

The Real Gandhi:

An impartial estimate of his greatness

In psychoanalytic practice there is a well-mown method of testing our instinctive responses, plumbing our spontaneous Idea-associations. A number of carefully chosen words are spoken to us and we have to blurt out without a moment's thought the words that rise up in our minds. Well, if any Indian is psychoanalytically pelted with the term "Swaraj", the rebound in most cases will be the name "Gandhi".

You would say this is but natural. Yes, natural it is, since Gandhi stood at the forefront of the political scene here for the last three decades. And yet the response, the association is wrong. There would be the right response and association if there were the mention of a leader like Tilak who bent his whole leonine energy towards the attainment of Swaraj, who was a Swarajist first and last, who had no other life-passion than to free India from the British and who considered all means legitimate in breaking the fetter of foreign domination. With Gandhi, Swaraj was never the be-all and end-all. No doubt, he wanted India to be politically independent, but never unconditionally, never by any kind of means. Either certain conditions must be observed by us, certain means adopted, or else no Swaraj was to be desired and worked for. There was in Gandhi's vision an ideal which seemed to him larger than India's political freedom - and that ideal was what he strove after and sought to represent: if Swaraj could be subsumed under that ideal, if it could attune itself to this "greater glory" then alone was it worth having!

Not Swarajist but Humanist

Gandhi was not first and last a patriot or a politician. He was above everything a moralist and humanist. What was his

charge-sheet against the British rulers? A patriotic politician would announce that even if there were nothing to hold up against British rule on the score of moral or humane conduct, self-government would still be the goal: it must be won for its own sake because it is an inalienable right of every nation. Gandhi's attack on British imperialism was not essentially on the ground that India must be governed by Indians. It was rather on the ground that England had mis-governed India.

If the British sovereignty had really been what it claimed to be - *mabap raj*, fatherly and motherly rule - it is questionable indeed whether Gandhi would have launched into politics. He was at heart a champion of the down-trodden and the ill-treated, and his main accusation against John Bull was not the foreignness of the fellow but the crudity of the chap. And it is characteristic of Gandhi that while not forgetting the political misdeeds, he gave prime place on his black list to the misdeeds that were economic. After the first World War, he did not mention as the chief blot on British rule the Rowlatt Act, the Jallianwalla Massacre, the broken promise of the British Premier to the Muslims of India and the sham unsatisfactory reforms. He mentioned in words of the intensest fire and the most glaring light the appalling poverty which was the result of systematic exploitation of our masses by the British. In the celebrated trial in which he showed the causes of his disaffection for the Government, this deliberate impoverishing of the bulk of his people, this continual and cold-blooded degrading of millions below the bare subsistence level in order that a few might wax rich was declared to have principally alienated him from his masters. Even more characteristic

of him was his grouping together with the crime of his masters the crime of his own countrymen who shared the exploiter's mentality and never scrupled about grinding the faces of the poor.

The passage is memorable, for in it is summed up the real Gandhi: "No sophistry, no jugglery in figures can explain away the evidence, the skeletons in many villages, present to the naked eye. I have no doubt whatsoever that both England and the town-dwellers of India will have to answer, if there is a God above, for this crime against humanity which is perhaps unequalled in history."

The castigation of the Indian exploiters, and not solely the British, is a clue that leads us straight to his most humanitarian campaign, the one against Untouchability - a campaign whose thrust was at the Indian though the foreigner also was taken to task for setting up a separate electorate for the Untouchables and thus perpetuating them as a class. Gandhi's battle with conventional India ran parallel to his battle with John Bull. He solemnly thought his country deserved to be tyrannised over by the British because of the heinous sin she had committed for centuries against so many millions of her own people by looking down upon them as pariahs, as outside the pale of social intercourse, as worse than beasts of burden. Unless we set about putting our own house in order we are not fit to be free: this is what Gandhi said time and again. Never did he spare his countrymen the scorpion whip: he lashed them without fear, he stung them relentlessly into consciousness of guilt. He was no flatterer: he did not play up to his audience: he was a just and bold critic of India. Even about the scurrilous book by Miss Mayo he said that it was a book Englishmen should put out of their minds but Indians must take to heart, for though it was in many respects a malicious exaggeration with not half a glance to spare for the good side of our land, it did drive home a few facts, a few truths.

And the worst fact, the most painful truth about us was, in Gandhi's eyes, Untouchability. To remove the bar sinister of the Untouchables was to be our duty side by side with removing the yoke of the Britisher, who was inclined to treat us as untouchables. "Fail in this moral and humane duty," said Gandhi in effect, "and you do not merit to be set free. Social reform must go hand in hand with work for Swaraj: without social reform Swaraj is not worth a straw!"

Can Non-violence be the Master Ideal?

Nor is the attack on the pariah system the sole distinguishing mark of Gandhi being basically something else than an embodiment of Swarajism. There is the insistence, in season and out, on non-violence, *ahimsa*. According to him, we simply had to oppose the British for the economic as well as political chains put on us by them, but the chains had to be snapped in the right way and not the wrong. The moment we chose the wrong way we would forge worse chains for ourselves and it would be much ; better to endure the lesser evil than create the bigger. A man is truly man, in Gandhi's view, when he restrains himself and not when he retaliates. We must fight without rancour and without staining our hands with brute force. Every injustice has to be combated but unto one's own death, never unto the death of one's opponent. Blood must be spilled for a noble cause, but it must be our own blood. One remembers how at the height of his Civil Disobedience Movement in 1922, with the entire nation steeled to resist the British Government and bring the proud rulers to their knees, Gandhi cast away the prize nearly in his hands and stopped the campaign just because at Chauri Chaura the populace, inflamed by armed police repression, ran amuck and committed a few acts of gruesome violence.

This sudden drawing of reins by Gandhi brings out sharply the fact that as a politician he was not always the master-guide. What he did in 1922, like several other acts in his career as India's leader, was, from the

political standpoint, short-sighted; he might have striven to check further violence without stemming the enthusiastic tide of nationalism and frustrating the highly wrought millions he commanded. Besides, the too acute recoil from violence of any kind is a dangerously confusing emotion, in a world where there are so many diabolic presences. The inadequacy of the dictate to abjure violence was most revealed when in the last war Gandhi advised England to fling off arms and melt Hitler's heart by letting him ride roughshod over her. Its defect was laid bare again with terrible vividness when he talked of India fighting the Japanese invader with non-violence. He did not realise the threat to world-civilisation by the Fascist maniacs and how limited and ineffective complete non-violence would have been against their blind brutality. Beglamoured by his own pet doctrine, he could not see the Inferno that was the heart of Fascism and thought that here was only another form of the imperialistic ambition which had marched through history so often and which was never quite impervious to the influence of heroic self-sacrifice and passive resistance on its opponent's part. Many Indians committed the same mistake, but except the taking up of arms on behalf of Fascism nothing could have been more Himalayan a blunder than the pitting of *ahimsa* against a Hitler.

Did Gandhi Embody the Soul of India?

The idealisation of non-violence at all costs serves also to throw into relief the precise meaning of Gandhi's saying: "Politics are to me subservient to religion." If religion primarily signified to him non-violence, then it is doubtful whether he can stand wholly as a representative of what India has historically understood by religion. In the golden age of Indian spirituality, the Vedic times, the arts of war were not taboo. Even in the Ashrams of the Rishis archery was taught - surely not just to hunt animals (though that too would be contrary to non-violence). It was taught essentially in order to fit men for violence in a right cause. The

emphasis was always on being right, not on being non-violent. The holiest figures in Indian tradition, Rama and Krishna, were mighty warriors and urged men to battle against the enemies of *dharma*. To explain away their fights as being allegories of inner struggle between man's higher self and his lower is to forget that in part of mankind the lower self is not only dominant but also aggressive against those in whom the higher self is more active and that the inner struggle must necessarily get projected into an epic of physical combat. Even Buddha who among India's spiritual personalities put the greatest premium on non-violence did not enjoin it on all and sundry: he restricted it to the class of monks and, while conjuring humanity to return love for hatred, never discouraged violence in defence of a cause that was just. The absolute adherence to *ahimsa* was derived by Gandhi from Tolstoy: it does not reflect the flexible and many-sided spiritual wisdom of original Hinduism.

There is also another fact which leads us to question whether Gandhi, for all his veneration of the Gita, embodied vitally the soul of the: Hindu religion. It was not only Swaraj that he deemed undesirable without unsleeping agitation and activity to demolish the barrier between the untouchables and the rest of our population: even Hinduism itself, the whole grand structure of spiritual aspiration towards the invisible Divine, was a mockery to Gandhi so long as that barrier was not torn down. One of his often-quoted utterances is that he would far rather that Hinduism died than that Untouchability lived! Here is an hysterical rushing to extremes by a conscience hypersensitive to social inequalities. Here is deplorable forgetfulness of the truth that, though social reformism is a fine passion, it cannot be the centre and core of man's upward endeavour. The main purpose of true religion is a change of the merely human consciousness into a divine consciousness by a progressive practice of the presence of God. Only when that presence is inwardly realised can social pestilences like Untouchability be radically

removed. Till then, sincere efforts must certainly be made to abolish them by means of brotherly social behaviour, but to believe that a sore like Untouchability renders all Hinduism corrupt and futile and that, without the help of the fundamental transformation of consciousness that is Yoga, the root and not only one or another outward form of social iniquity can be plucked out is to confuse morality with religion and to prove clearly that one lacks the burning essence of not only the Hindu religion but also of all religion - the mystical cry for the Eternal and the Infinite.

Gandhi and the True Spiritual Light

In view of this it becomes impossible to speak of Gandhi, as so many do, in the same breath with Buddha or Christ. Christ and Buddha had an intensely developed social sense of brotherhood; but they had something more, and that something was not merely a mental and emotional acceptance of the Eternal and the Infinite as a sort of penumbra of the passion for social equality. Rather, this passion was radiated from a centre of consciousness that had deepened beyond the human into the immense reality of the Infinite and the Eternal. They were mystics, men who had Yogically realised God whether in His impersonal aspect of Nirvana or in His personal aspect as Lord and Lover.

Our feeling, that Gandhi never had the mystical experience and the spiritual realisation, is borne out in full by a comparison of what mystics of various ages have left on record with what Gandhi put on paper about his own life. It is not possible to say that he may have kept silent about certain things: he made it a point to hide nothing, to confess and register whatever he experienced or did, and if any man's life was transparent to the world's eyes so far as his own knowledge of himself went it was the life of Gandhi as described in his autobiography *My Experiments with Truth* and some other writings of his in the periodicals he

edited. If Gandhi had gone through any mystical realisation he would not have violated truth by omitting it from his account when he made it his professed aim to omit nothing. Of course, for the world to know that a man is a mystic the writing or declaring explicitly that he had gone through certain experiences is not necessary; there are other ways in which mysticism talks manifests, comes into the open and it might be difficult to judge from this or that man's writings whether he was a mystic or no. But Gandhi - by setting up as his autobiographical ideal an account which lays open all important details and by yet failing to lay open anything mystical in his self-portrayal - leaves no shadow of a doubt that he never was a mystic.

Merely to get promptings, as Gandhi said he did from an inner voice does not constitute mysticism. "The still small voice" in the form of what is called conscience is a common possession: It becomes very imperative in some people, but there is no undeniable spirituality implied by it, even if one has practised self-control and tried to avoid dishonesty. A voice of conscience can arrive from various recesses of our being: it can be as often undivine as divine, and mostly it is neither in any specific sense, and not seldom there are several kinds of voices in the same individual, creating quite a confusion in the long run. Occasionally a voice from within becomes an extraordinary phenomenon, as if it were an objective dictate from some guiding power outside or beyond us. In his entire life Gandhi knew this phenomenon only once: a voice suddenly woke him up in the middle of the night and whispered to him clear and cogent directions about a fast of issues arising out of Untouchability. He wrote about it in *Harijan* a few years later (December 10, 1938) and ended with the words: "That kind of experience has never in my life happened before or after that date." The experience has been compared to those of the Saints. Even if it could be so compared, one such experience would not give a man the authentic mystical status. But in point of fact an experience like Gandhi's

carries by itself no guarantee of a mandate from on high. Any distinctive occult phenomenon is not necessarily spiritual in origin any more than is an exceptionally willed abstinence or a keen urge towards philanthropy. The call received by Gandhi to fast has nothing in it similar to the voices and the visions that are revelatory incidents in the exalted sweep of the Saints into the "unitive knowledge" which transcends and transfigures the human consciousness.

Absence of mysticism does not prevent a man from being great, and Gandhi was great - but in the ethico-religious sphere, without the marked touch of the religio-mystical sphere which takes up both mind and heart into a greater and more gracious life. Just as Gandhi was not primarily a patriot or a politician, he was also not fundamentally in the line of the illumined and ecstatic seers. It is these seers, these embodiments of spiritual realisation, who are the purest light of the world - and in that light has India of the ages striven most to live, and only by its gold of godhead will she be able to crown her long history and lead our broken half blind earth to its fulfilment. Once we perceive this, we shall not fall into a blurring of values when we confront the future, for we shall be in a position to estimate correctly the significance of that frail yet unconquerable, ascetic yet compassionate figure who will have a deserved place in his countrymen's memory but to whom it was a mistake to give the mysticism-charged Upanishadic title of "Mahatma".



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