

Gandhi without Myths

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History is scarce in India. Stories or myths, however, abound. The bulk of the little history that we have got about ancient India, for example, is from the accounts of foreigners who came to India either as students or as travellers. Megasthenes, the Ambassador of Seleucus Nicator at Chandragupta Maurya's Court, had left behind a detailed description of India. Again, it was during the reign of Chandragupta II (Vikramāditya) that the Chinese pilgrim Fa-Hien visited India and wrote an elaborate account of the country and its people. In the similar way, we get a vivid description of the rule of Harshavardhana from the Chinese pilgrim Hieun-Tsang. There are historians who believe that some of these accounts contain facts as well as some myths. The same tradition of myth-making has continued to the present days, including the days of Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, our much venerated Gandhiji.

But all about Gandhiji is not make-believe or imaginary. He was a great political leader—in fact, the greatest political leader of modern India. According to Jawaharlal Nehru, Gandhiji has often acted almost by instinct. From his long and close association with the masses he appears to have developed a new sense which tells him how the masses feel, what they do and what they can do. He reacts to this instinctive feeling and fashions his action accordingly. What surprises most was the amazing power of Gandhiji to inspire and enthuse a whole people. 'There was something almost hypnotic about it.'¹

Gandhiji led three movements during his

political career. The Non-Cooperation Movement of 1920, the Civil Disobedience Movement of 1930 and the Quit India Movement of 1942. In the first two movements he exhibited an unparalleled organising power. Take the Civil Disobedience Movement of 1930 which sought to oppose the Salt Tax. Suddenly 'salt' became a mysterious word, a sort of mantra. It seemed as though a spring had been suddenly released. In towns and villages, a tremendous enthusiasm among the countrymen to break Salt Laws by manufacturing salt was boiling. The quality of the salt made was immaterial. The main objective was to disobey a law made by the British. As the movement kept spreading like a prairie fire, everyone marvelled at the amazing power of Gandhiji to stir the multitude to act in an organised way. Moreover, by then the boycott of all British goods had become almost complete. Thus there is no doubt Gandhiji was a remarkable political leader, who had awakened the masses from Kashmir to Kanyakumari.

So, Gandhiji may be said to be the 'Father of the Nation'. However, he was not the 'Father of Indian Independence'. Why? Because all the three movements sponsored and organised by him did *not* bring about the departure of the British from India. The Non-Cooperation Movement of 1920 was broken off in the middle by Gandhiji because of the occurrence of some violence at a place called Chauri Chaura. So far as the Civil Disobedience Movement of 1930 was concerned, an agreement called Gandhi-Irwin Pact was made with the Viceroy in 1931. Nehru in his autobiography referred to

earlier says: We saw the draft, it gave me a tremendous shock. The thing had been done. The Civil Disobedience Movement was ended. Was it for this that our people behaved so gallantly for a year? Were all our brave words and deeds to end in this?²

As for the Quit India Movement of 1942, it was a non-starter because all the top Congress leaders including Gandhiji had been imprisoned by the British for passing the Quit India Resolution on 9 August 1942.

Thus India became free in 1947, not because of these Gandhian agitations but because of the World War II, in which Britain was battered by Germany and Japan to become a second rate Power incapable of holding its empire, including its Indian empire. Even Nehru would often mention that in the immediate post-War period, in the context of history, the British Empire has ceased to exist. And, according to the version of history of the freedom movement as interpreted by the leaders of the Indian National Congress, the spirit of Gandhian *ahimsā* (non-violence) so impressed the British, including Sir Winston Churchill, that they decided to relinquish their worldwide empire, including the Indian empire.

Not a universal man

Another pillar in the mansion of Gandhian mythology to be demolished is the account of his being a universal man, concerned very much with the welfare of mankind. He may have been concerned about mankind's future, but he was not a universal man. In fact, he was communal in the sense that he belonged to a particular community, namely the Hindu community. In an issue of his *Young India*, Gandhiji had clearly declared that he was a *Sanātani* or traditional Hindu. In his politics he brought in such Hindu communal terms as 'Rām Rājya' ('Kingdom of Rāma), 'satyāgraha' etc. The use of these quasi-religious terms in politics not only showed up his communal bias but also had the effect of alienating the

Muslim community from the freedom movement under the leadership of Gandhiji and the Indian National Congress. Above all, it alienated M. A. Jinnah, who in spite of being an atheist and absolutely non-communal, went over to the Muslim League to lead the Pakistan movement that resulted in partition of India on communal basis.

The main structure of the mythological build-up of Gandhiji consists of his preaching of the *ahimsā* (dictum) for which he is known as Mahatma Gandhi all over the world. This preaching of his is to be found in the many utterances in his numerous publications. But what about his practice? Though a votary of *ahimsā*, Gandhiji voluntarily made himself a recruiting agent of the British Indian Army during World War I. This we know from his own account of his life: 'War was declared on the 4th of August [1914]. We reached London on the 6th. . . a meeting of the Indian residents in Great Britain and Ireland was called. I placed my views before them. I felt that Indians residing in England ought to do their bit in the war. . . I . . . invited those who would to enlist as volunteers. There was a good response. . .'

Again, he writes, ' . . . the Viceroy had invited various leaders to a war conference in Delhi. I had also been urged to attend the conference. . . The Viceroy was very keen on my supporting the resolution about recruiting. . . I spoke but one sentence [at the Conference to this affect]: With a full sense of my responsibility I beg to support the resolution.' [In a letter to the Viceroy I said] ' . . . I recognize that in the hour of its danger we must give . . . ungrudging and unequivocal support to the Empire. . . If I could make my countrymen retrace their steps, I would make them withdraw all the Congress resolutions, and not whisper "Home Rule" or "Responsible Government" during the pendency of the War. I would make India offer all her able-bodied sons as a sacrifice to the Empire at its critical moment. . . .'³

This is from Gandhiji, the saint of *ahimsā*! Gandhiji's exhortation to his associates not to utter a whisper about Home Rule or Responsible Government is indicative also of the political objective behind his movements (including his subsequent ones) as also the character of the Movement themselves. His political objective was hardly full independence from the British rule and his technique was to put pressure on the British Indian Government in London to grant concessions. He never allowed his two movements, viz the Non-Cooperation Movement and the Civil Disobedience Movement, to go beyond a certain distance, never to be out of his control.

Signs of a saint

A characteristic of a saintly person is absence of egotism through self-effacement. Such a person Gandhiji never actually was, in spite of his utterances and writings. He used often to declare that he was not even a 4-ana (pence) member of the Indian National Congress, although all the time he was at the top of the organisation. When in December 1924, at the Congress Session Gandhiji was made President, this was Nehru's comment: 'For him to become the Congress President was something in the nature of an anti-climax. For he had long being the permanent super-president'.⁴ How intense and deep-rooted his love of power and position in the Indian National Congress has been revealed by the statement he made after the news of the victory of Subhas Chandra Bose at the Congress Presidential election in 1939 at

Tripuri came out. It was all because his candidate, Mr Sitaramaiya, was defeated in the election by Subhas Bose (Incidentally this was the first time at Tripuri that a Congress President was elected. Hitherto they were invariably nominated by Gandhiji). In his now-famous statement, trembling with indignation, he said: 'Pattavi's defeat is my defeat'. Then came his innuendo—'After all Subhas Babu is not an enemy of his country.' Such outbursts of deep-seated anger should not have come from a person whose name is pronounced along with Buddha and Jesus Christ!

The laxity in his fidelity to *ahimsā* was revealed on another occasion. It took place in a town in the U.P., now called Uttar Pradesh. A large crowd of protesters, wholly unarmed, faced a British-led regiment, called 'Garwal'. Its British officers ordered their men to open fire on the protesters, but they refused to do so. For this the Garwal Regiment was disbanded. Gandhi strongly condemned the refusal of the Regimental men to shoot at unarmed men and women as an act of gross indiscipline, instead of calling it a brave act of non-violent resistance.

This laxity on the part of Gandhiji was exhibited many times not only towards non-violence principle, it was exhibited also in his dealings with women as women. The fact is, like most other saints, Gandhiji did not believe in celibacy or *brahmacharya*.⁵

In fine, it may be repeated that although Gandhiji was a great political leader, it is questionable if he was a *Mahātma* (saintly person) in the true sense of the term. ■

REFERENCES

- 1 Nehru, *An Autobiography*, Allied Publishers, 1942, p. 223.
- 2 *Ibid.*, p. 258.
- 3 M. K. Gandhi, *An Autobiography or The Story of My Experiments with Truth*, Navajivan

Publishing House, 2005, pp. 318-19, 405, 408, 411.

- 4 *An Autobiography*, p. 132.

- 5 For details see, Rajmohan Gandhi's *Mohandas*, Penguin Books, India, 2006, pp. 229-31, 572.

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