slumber and

exhaustion. The manner in which this transformation came over the Indian people, earlier in South Africa, and from 1915 onwards at an accelerated pace in India, made it seem as if there were a regeneration of Indian life, and even of Indian tools and institutions. What only a little while earlier had appeared fatally damaged and in disrepair, in the presence of Gandhiji once again looked lively and functional. That even a *charkha* could not be found in Gujarat around 1916 indicates the extent of the decay and the wreckage of things Indian during the nineteenth century.

The essays that follow are mainly related to Gandhiji's social and political concerns about India and Indian society. The other--perhaps more important--aspects that moved him. The seeking God, *moksha*, man's quest for the deeper meaning of things, are hardly directly touched in this present attempt. So more profoundly, that it does not seem right to discuss them here in an amateurish manner. For I must admit that my own Further, it seems to me that God, *moksha*, and man's quest for the deeper meaning of things are matters which have been perennial Indian concerns, and not much more can be said about them than has been said already by the ancient and latter and latter *rishis*, scholars and religious, his life and work, from 1891 to 1948, his/her society. He was convinced that this effort would restore the freedom of India and renew its land and environment. What is special about Gandhiji's effort is that both the attempt at salvage and the recovery of freedom were based on the spiritual view of life that he shared in a profound way with his ordinary fellow beings. It is this spiritual sharing that enabled him to help them regain their courage, fearlessness and confidence, and to resist injustice by trying, to the extent possible, to hold on to truth and to non-violence.

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