Mohandas Gandhi

Mohandas Gandhi

Experiments in Civil Disobedience

Talat Ahmed

PLUTO PRESS

First published 2019 by Pluto Press
345 Archway Road, London N6 5AA

www.plutobooks.com

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 978 0 7453 3429 5 Hardback
ISBN 978 0 7453 3428 8 Paperback
ISBN 978 1 7837 1514 5 PDF eBook
ISBN 978 1 7837 1516 9 Kindle eBook
ISBN 978 1 7837 1515 2 EPUB eBook

This book is printed on paper suitable for recycling and made from fully managed and sustained forest sources. Logging, pulping and manufacturing processes are expected to conform to the environmental standards of the country of origin.

Typeset by Stanford DTP Services, Northampton, England

Simultaneously printed in the United Kingdom and United States of America

Contents

Illustrations vi
Acknowledgements vii
Glossary x
Maps xii

Introduction 1
1. Early Life: 1869–93 13
2. South Africa and the Birth of *Satyagraha*: 1893–1915 30
3. The Champion of the Oppressed Returns: 1915–19 56
4. Nationalist Leader: 1919–29 75
5. Global Icon: 1929–39 97
6. Fascism, War, Independence and Partition: 1939–48 128
Conclusion: Assassination and Legacy 152

Notes 164
Index 185

Introduction

Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi was one of the most photographed people of the twentieth century in his lifetime, and since his death he has become one of the most recognisable iconic figures of modern world history. Gandhi is not just simply the most famous 'founding father' of India; to use the language of Hegel, he is a 'world historical individual' whose impact on the twentieth century might be compared to Vladimir Lenin or Mao Zedong. His remarkable life has been captured on film – both fictional and documentary – and countless pamphlets, biographies and school texts continue to proliferate. Among the many forms of cultural representation of his life, which include plays, novels, and graphic novels, Richard Attenborough's Oscar-winning film *Gandhi* in 1982 made the greatest impact, providing a window into Gandhi the icon for many millions of people. The film was released at a momentous time when millions all over the world were fearful about the threat of nuclear holocaust during the Cold War, and peace movements were burgeoning internationally. In Britain, for example, the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament organised mass demonstrations against the deployment of American Cruise missiles in Berkshire and opposition to NATO. A women's camp was set up at Greenham Common in an attempt to physically but peacefully prevent the Royal Air Force base in Berkshire from operating. Attenborough, himself a lifelong supporter of the Labour Party who later also opposed the Iraq War, stated in 1982 that 'Gandhi believed if we could but agree, simplistic though it be, that if we do not resort to violence then the route to solving problems would be much different than the one we take.'[1]

Such sentiments moved the United Nations General Assembly to vote unanimously on 15 June 2007 to declare 2 October – the date of Gandhi's birth in 1869 – 'International Day of Non-Violence'. Such a commemoration underlies Gandhi's global significance, and today, seventy years after his death in 1948, Gandhi remains an iconic and

mesmerising figure. His stature as the father of modern India is undiminished; if anything, Gandhi continues to inspire awe in new generations of scholars, students and activists in all manner of social movements such as those against climate change, racism, imperialism and war. The protests in Gaza in May 2018, for example, on the seventieth year of the Nakba (the expulsion that accompanied the Israeli occupation), saw Palestinians using non-violence on their 'Great March of Return', with many explicitly stating how Gandhian methods and ideas were an inspiration. For example, one leading organiser of the 'Great March of Return', Abu Artema, stated 'I was inspired by Gandhi … I like the way he fought by peace. I think what is right is stronger than weapons, so I like the method of Gandhi, I liked the method of Martin Luther King.' It might be noted, however, that this change in tactics on the part of the Palestinians did not affect in the slightest how the Israeli state responded. At the time of writing, over a hundred Palestinians peacefully protesting have been shot dead and over 3,000 wounded.[2]

The Inspiration of 'the little brown saint of India'

Abu Artema's mention of Martin Luther King in the same breath as Gandhi is fitting, for King clearly understood the attraction of Gandhi's method during the Montgomery Bus Boycott of 1955–56. Bayard Rustin – a key organiser from New York – suggested how best to apply Gandhi's tenets of non-violence: 'Going to jail is precisely what we should be doing.'[3] As Harry Belafonte notes, 'Gandhi had preached this very form of civil disobedience; overwhelm the government's jails, he reasoned, and the government would have to compromise or collapse. "Jail, no bail" would become a rallying cry of the American civil rights movement, often to great effect ….'[4] In 1964, King noted in his Nobel Peace Prize acceptance speech how 'In the summer of 1956 the name of Mahatma Gandhi was well-known in Montgomery. People who had never heard of the little brown saint of India were now saying his name with an air of familiarity.'[5]

In the same speech, King also paid fervent tribute to Gandhi's strategy:

> Nonviolence is a powerful and just weapon … a weapon unique in history, which cuts without wounding and ennobles the man who wields it … He [Gandhi] struggled only with the weapons of truth, soul-force, non-injury and courage … Nonviolent resistance had emerged as the technique of the movement, while love stood as the regulating ideal. In other words, Christ furnished the spirit and the motivation while Gandhi furnished the method.[6]

Aside from the American Civil Rights Movement, 'the little brown saint of India' clearly made a profound impact on a wide variety of people during his own lifetime. Perry Anderson captures well what set Gandhi apart from other leading Indian nationalist figures involved in the Indian National Congress (INC):

> He was a first-class organiser and fundraiser – diligent, efficient, meticulous – who rebuilt Congress from top to bottom, endowing it with a permanent executive at national level, vernacular units at provincial level, local bases at district level, and delegates proportionate to population, not to speak of an ample treasury. At the same time, though temperamentally in many ways an autocrat, politically he did not care about power in itself, and was an excellent mediator between different figures and groups both within Congress and among its variegated social supports. Finally, though no great orator, he was an exceptionally quick and fluent communicator, as the hundred volumes of his articles, books, letters, cables (far exceeding the output of Marx or Lenin, let alone Mao) testify. To these political gifts were added personal qualities of a ready warmth, impish wit and iron will. It is no surprise that so magnetic a force would attract such passionate admiration, at the time and since.[7]

Alongside passionate admiration, we should not forget that like any political radical he also inspired venom and mockery from conservatives and defenders of the imperial order. Winston Churchill famously scorned Gandhi as a 'half-naked *fakir* [ascetic]' in 1931.[8] Indeed, as early as 1914, the future South African Prime Minister Jan Christian Smuts was already remarking sardonically on the 'saint-like' qualities

of Gandhi, when he noted that 'The Saint has left our shores, I sincerely hope forever.'[9] Nonetheless, aside from colonial officials like Smuts, Gandhi's 'saintliness' certainly came to characterise Gandhi's life and impact. In 1940, Albert Einstein stated 'Generations to come, it may be, will scarce believe that such a one as this ever in flesh and blood walked upon this earth.'[10] And of course, Gandhi's demise at the hands of an assassin's bullet on 30 January 1948 sealed his iconic status and sanctified Gandhi as the *Mahatma*, India's 'Great Soul'. King George VI described his death as 'an irreparable loss for mankind'. Labour Prime Minister Clement Attlee expressed 'profound distress' and Jawaharlal Nehru, first Prime Minister of India, immortalised him further with the now memorable words 'the light that shone in this country was no ordinary light'; it was 'something more than the immediate present' and would continue to 'illuminate this country for many years', giving 'solace to innumerable hearts'.[11] As the most revered figure of the Indian nationalist movement, Gandhi was affectionately referred to as *bapu* – father of the nation – seeming to offer India a unique path of development in the emerging Cold War world that was neither 'Western' nor 'Communist'.

Gandhi's admirers in the imperial metropolis of Britain itself were also legendary. Muriel Lester, a non-conformist social reformer from east London, went to India for the first time for three months in 1926. She thus writes of a British magistrate whom she meets at a dinner who explains what Gandhi had achieved for India:

> Ten years ago, if a coolie had suddenly crossed my path and frightened the horse I was riding, I would probably have sworn at him and shouted 'Get out of the way – you'. He would have cowered before me and disappeared. Now I should not shout at a coolie like that. But if I did, he wouldn't disappear. He'd stand facing me with complete assurance, look me full in the face and politely enquire, 'Why should *I* move?'[12]

Madeline Slade was the daughter of the distinguished Admiral Sir Edmond Slade, former commander-in-chief of the East Indies Station and a board member of the Anglo-Persian Oil Company. She had lived in India hosting local elite women at purdah parties and

enjoyed horse-riding with the imperial elite.[13] Such was his personal charisma and appeal that, after reading of Gandhi's 21-day fast for Hindu-Muslim unity in October 1924, this quintessentially colonial white woman sold her diamond brooch and sent £20 along with a letter to Gandhi asking to join him. Gandhi invited her to come, but warned that the climate was challenging and the labour strenuous.[14] Nevertheless, she went, and stayed for many years. Yet Gandhi also made an impact on working-class women in Britain, and after his death helped inspire the leader of the Great Grunwick strike of 1976–78, Jayaben Desai, who defiantly invoked Gandhi in response to right-wing efforts to derail the magnificent strike action in the winter of 1976, telling a mass meeting of 130 strikers in Brent Town Hall, 'We must not give up … Would Gandhi give up? Never!'[15]

The influence and inspiration of Gandhi on colonial subjects and anti-colonial activists internationally should also be briefly registered. Writing in 1931, one young supporter of 'West Indian Self-Government' in far-away colonial Trinidad, C.L.R. James – later a renowned revolutionary Marxist – noted:

> That Gandhi has the rich and middle-class Hindu with him is not surprising. But that the agricultural labourer in remote villages, the slum dwellers in the towns, should all be ready to face hardships, imprisonment, death; should understand and practise so successfully ideals as difficult as non-cooperation and non-violence, all this is something which to me is as miraculous as anything I have ever read.[16]

The Fifth Pan-African Congress, held in Manchester in 1945, saw organisers George Padmore and W.E.B. Du Bois laying a new stress on militant non-violence in the aftermath of Gandhi's successes, with armed revolt now only to be held as a tactic in reserve. A key Nigerian delegate noted 'we must take India as an example.'[17]

Kwame Nkrumah – one of those present at the Fifth Pan-African Congress – would lead the struggle for independence in Ghana in 1957 in no small part through the inspiration of Gandhi's tactics of civil disobedience, as his Convention People's Party carried mass agitation for 'Positive Action without Violence for Full Self-Govern-

ment Now'.[18] In 1959, Eric Williams, leader of the People's National Movement in Trinidad and Tobago, who would in 1962 become the first prime minister of that independent nation, delivered a broadcast to mark the ninetieth anniversary of the birth of Gandhi.[19] Williams credited Gandhi as the one who 'led the revolt against British imperialism which led to the freedom of India', and whose tactics were now leading to successes in Africa thanks to Pan-Africanists like Nkrumah.[20] Williams emphasised the relevance of Gandhi for the peoples of the Caribbean and the Atlantic region more broadly in terms of the experience of indentured labour, but also saw Gandhi's passive resistance as a 'new method of political struggle' that placed its inventor Gandhi on a par with the 'tradition of revolutionists, with men of the French Revolution, with Marx'.[21]

In South Africa, Nelson Mandela held Gandhi as the 'archetypal anticolonial revolutionary', noting that his strategy of non-violent resistance and his assertion that a people can only be dominated if they cooperate with the dominators, had inspired anti-colonial and anti-racist movements internationally. Explaining the military dimension of Umkhonto we Sizwe, the armed wing of the African National Congress, Mandela added that 'even then, we chose sabotage because it did not involve the loss of life.' Mandela also rightly stressed the importance of Gandhi's time in South Africa for Gandhi's own political development, once remarking on a visit to India 'You gave us Mohandas, we returned him to you as Mahatma … No ordinary leader – divinely inspired.'[22]

The theme of Gandhi as a 'saint', and 'divinely inspired' became manifest after his death. To again take a perhaps less familiar example from the Caribbean, the great pioneering Trinidadian calypsonian Raymond Quevedo, also known as Atilla the Hun, penned the following 'Panegyric to Gandhi' in 1948 on hearing of his death:

The whole civilized world must mourn
For Mahatma Gandhi who is dead and gone
Recognized internationally by the world
As a great and noble soul
I declare his death is undoubtedly
The greatest tragedy of the century

Born over seventy-eight years ago
His life of selflessness we all know
Although he preached civil disobedience
He was an advocate of non-violence
He said Humanity their problems could solve
By embracing a policy of love
Laudation to his glory will never cease
The wonderfully great Apostle of Peace

In the death of the Mahatma
The world has lost a great spiritual leader
A real true saint, good upright and
A beautiful soul and a noble man
Millions are weeping in sympathy
Over this terrifying tragedy
So let us join with them and sing R.I.P.
May he rest in peace in eternity.[23]

The above all testify to Gandhi's enduring impact and appeal. He is held as an uncompromising opponent of injustice and imperialism and a champion for the oppressed and exploited the world over. This is why he is often viewed as a great revolutionary figure – albeit a non-violent one. Indeed, Gandhi himself made this claim about himself in 1931: 'I believe myself to be a revolutionary – a non-violent revolutionary … my means are non-co-operation.'[24] Fifteen years later, he further elaborated the essence of his non-violent revolution: 'A non-violent revolution is not a programme of "seizure of power". It is a programme of transformation of relationships ending in peaceful transfer of power.'[25]

The Contradictions of a 'Non-Violent Revolutionary'

Such an enigmatic figure as Gandhi, who inspired – and continues to inspire – such forces and passions, has led to a proliferation of literature both scholarly and popular which attempts to try and make sense of the man himself. Indeed, the vibrancy of interest in Gandhi is most clearly evident in the tremendous amount of scholarship

that engages his writings and life. The earliest biographies by the English missionary Joseph Doke, the French writer Romain Rolland and the American journalist Louis Fischer were written by people who knew Gandhi and had deep respect for his ideas. Doke, a Baptist minister from Devon born in 1861 had met Gandhi in Johannesburg while working as a Christian missionary in 1907 and the two became kindred spirits, with Doke's biographical sketch appearing in 1909.[26] Doke's work was written with Gandhi's permission and essentially represents an oral testimony told by Gandhi to him through several conversations, and published with the aim of helping British people to understand him better and not just dismiss him as an anarchist or troublemaker. Rolland had been drawn towards Eastern mysticism philosophically through the works of the poet, Rabindranath Tagore, and the religious guru, Swami Vivekananda, and eventually, Gandhi. Rolland's biography appeared in 1924, though he did not meet Gandhi until 1931, in Switzerland.[27] Both books are faithful, but perhaps inevitably as they were written while Gandhi was still alive, in the midst of his campaigning and with his star in the ascendancy, they are quite hagiographic in tone. Louis Fischer's *Life of Mahatma Gandhi*, written after Gandhi's death and published in 1950, was a pioneering, more comprehensive, scholarly overview, and it proved hugely influential, helping provide the material for Attenborough's film.[28] Similarly, the radical British Quaker Reginald Reynold's *To Live in Mankind: A Quest for Gandhi* (1951) provided a valuable first-hand account of Gandhi's life drawn from Reynolds's time in India in 1929.[29] Many of the above had extensive correspondence with Gandhi going back some thirty years and they provide perceptive and thoughtful insights into Gandhi himself and how he was viewed by early twentieth-century radicals, Quakers, theosophists and non-conformists who detested imperialism and looked towards a better world.

If these early books based on first-hand knowledge of Gandhi helped introduce audiences in the West to Gandhi's remarkable life, they have inevitably since been supplemented by a host of serious academic studies. Many *Gandhi Readers* have been published over the decades, demonstrating the emergence of a vibrant field of 'Gandhi Studies', with scholars mining new sources through which to interpret Gandhi.[30] The man himself was a prolific writer; he

corresponded with family and close associates, journalists and intellectuals, dignitaries and politicians, friends and adversaries. Many scholars, working meticulously and tirelessly, have collected, edited and made available to the public Gandhi's *Collected Works* in both print form and electronically.[31]

Perhaps some of the most notable studies of Gandhi's politics have been by historians such as Judith Brown,[32] David Arnold,[33] David Hardiman[34] and Geoffrey Ashe.[35] In differing ways, they have probed Gandhi's life and his ideas to offer varying interpretations ranging from the sympathetic, to those striking a more critical note and challenging some of the long-standing myths – nationalist and otherwise – which have arisen about him. Alongside these works, writers have highlighted and explored the specificities of Gandhian thought in philosophy and religion.[36] Recently, Ramachandra Guha's work has emphasised the importance of Gandhi's time in South Africa,[37] whilst Kathryn Tidrick argues that his student days in London were much more central to the formation of Gandhi's political project.[38] Both Guha and Tidrick have been particularly significant in terms of (re)examining new material and acting as a corrective to the over-simplified interpretations of Gandhi as quintessentially Indic: 'I do not want my house to be walled on all sides nor my windows to be shut. I want the culture of all lands to blow about my house as freely as possible: but I refuse to be blown off my feet by any of them.' These words of Gandhi's, inscribed on the foundation stone of the Indian YMCA in London, capture well his cosmopolitanism, as well as locating him firmly within an indigenous context. Memoirs and biographies by relatives have also been valuable in affording an opportunity to see Gandhi through the family archive.[39] Scholarship from South Africa has been vital in questioning the notion of Gandhi as catalyst for change amongst Indians in South Africa and more recently the excellent book by Ashwin Desai and Goolam Vahed has persuasively contested the nationalist myth of Gandhi as the saviour of South Africa's Indian community.[40]

Other recent trends in Gandhi scholarship have challenged the accepted wisdom that Gandhi and non-violence were the defining feature of modern India. Faisal Devji has sought to recast Gandhi as a very mortal individual, who was pragmatic and willing to entertain

notions of violence to achieve the emancipation of the ethical self.[41] Scholars now increasingly view Gandhi's life within the analytic framework of transnationalism, exploring the life and afterlives of 'the Mahatma Overseas', with respect to travel and the circulation of ideas.[42] Other recent scholarship – no doubt in part written with an eye on what kind of books might attract publicity, controversy and sell well to a wider popular audience – have focused on certain more unusual aspects of his life, such as his so-called 'sexual experiments'.[43]

Controversies about aspects of Gandhi's life and political views inevitably continue to provoke media comment, debate and argument.[44] Gandhi's life was clearly one of complexities, contradictions and ironies: the apostle of non-violence who was mowed down by an assassin's bullet; a deeply religious individual who fought passionately for Hindu-Muslim unity only to see India free but partitioned; a man who was seen as a religious zealot and imprisoned as a dangerous subversive nine times by colonial governments, and yet every British viceroy from 1916 onwards had to deal with him, and a 'saintly' figure who never held political office and is seen to be above the grubby business of political horse-trading and yet was a shrewd political operator who weighed every action and word in a calculated manner. This is the enigma of Gandhi – how could this little man from a small town in India, a London-trained barrister, with a penchant for elocution, dancing classes and French lessons, come to dominate Indian politics in the first half of the twentieth century and inspire a variety of social movements and liberation struggles ever since?

This political biography will chart Gandhi's life chronologically to try and unravel this enigmatic 'non-violent revolutionary' through an examination of his activism and ideas in their concrete historical context. In contrast to the elitist mainstream political currents of Indian nationalism at the time, which were focused on gentlemanly requests for gradual constitutional reform, Gandhi's capacity to mobilise and lead masses of people into struggle against British rule was indeed radical and revolutionary. By challenging the might of the largest and most powerful empire in the world, Gandhi's campaigns to demand serious reform and self-government opened the door for social forces from below that would aim to go beyond mere consti-

tutional niceties. However, other forces – both more conservative on the right and more radical on the left of Gandhi – also exercised their pull on the momentum of the independence struggle in India. In some ways, Gandhi was at the crossroads of such tensions, and his appeal can be assessed in the distinction between his intent and its actual objective impact.

By campaigning in such a militant fashion for the bourgeois democratic demand of national independence – *purna swaraj* (self-rule) – Gandhi opened the way for forces that went far beyond him, despite his intentions. The objective achievement of independence for the 'brightest jewel in the crown of the British Empire', to use Disraeli's phrase, was revolutionary in the sense of shattering any hope of maintaining Britain's place as a great power in the world – far more than, say, the impact of Irish independence in 1922, even though James Connolly, leader of the Easter Rising of 1916, was a conscious socialist revolutionary. Gandhi's legacy as a 'non-violent revolutionary' has always been contested and it remains so today. Both within the international radical left and the Indian left, Gandhi's ideas have been engaged with, tested and contested, in his times and since.

Given the hope that Gandhi seems to embody to new generations of activists wishing to change a world scarred by permanent war, grotesque inequality, and the racist legacies of colonialism, it is imperative to reflect on Gandhi's life in order to gain insights into his strategy – and also its limitations. It would be tempting to simply valorise Gandhi as a great 'non-violent revolutionary', place him at the helm of a great radical tradition, and leave matters there. After all, Gandhi was hailed as such by a range of figures including Eric Williams and Nelson Mandela. Many young radicals today would surely agree with the anti-capitalist comedian Russell Brand, who in his 2014 book *Revolution* playfully describes Gandhi as a 'mad-looking little Indian bloke all dressed up in a nappy', but more seriously hails him as an 'extremely efficient revolutionary'.[45] This efficiency, according to Brand, lies in the simplicity of Gandhi's mathematical application of his non-violent creed, as evidenced in the iconic 1982 film, with Ben Kingsley's Gandhi delivering the following riposte to a British brigadier: 'In the end, you will walk out. Because 100,000 Englishmen simply cannot control 350 million Indians, if those

Indians refuse to cooperate.'[46] This is a simple quote, but it neatly encompasses Gandhi's philosophy.

For many people, including Brand, the question of why Gandhi was a 'revolutionary' is self-evident, since it rests on the argument that if Gandhi's pacifist and non-violent approach liberated India from British colonial rule, therefore his method and tactics must have 'worked' and he therefore deserves to be acclaimed as a 'revolutionary'. However, the story of India's struggle for independence was anything but non-violent – as any cursory glance at Indian resistance to British rule over two centuries will attest. To credit Gandhi and his tactics alone with delivering independence is to arguably fall into an elitist nationalist 'great man' narrative of history – a view which is almost as erroneous as explanations of decolonisation which romanticise the 1945–51 reforming Labour government of Clement Attlee. This book will then locate Gandhi's life, ideas and work within a larger process and examine the contradictions of how he stimulated mass movements for political and social change, but then strove to limit their impact within certain bounds. He deserves a place in a series on 'Revolutionary Lives' because it could be argued that Gandhi 'weaponised' non-violence into a revolutionary strategy, in a not dissimilar way to his utilisation of fasting, vegetarianism, vows of silence and even sexual abstinence.

This book's subtitle, 'Experiments in Civil Disobedience', is inspired by the sub-title of Gandhi's own autobiography, *The Story of My Experiments with Truth*. In many ways, it is a fitting one, for Gandhi's whole life was littered with experiments, whether relating to diet and vegetarianism; communal living, or sexual abstinence. They all represented Gandhi's struggles with his most intimate demons and were a challenge in the process of becoming the master of one's *karma* (destiny). Gandhi believed that deep social change could only result from individual spiritual transformation. Yet only by focusing on the historical reality of Gandhi's 'experiments in civil disobedience' in their concrete context will it be possible to examine and assess the effectiveness of his approach, and draw conclusions about his actual relationship to revolutionary politics.