

MAHATMA GANDHI: A MANIPULATOR OR HERO

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Abstract

His countrymen called him Mahatma; the world knew him as Gandhi. He defied the great British Empire, and the Empire failed to control him. He grew up an ordinary man, yet became extraordinary because of his intellect. He believed that bloodshed never brings peace but only more bloodshed. His self-confidence was so enormous that many misjudged him as dominating and proud. His determination to see his country free from foreign rule was never in vain, even at the great cost of partition. He united the whole country under the banner of the Indian National Congress and understood the deceptiveness of the British Raj. His actions troubled the Empire and did not go unnoticed or unpunished. On numerous occasions he was imprisoned, called evil, put under the microscope because the West never understood how a man who dressed like a beggar could become so popular and respected by millions. By advocating the *satyagraha*, he united the nation and showed the world that nonviolence and noncooperation can be the keys for political success. He became an icon for those who were struggling to win a freedom from their foreign ruler, and a great threat for the British colonial rule. The British Raj never knew how to subdue him or change his views, so he was portrayed as an arrogant man. After his death, many felt compelled to criticize his ideologies and his achievements based on his personal and sexual life. His image has been slandered, as many have been led to believe that he was an ambitious man who manipulated the legal system and the emotions of others to bend the people to his will and have them do his bidding. The question arises: was Gandhi a manipulator or a hero? Did he deceive others to boost his own popularity? Or he was the man who saw how poorly the Indians were treated by the British Raj and decided to stand firm against injustice no matter what?

Keywords: Nonviolence and noncooperation, *Satyagraha*, An icon, Slandered.

1 INTRODUCTION

Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi strongly believed that India could only obtain its freedom from Britain not through violence but by advocating *satyagraha* (loosely translated as “insistence on truth” or “zeal for truth”) through *ahimsa* (nonviolence) and noncooperation. Using these techniques would not only repel the British imperial power in India but also show the inner strength of India’s people to the outside world. By endorsing nonviolence, Gandhi was able to unify India under one banner without any racial prejudice, leading the country through three major movements of nonviolence—the Noncooperation Movement from 1920–22, the Civil Disobedience Movement from 1930–34, and the Quit India Movement of 1942—until the country finally achieved its freedom on August 15, 1947. However, although he was the beloved leader of a country that honored him with the name of Mahatma (“great soul”), Gandhi and his philosophy had strong critics. Even today, there are many who think that he was a proud, sex-addicted, fraudulent, domineering, and abusive man who became an icon because he was smart enough to understand the weaknesses of others, using them to satisfy his own ambitions. History and thoughtful analysis will determine whether Gandhi was a man who became great by manipulating others or a man who found a unique way to overpower and destroy the reputation of the mighty British Empire—a regime which had turned India into a country that would unconditionally support the British “need for money, a market, and an imperial army” (Adams, 2011, p. 24).

2 ANALYSIS OF GANDHI

Arguments abound about how much credit Gandhi deserves as India’s savior and about his reputation as a man of virtue and chastity. Numerous critics around the world have sought to blacken the name of the man who represented a non-Western, British-dominated colony and yet became the most powerful man of the

twentieth century, according to Albert Einstein. Even during his own lifetime, some people criticized Gandhi, mocking him for being a *mahatma* who took a vow to live his life as a *Bramhacharya* (“one living a spiritual life,” but normally referring to one living in chastity) but who still slept naked with young women. In reality, Gandhi not only experimented in politics but also in his personal and sexual life.

2.1. Personal Life, Philosophy and Beliefs

Gandhi was born on October 2, 1869, in the port city of Porbandor, Gujrat. His household was an ordinary Hindu orthodox Bania home, although his father, Karamchand Gandhi, was the prime minister of a princely state; his mother, Putlibai, was illiterate and very traditional. He grew up as an ordinary man but found a way to become extraordinary. He learned from the Old Testament and Koran as well as the Bhagavad Gita and other Hindu scriptures and used those teachings in practical ways. The Bhagavad Gita is a traditional Indian epic based on the conversation between Lord Krishna and Pandava Prince Arjuna on the eve of the Great War of Kurukshetra. By reading the Bhagavad Gita, Gandhi learned how to be politically astute in order to overpower his enemy, just as Krishna taught Arjuna. Gandhi was a tactful person, but more importantly, he was a practical man. He understood the dilemma Indians faced each and every day under a foreign ruler, but he also understood that being vindictive toward the British Raj would not bring any positive outcome, so instead, he talked about peaceful protest.

At first, this tactic was not well received by many Indian freedom fighters, who believed that the quickest way to achieve independence was to assassinate every British official living in India. They believed that since Gandhi was preaching against this course of action, he was actually just trying to save the British colonists and not end the occupation. Gandhi, however, with his tactical superiority and belief in nonviolence, actually understood the mindset of ordinary, poor, village-oriented Indians very well. He knew that Indians had neither the ammunition nor the trained soldiers to defeat the British Empire. Yet all Indians craved freedom from their colonizers, and the Sepoy Mutiny in 1857 was the fruit of that frustration. Gandhi, however, understood that bloodshed was never a solution. He became a man of virtue, and that legacy will never fade away simply because in his old age he slept naked with young women and might have abandoned his chastity.

A man should be remembered for his deeds, and that is why history remembers Hitler as a mass murderer rather than as a man who wanted to be an artist. Historians blame Robespierre for causing the Reign of Terror, though he was shy and idealistic before the 1789 French Revolution altered French society, destroying lives and toppling the Bourbon monarchy and its heads of state, Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette. In contrast to Hitler or Robespierre or others who have preached violence throughout the centuries, Gandhi, with his *satyagraha* ideology, stands alone. He became an inspiration to Martin Luther King Jr., Cesar Chavez, Kwame Nkruma, Petra Kelly, and many more who followed in his footsteps to achieve equality and justice for their own communities.

Gandhi's personal life only shows how honest he was, and his negative side only proves that he was a human being—just like other human beings, he had weaknesses. However, these faults cannot overshadow his philosophy, his selfless acts, or his determination to do good for his countrymen and nation. British historian Jed Adams, one among many who have slandered the character of Gandhi, presumed that Gandhi's service with the Indian Ambulance Corps during the Boer War meant he must have been a supporter of the British Raj. This was not the case; Gandhi did not support the Zulu rebellion not because he backed the British but because he was a man who had faith in the rule of law and justice. It should not slip from our minds that before him, no one ever dared to challenge the officials of South Africa.

Like Adams, Indian historian Sumit Sarkar argued that Gandhi should not be given full credit for his success in the South African *satyagraha* movements of 1907–1914 because he neglected those who suffered as the Indians did but were of another race. However, Sarkar agreed that “Gandhi's life-long recognition of the necessity and possibility of Hindu-Muslim unity certainly...” was the reason for the 1907–08, 1908–11, and 1913–14 *satyagraha* movements in South Africa “in which Muslim merchants had been extremely active” (Sarkar, 1989, p. 178). His action against the Black Act in South Africa and his agreement with Jan Smuts on June 30, 1914, was a symbol of hope for Indian immigrants in South Africa. It was also an inspiration for Indians in India and for future leaders of Africa such as Nelson Mandela, who followed in Gandhi's footsteps and won freedom for his country.

Many Indians, mainly Punjabi and Bengali freedom fighters and alternative revolutionaries like Jatindra Nath Das, Betukeshwar Dutt, Bhagat Singh, and Subhas Chandra Bose, felt that because of Gandhi, India's struggle for independence was longer than it should have been. These individuals felt that violence was the

only way to force the British to leave India. Sarkar argued that the British were not very threatened by Gandhi's policy of nonviolence because they could subdue nonviolent revolutionaries with force, yet because of the nonviolence movement, those freedom fighters and nationalists who were conducting armed resistance became insignificant (Sarkar, 1989, p. 180)

2.1.1 Reasons for Hindu and Muslim Unity

Gandhi's campaign to unify Hindus and Muslims was not merely based on his childhood link to a temple that preached both the Koran and Gita. He had been able to unify the Indian-born Muslims, Hindus, and Parsis in South Africa without any racial prejudice and knew that unification was possible. He understood that the immigrants in a foreign land survive only if they stand firm together. Gandhi did not forget that Hindus and Muslims have shared India since the Second Battle of Tarain in 1192, when Hindu King Prithviraj Chauhan was defeated and killed by Shahāb-ud-Din Muhammad Ghori; Muslims, Arabs, Afghans, and Turks became mutual inhabitants of India. In fact, some scholars of Indian history believe that 89% of Muslims are of Hindu origin (Parkin, 1945, p. 15).

Gandhi, who lived outside India for almost two decades, was able to see beyond racial barriers, social customs, and caste systems. He found a way to reform traditional Indian society, building on the work that individuals such as Gopal Krishna Gokhale had done in the past.

2.2. Movements

In 1915, Gandhi came back to India and launched his *satyagraha* campaign to support the poor villagers of Champaran. According to Adams, Indian villages in the twentieth century were neglected by both British officials and upper-class, educated Indian nationalists. Gandhi was the first leader who understood that if India was to win its independence, it also needed to become self-sufficient. Before launching a national movement, he needed to experiment on a smaller scale. Therefore, Champaran, Ahmadabad, and Kheda became his first testing grounds in India. Furthermore, Gandhi saw poor indigo farmers and mill workers being exploited by British and Indian landlords and factory owners and wanted to help the poor learn to be economically self-sufficient.

The *Khilafat* Movement was the movement in which Hindus and Muslims, the INC and AIML, worked together for the common cause most prominently. It was at the *Khilafat* Conference in September of 1920 that Gandhi first preached about his noncooperation principle in India; educated and influential Muslims like Maulana Abul Kalam Azad, Mohammed Ali Jinnah, and Shaukat Ali gave Gandhi their full support.

Gandhi had a shrewd purpose in choosing nonviolence as his primary tactic. As a lawyer, Gandhi knew that British law gave the colonizers the right to subdue any kind of violent act as a terrorist threat to the empire (Best, 2003). Gandhi did not want his fellow countrymen to die in vain, especially after having witnessed the cruelty of the 1919 massacre of Jallianwalla Bagh in Amritsar, Punjab. Gandhi was being a better politician than his fellow leaders; he chose nonviolence and peaceful noncooperation to avoid another bloody battle. In so doing, he convinced his countrymen that nonviolence shows more strength of character and courage than violence.

Tactically, the economic boycott used in the Non-Cooperation Movement of 1920–22 proved effective because the whole interest of the British Raj in India was based on economic exploitation. Furthermore, Gandhi recognized the British dependence on Indian labor—Indians did British chores, worked as civil or domestic servants, and served as obedient soldiers who fought against other Western powers. Because of Gandhi's movement, the British felt threatened, fearing that they would lose a country considered the crown jewel of the British monarchy. The British wanted to stop the man they thought was a great challenge to their empire, so even though Gandhi called off the Non-Cooperation Movement in 1922, they imprisoned him. In court, he said, "I am here, therefore, to invite and submit cheerfully to the highest penalty that can be inflicted upon me for what in law is a deliberate crime, and what appears to me to be the highest duty of a citizen," as Sumit Sarkar noted in his book *Modern India: 1885–1947* (Sarkar, 1989, p. 226). Gandhi's does not present himself in his speech as a master manipulator but rather as a great politician and patriot who understood how to inspire his fellow countrymen to join him.

Calling off the movement after the Chauri Chaura incident was not a popular decision. Many criticized his choice because they believed that India could have won its freedom then if Gandhi had not called off the Non-Cooperation Movement (Brown, 1972, p. 107-08). Even some members of the Indian National Congress felt that "in the absence of perfect obedience to Gandhi's dictates such action is bound to end in disaster" (Tomlinson, 1976, p.147). Some Indians' lack of faith in Gandhi's tactics has magnified into broader

criticisms with the years. Some have said that Gandhi was not ready to bend or listen to anyone. As a result, some historians have called him a dominating personality who could not tolerate those who opposed him. Adams tried to depict this aspect of his personality by emphasizing Gandhi's relationship with his wife Kasturba, whom Gandhi forced to abandon her own views in order to follow his simple Ashram-oriented lifestyle. Also, later in his life, Gandhi adopted the same domineering attitude toward young Subhas Chandra Boss, who had to resign his post as president of the Indian National Congress in 1938 because he was not as devoted a follower of Gandhi as Nehru and had started to attract those who disagreed with Gandhi's policies.

Gandhi declared full swaraj at the Lahore Congress in 1929. It took him fourteen years to do so because, like Rabindranath Tagore, Gandhi was not sure if the country would survive after freedom without external help. Soon after the Lahore Congress, Gandhi started the Civil Disobedience Movement (1930–34) with the intent of making salt, an action that Britain had pronounced unconstitutional. However, the salt movement had a greater symbolic impact; the Salt March became a walk toward unity, which pulled in those who had lost faith in Gandhi after the failure of the 1922 movement. The Civil Disobedience Movement had an immediate effect on the British cotton industry: British cloth imports fell from £26 million in 1929 to £13.7 million in 1930 (Sarkar, 1989, p. 293).

2.2.1 Gandhi and Women

For the first time in Indian history, women actively joined a national movement and left their homes to march alongside Gandhi. At the Round Table Conference of 1931, Gandhi asserted that women should have voting rights and become more educated so they could be considered the equals of men. According to Gandhi, "It would be a dangerous thing to insist on membership (in the legislature) on the ground of sex" (The Hindu Magazine, 2013). It seems ridiculous to call him domineering when he was the impetus for women to take an active role in politics. Gandhi respected women, which was why he became quite attractive to bright, educated, and modern Indian women such as Saraladevi Choudhurani, the niece of Rabindranath Tagore (Adam, 2011, p. 167). His views on child marriage and women's education proved that he understood the backwardness inherent in the Indian social structure, and he wanted to cleanse society not by force but through self-education and self-realization. He saw the caste system as a barrier to a unified Indian social structure. According to historian Tara Sethia, even though Gandhi had an argument with *dalit* leader B. R. Ambedkar about voting policies, he did not consider *dalits* untouchable, as they were traditionally labeled by Indian society (Sethia, 2012, p. 120). Thanks to Gandhi, *dalits* were finally allowed into the Hindu temples and seen as equal to other castes.

2.3. Further Movements

At the first Indian Round Table Conference in 1931, Gandhi claimed that the Indian National Congress was the one body to "represent the whole of India" (Indian Round Table Conference, 1931, p. 390). He believed in a single nation, one India stretching from the Himalayas to Cape Comorin. However, the Hindu and Muslim communities grew apart in the period between 1932 and 1947, becoming political adversaries. The rift between the communities increased when the communal electorate was introduced in 1937's provincial election. Muslims automatically became the most powerful community in Bengal and Punjab as they outnumbered the Hindus and Sikhs. By 1938, Gandhi was beginning to see his one-nation theory failing, so he met Jinnah in the hope of creating a new unification plan, but the meeting ended unsuccessfully. Gandhi felt he was the one who represented all India, and he blamed Jinnah for abandoning "nationalism for secretarial politics," whereas Jinnah felt that, because of Mahatma Gandhi, Congress had become an instrument for renewing Hinduism (Adam, 2011, p. 224).

2.3.1 World War II and Change in Politics

World War II was of great significance to the Indian independence movement. At the beginning of the war, the British ignored the fact that they might need to consult Congress before they declared war on India's behalf. The Indian Congress was outraged, and Gandhi did not feel that there was any need to resist Hitler because he considered the Nazis and the British two sides of the same coin. To him, "all are exploiters, all resort to ruthlessness" (Adam, 2011, p. 221). In three articles published in *Young India*, Gandhi explained how India and its people were "slowly sinking to lifelessness," and how the British Raj should be the one to be blamed (Gopal, 1967, p. 337). He asserted that "the greatest misfortune is that Englishmen and their Indian associates in the administration of the country do not know that they are engaged in crime." Gandhi wrote that "they truly believe that they are administering one of the best systems devised in the world and

that India is making steady though slow progress.” Clearly, Gandhi had no doubts about the exploitative nature of the colonists, nor did he believe in their supposedly just laws.

The results of this declaration of war were protests on Congress’s behalf and the subsequent imprisonment of many leaders of Congress. At this time, Gandhi launched the Quit India Movement. The Muslim League demanded a “divide and quit” action while the Indian Congress wanted Britain to leave without dividing the nation” (Schaeffer, p. 224). Gandhi wholeheartedly opposed the partition plan, stating that “If Congress wishes to accept partition; it will be over my dead body. So long as I am alive, I will never agree to the partition of India” (Azad, 1960, p. 218). However, at this juncture, Gandhi failed to notice two of his favorite leaders in Congress—Muhammad Ali Jinnah and Jawaharlal Nehru—reaching an agreement behind his back to divide the country, creating two separate nations to house two religious sects. Sadly, Gandhi’s effort to see Hindus and Muslims unified in a free India did not last.

There may be many reasons why Gandhi never spoke out directly against the Muslim separatist movement. According to Tara Sethia and Jed Adams, in 1908, Gandhi was attacked by Mir Alam, the leader of a Pathan group, causing him to faint. After this incident, Gandhi never spoke directly against Muslims, and historians have suggested that he was afraid of the Muslims. However, it is possible that he understood the reasons why Jinnah and the Muslim League were urging the creation of a new nation. In order to preserve his vision of a unified India, though, Gandhi wanted to compromise by making Jinnah the first prime minister of India, letting him form the cabinet, but neither Patel nor Nehru was ready to give up his position in the newly independent India to Jinnah. Patel believed that India was inherently two separate nations and that it was not possible to unite Hindus and Muslims under one banner (Azad, 1960, p. 216–217). Yet many Muslims did not support the idea of creating a new country. Khan Abdul Gaffar Khan and his party, Khudai Khidmatgars, had always supported Congress and opposed the Muslim League, which regarded the Khan brothers and their party as their mortal enemy (Azad, 1960, p. 226).

2.3.2. Partition and Death

On the eve of the partition, riots broke out, primarily in cities that had both Hindus and Muslims and near the newly formed border between India and Pakistan. The metropolitan city of Calcutta experienced some of the most horrific rioting; the city’s Hindus and Muslims ruthlessly slaughtered each other. People in Calcutta blamed Congress and Gandhi for the partition, even though Gandhi had always stood against the two-nation ideology. When Congress failed to contain the bloodshed, Gandhi decided to come to Calcutta and undertook a “fast unto death” unless the killing stopped. Even Gandhi’s threat to fast to death unless the riots stopped failed to achieve its goal for quite some time.

To Gandhi, fasting was a tool of empowerment; others had to bend to his will if they wished to save his life. Making fasting a weapon to force others to bend to his will could be seen as an act of a manipulation; however, in the case of Gandhi, he never fasted for his own gain, and his fasts often helped achieve his goals for India. Both Hindus and Muslims pledged to him that they would not try to harm the other side if Gandhi broke his fast, and he did. It seemed that no one wanted to be blamed for his death until a religious fanatic named Nathuram Godse shot Gandhi at point-blank range on January 30, 1948, ending a life that could have been valuable for guiding the newly independent country.

3. CONCLUSION

At his trial, Godse described Gandhi as eccentric, whimsical, a believer in a primitive vision, and a “judge of everything and everyone” (Adam, 2011, p. 273). Yet the murderer of Gandhi had to agree that he had a “formidable and irresistible” personality (Adam, 2011, p. 273). He was the *bapu* (father) of a whole nation, and everywhere he went, people chanted “Mahatma Gandhi ki jai” (“Long live Mahatma Gandhi”) (Azad, 1960, p. 218). It is impossible for a man to gain that sort of love and popularity from his countrymen by manipulating them; a hero, though, can easily win that kind of devotion.

The fear provoked by an Eastern man who dared to cross everyone in the West can be seen in Jed Adams’s description of Gandhi. According to Adams, Gandhi was an ambitious man who craved spiritual power, did not care for the poor or the cause of Indian independence, and enjoyed the support of the rich. (Adam, 2011, p. 6). He was supposedly fickle because he supported the mill workers “when he was opposing the use of mill-produced cloth” (Adam, 2011, p. 6). These arguments amount to little more than slander as Gandhi was the first Congress leader who made direct connections with India’s poor farmers, fighting for their rights. Furthermore, choosing to live in an Ashram did not make him merely a spiritualist, nor did it mean that he was carefree.

When we read that British Prime Minister Winston Churchill called Gandhi “a malignant subversive fanatic”

and “a thoroughly evil force,” it becomes quite clear how much of a threat one man became to the mighty British Empire. The West portrayed Gandhi as a “man of the loincloth” just because he dressed like thousands of other poor Indian men. Surprisingly, though, no one questioned his motives for rejecting the use of Western suits and pants after wearing them for many years. It can be argued that Gandhi wore a loincloth not only to promote *swadeshi* or to identify visually with ordinary Indians but also as a way to show the world how hollow Western etiquette seemed to the natives living under colonial rule. By abandoning standard British bureaucratic attire, Gandhi proved that it was possible for a traditional Indian to be powerful and well-respected.

Soon after India won its freedom, many of Gandhi’s ideologies were cast aside. For instance, his beloved Nehru rejected his village-oriented economy and embarked upon building a large-scale, industrial, city-oriented economy. Today’s India is a country where the rich are becoming richer and the poor are becoming poorer. It is hard not to wonder what would have happened if India had followed Gandhi’s path and become a self-sustaining economy, one that was strong from its core.

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