Gandhi’s Changing Image
A Case Study in Perspective and Reputation

Young Gandhi thought little of South Africa’s tribal citizens.

BOOK REVIEW: Gandhi: The Years that Changed the World (1914-1948)
EDITOR’S INTRODUCTION
A new biography of Mahatma Gandhi reminds us of how reputations can change, and how valuable it can be to put together competing perspectives.

In this brief Introduction, you will see some of the wide range of opinions about this remarkable figure. Then, in Punyashree Panda’s book review of Ramachandra Guha’s new, thousand-page biography *Gandhi: The Years that Changed the World* (1914-1948), you will see an overview of the singular life that is behind this deeply-felt controversy.

Once we get beyond the narrative which he himself was feeding us, we see a more complex man than the traditional image. Gandhi might have been someone whose skills matched the task of winning independence from the British Empire, but not the task of governing a society divided by class, religion and gender. Had he come along ten years earlier or later on that arc of empire, he might have disappeared from history.

To my students who find all this relativism to be a challenge, I have this message: no matter where in the modern world you live or what career you choose, you need to understand India. And to understand India, you must know Gandhi.

GANDHI THE SAINT
Stanley Wolpert in *Gandhi’s Passion* characterizes Mahatma Gandhi as “a prophet of non-violence, a beacon light to a beleaguered humanity, and an instigator of change through peaceful means.” This revered, humble man was, in the end, betrayed by his closest comrades, and selfish disciples who
were interested in power. “Great Soul that he was, Gandhi carried on, passionately ignoring daily threats to his life, refusing to silence his criticism of the government,” writes Wolpert.

The outlines of this version of the Gandhi story are well-known – his success in patiently freeing a vast culture from governance by a handful of Europeans; how the Salt March drew the world's attention; how he won over his own countrymen to revolt without firing a shot; how he used English laws to bring down the English government. His policy of non-violent protest ended in triumph, with India’s independence in 1947.

A CONTRARIAN VIEW
During Gandhi’s lifetime, the economist and social reformer B.R. Ambedkar took issue with the discrimination against the “untouchable” caste that was inherent in Gandhi’s world view. The two men clashed, and Ambedkar raised uncomfortable paradoxes in the life and policies of the Mahatma. Since then, Gandhi’s biographers have waged war over the proper interpretation of his life and legacy.
A contrarian view of Gandhi is brought out in Vinay Lal’s 2008 essay “The Gandhi Everyone Loves to Hate.” In these two short quotes, the author begins to block out the contours of a far-reaching field of literature that revises our initial view of Gandhi:

His detractors ... are certain that the alleged mediocrity of the master’s disciples suggests that the source itself radiated much less light than is commonly imagined.

Some critics fault him for particular positions, such as his support of the Khilafat movement, his inexplicable views on the Bihar earthquake, his deployment of Hindu imagery or idioms of speech such as ‘Ram Rajya’ ...

A smart, resourceful Gandhi critic, Booker Prize-winning author Arundhati Roy, has called for institutions bearing his name to be renamed. Her thesis is that the generally accepted image of Mahatma Gandhi is a deception, an image pushed forward by a cunning politician.
Gandhi appears to be a more, not less, compelling figure in the face of criticism. (Vinay Lal)

GANDHI AND CLASS

It is Gandhi’s views on caste that Roy sees as particularly toxic. Roy warns us against mythologizing Gandhi as the Father of Indian National Identity. In challenging this mythology, Arundhati Roy has provided an important counternarrative. Here, she brings up Gandhi’s recurring disdain for the lowest classes, both in South Africa and India:

In what context does it become acceptable to call Black Africans bestial “savages” and subordinate caste Indian workers congenital liars whose “moral faculties have collapsed”? In what context is it acceptable to say that scavengers should remain scavengers for generations to come?

In a scathing 2014 essay called “The Doctor and the Saint,” Roy takes aim not only at Gandhi himself, but at all of us – how we have uncritically accepted the official version of his narrative, exemplified in the Oscar-winning movie, Richard Attenborough’s 1982 Gandhi (which was financed in part by the Indian government). Here, Roy calls Gandhi “the Saint of the Status Quo.”

History has been kind to Gandhi. He was deified by millions of people in his own lifetime. His godliness has become a universal and, it seems, eternal phenomenon. It’s not just that the metaphor has outstripped the man. It has entirely reinvented him (which is why a critique of
Gandhi need not automatically be taken to be a critique of all Gandhians). Gandhi has become all things to all people: Obama loves him and so does the Occupy movement. Anarchists love him and so does the establishment. Narendra Modi loves him and so does Rahul Gandhi. The poor love him and so do the rich.

He is the Saint of the Status Quo.

Marxist critics go even further, suggesting that Gandhi actually served to keep the lower classes enslaved by avoiding a true revolution. The idea here is that an oligarchy survived the process of Indian independence and separation, and that conditions since the time of that false revolution are worse. Roy cites Gandhi’s “refusal to allow working-class people and untouchables to create their own political organization and elect their own representatives” as an historical root cause of (or contribution to) India’s contemporary cultural divide.

GANDHI AND WOMEN

Feminist scholars see deep flaws in Gandhi’s policies towards women as well as in his personal behavior. Prominent in any “warts and all” documentation of him is Gandhi’s attitudes towards women in general, and his specific treatment of his wife and female colleagues.

The writer and publisher S. Anand and Eric Erikson are two of the many critics who point out the divergence between the non-violence of Gandhi’s philosophy and the “psychological violence” to which his wife and his female followers were often subjected. Gandhi subscribed to a cruel, patriarchal view of women. In 1935, in a reply to a query, Gandhi suggested
that “the duty of a woman is to look after what in English is called the hearth and home.”

Gandhi has become all things to all people: Anarchists love him and so does the establishment. He is the Saint of the Status Quo. (Arundhati Roy)

Writing in The Guardian, Michael Connellan concludes that we must make room for Gandhi the flawed human, side by side with Gandhi the Saint. “Gandhi was also a puritan and a misogynist who helped ensure that India remains one of the most sexually repressed nations on earth – and, by and large, a dreadful place to be born female.” Gandhi believed that women should carry responsibility for sexual attacks upon them, and that a woman who has been raped has lost her value to society.

GANDHI IN THE 21ST CENTURY

Joseph Lelyveld’s 2011 book, Great Soul: Mahatma Gandhi and His Struggle with India, sets the figure against a complex field of larger forces. For example, Lelyveld dwells on the influence which South Africa (where he spent early, formative, not particularly successful years) had on him. A second influence which helped determine a positive outcome for Gandhi’s campaign for India’s independence was World War II; the strain placed on Britain made it impossible to fight wars on two such divergent fronts. Europe’s war became India’s opportunity.
Rather than give readers a portrait of the lone figure, Lelyveld offers a presentation of Gandhi against the complex landscape of the 20th Century. Lelyveld does not shy away from Gandhi’s failures – uniting Muslims and Hindus, for example, and easing the plight of the “untouchable” castes.

The late, talented writer Christopher Hitchens reminds us of Gandhi’s misconceived application of nonviolence, in which the Mahatma suggested that England capitulate to Nazi Germany. Here are Hitchens’ words:

Gandhi cannot escape culpability for being the only major preacher of appeasement who never changed his mind. The overused word is here fully applicable, as Gandhi entreated the British to let the Nazis “take possession of your beautiful island, with your many beautiful buildings. You will give all these but neither your souls, nor your minds. If these gentlemen choose to occupy your homes, you will vacate them. If they do not give you free passage out, you will allow yourself man, woman and child, to be slaughtered ...”

Hitchens also points out another odd mark against Gandhi: his rejection of all things modern, in the hopes that all of India – even the city-dwellers – might revert to rural village life:

[[ Gandhi]] considered India’s chief enemy to be modernity, arguing until well into the 1940s that the new nation should abhor industry and technology and relocate its core identity and practice in the ancient rhythms of village life and the spinning wheel.
CONCLUSION

When it is our own turn to consider a topic like Gandhi, these multiple perspectives make life more difficult. But a single-lens portrait does not do him justice.

The framework of empire can help explain Gandhi’s shifting image. He was an unqualified success in ending the British Empire in Asia, and far less so in founding the new Indian “empire.” That is, he was a gifted politician at Stage Four, not so much at Stage One. Naturally, as the wheel of empire has turned in the eighty years since the Salt March, so has the angle from which we view Gandhi. The narrative of his unerring instincts in bringing down the Raj is an excellent story, with a clear ending (Independence Day, August 15, 1947). The narrative of modern India is not such an easy, or satisfying, story to tell, however.

Two important takeaways from the case of Mohatma Gandhi’s shifting reputation are these: 1) our understanding of any historical figure is influenced by where we and they exist on the wheel of empire, and 2) the truer, fuller, more complex story is the better story.
Modern India is a hostile culture for women, and Gandhi has taken a share of the blame.

BOOK REVIEW

Gandhi: The Years that Changed the World (1914-1948) by Ramachandra Guha

Reviewed by Punyashree Panda

It is a mammoth task to document Mahatma Gandhi’s years of activism in India in a single book. That explains the reason behind the voluminous study that Ramachandra Guha has produced in Gandhi: The Years that Changed the World (1914-1948). In this study spanning more than a thousand pages, Guha rewardingly engages the reader in his intricate and intimate understanding of Gandhi’s political strategies, social measures, religious and
quasi-religious practices, principles and approaches to private and public life, and the idea of a modern India, among other discussions. As the author puts forth the Mahatma’s personal equations with a plethora of contemporary political figures, social reformers, colonialists, government officials, aristocrats, artists and such like, and as Gandhi’s moves and motives over his career spanning from 1914 to 1948 are dissected with precision, Guha takes up a humungous challenge of documenting the life and times of the most prominent figure in contemporary history of India and delivers. Gandhi is a difficult subject to study as such because of the contrastive schools of thought that have portrayed him in a range of colours starting from a humanitarian, anticolonial, pro-reform socio-political activist to a cunning, imperial opportunist with little concern for actual change in the conditions of the suffering masses. In some quarters, Gandhi is regarded as the vile force that resulted in the bloody partition of India. In some others, Gandhi is a saint, a messiah as much as Jesus is or Buddha is. A discussion on Gandhi can flare emotions in India in these trying times and Guha’s balancing act is a thought-provoking one, to suggest the least.

The book is divided into five parts, namely, “Part I-Claiming a Nation,” “Part II- Reaching out to the World,” “Part III- Reform and Renewal,” “Part IV-War and Rebellion,” and “Part V- The Last Years”.

In the first part, Guha introduces the reader to M.K. Gandhi, the lawyer activist who, having invented the method of Satyagraha for the downtrodden in South Africa, has come home to commit himself to the cause of India through social and political activism. In this part of the book, Guha points to the easy charisma of the middle-aged lawyer through the
depiction of little-known events and facts. One such record that stands out is Gandhi’s controversial speech in the founding ceremony of the now revered Banaras Hindu University where his fiery speech left many in the audience offended, baffled or awestruck for a variety of reasons. Guha categorizes this speech of Gandhi as “an act of courage” (Guha 35). This part also ponders on Gandhi’s relationship with his four sons, especially Harilal, his eldest, and Gandhi’s early understanding of the need for Hindu-Muslim Unity in India as was evident from his success in the Rowlatt Satyagraha of 1919. Gandhi’s intriguing relationship with Sarladevi Chaudhurani, a niece of Rabindranath Tagore, his (Gandhi’s) “first woman friend in India” (Guha 108) and with whom Gandhi had considered a “spiritual wedding,” (Guha 109) is explored in vivid detail in this part of the book. The early equations between the Congress and Gandhi are also chronicled here.

The second part of the text under discussion concerns itself with the detailing of the ever-emerging public persona of Mahatma Gandhi that created a definite interest in him among scholars, officials, artists, writers and the common people from the USA, Europe and many other places around the planet and contrasting it with Gandhi’s personal faith and morality (Guha 263). The chapter titled “Spinning in Sabarmati” documents Gandhi’s disapproval of Manilal’s love affair with Fatima, a Gujarati Muslim girl from South Africa and analyses his political and private motives behind such disapproval. It also documents Gandhi’s youngest son Devdas’s ‘love’ affair with C Rajagopalachari’s daughter Lakshmi (Guha 258). In the chapter titled “The Moralist”, the author records Gandhi’s reinterpretation of the Bhagavad Gita and his critique of other religions in India such as Islam and Christianity. An important historical event in the history of India,
the Dandi Salt March, is brilliantly described in this part, giving the reader an almost lifelike account of the event. Interestingly, it also documents the then Viceroy Irwin’s possible mishandling of the timing of Gandhi’s arrest at this juncture in history and contemplates what could have been if Gandhi was arrested earlier (Guha 353).

Part III and Part IV of the text handles Gandhi’s arguments with Ambedkar, his reservations with the two-nation theory put forth by Jinnah’s Muslim League, his discomfort with the official efforts of discarding the voice of Congress by branding it as a Hindu Organization and playing up public opinion on the basis of community rather than national interest. The author documents how Jinnah’s insistence of Gandhi as a “Hindu leader” (Guha 595), according to Gandhi, would “undo the effort the Congress has been making for over half a century” (Guha 595). This part also discusses in detail the Quit India Movement, how it earned Gandhi quite a lot of criticism overseas in the wake of World War II as much as it intensified public unrest against the British administration at home. One of Gandhi’s
most important relationships, the complex one that he shared with his wife Kasturba, is also a point of focus in this part of the book. This part throws new light on Gandhi’s handling of Kasturba’s death and the public response to it, including an interesting, unpublished obituary by Henry Polak, one of Gandhi’s longest standing non-Indian associates. In this part of the book, the author also articulates Gandhi’s many fasts and prison sentences, his longstanding secretary Mahadev Desai’s death, the demigod status Gandhi had acquired by then among the people of the Indian subcontinent as well as outside it, and also both Ambedkar and Jinnah’s disengagement with Gandhi and his ideas about India.

In the final part of the book that focuses on the last four years of Gandhi’s life, the author includes vital details on the crucial year of 1947 when India gained independence from colonial rule and much to Gandhi’s heartbreak, Pakistan was born. It also points at Nehru’s anointment as Gandhi’s heir when he became the first Prime Minister of independent India, in spite of the gap in their visions about an independent India. This part also explores the Hindu sangathanist V.D. Savarkar’s animosity towards Gandhi as he asked through letters and press releases addressed to the people of India to refrain from donating funds to Congress and especially to the Kasturba Fund. It also documents Ambedkar’s grave remarks against Gandhi’s work on the removal of Untouchability from the Hindu society and both Gandhi and C R Rajagopalchari’s refutation of such charges. This part, in the chapter “Marching for Peace” through a reading of a 1946 article published in Harijan, encapsulates Gandhi’s vision of a free India. This part also records Gandhi’s continued efforts to spread the message of religious harmony, above all else. Guha offers an accurate record of the events and incidents
leading up to Gandhi’s assassination and the public reception of the tragedy. The author observes non-violent resistance to unjust authority as “Gandhi’s most enduring legacy” (925).

The book under discussion does not take sides. It portrays facts as they are and in doing so, it thrusts the reader with the responsibility of understanding their version of Gandhi, the man. That is the biggest achievement of the book under discussion.

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