

## BOOK REVIEWS

# Mahatma Gandhi

## *Nonviolent Power in Action*

By Dennis Dalton

NEW YORK: COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY PRESS, 1993  
XII + 265 PAGES + INDEX

As one of the most original and charismatic philosopher-activists of this century, Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi caught the public eye in his quest for India's freedom (*swaraj*) through civil disobedience campaigns (*satyagraha*). Dennis Dalton's latest publication on Gandhi provides an excellent resource for teachers of modern South Asia as he focuses on the leader's philosophical views on *swaraj* and *satyagraha*, on their application in India's freedom movement, and on their current implications for social inclusion in the region today.

Moreover, as Dalton also highlights the impact and relevance of Gandhi's nonviolent methods in the context of American race relations, his pertinent but slim volume will be a particularly effective instructional guide for students unfamiliar with Indian history. Indian terms are presented with clarity but not too profusely so as to daunt the Western reader, and the format makes this a manageable text both for the instructor as well as the student.

In the first incisive chapters Dalton delineates his thesis that Gandhi perceived *swaraj* comprehensively to connote political freedom as well as socioeconomic justice through nonviolence and truth. He emphasizes that Gandhi felt that the path to freedom was equally important as the goal itself. Gandhi personally defined *swaraj* as "a movement for self-purification," and nonviolent *satyagraha* as a "policy of communal suffering," which empowered both the individual and the group. Gandhi's faith in cooperative action made him espouse Hindu-Muslim unity and fight against untouchability in India, but this communal message is also pertinent for other societies.

moreover, in an era when pollution threatens to engulf the globe, and the Cold War has ended but peace is still elusive in many places, Gandhi's credo of 'simple living and high thinking' has a prophetic ecological and demographic relevance today. Dalton's book helps to fill the curricular need for balanced texts showing the ongoing applicability of Gandhi's methods.

To Gandhi's discomfiture, he was acclaimed as a mahatma (great soul or saint) by adoring Indian peasants and politicians, as well as Westerners, all of whom were intrigued by his visionary

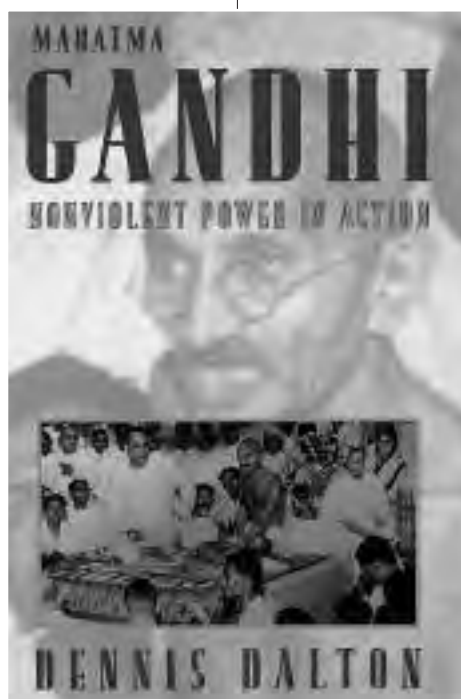
quest for equality and political morality. Since then, a great array of international scholars and educationists have reconstructed Gandhi according to each decade's need. Hagiographies are far too common, as are postmodern critiques attributing ulterior motives to Gandhi. On the other hand, Dalton's is a balanced assessment of a spiritual leader with human foibles, and of a human being capable of heroic deeds. This will appeal to readers in an era when sainthood is generally suspect, and politicians are often corrupt.

In his own academic search for truth, Dalton acknowledges that this volume includes 'previous incarnations' from his earlier essays. Despite his candid sympathy for his subject, he also examines Gandhi's writings and secondary documentation on controversies surrounding him. Thus, Dalton shows that despite Gandhi's genuine abhorrence of untouchability, his views on caste were fairly conservative until 1932 when the mahatma could ignore orthodox frowns with impunity, and publicly promote inter-caste dining and marriage.

One chapter appraises Gandhi's dialogues with his detractors, Ambedkar, M. N. Roy, and Rabindranath Tagore. Dalton hardly discusses Ambedkar's constitutional legacy of secularism, while his discussion is too brief of the distrust felt by this preeminent untouchable leader for Gandhi's programs for the Harijans (God's folk), the name coined by the mahatma for this marginalized group. However, there is a finer analysis of the Marxist Roy's ambivalence, starting with his distaste for Gandhi's moralisms interjected into what Roy felt was an incipient class struggle, proceeding to Roy's own ethical battle to cleanse the party of corruption, and ending with his final emotional eulogy for Gandhi.

The humanitarian Tagore's objections to *satyagraha* are attributed to the poet's suspicion of narrow patriotism and to his antipathy to mass movements that could subvert the individual will. Both of these arguments were comprehensible in an era scarred by dictators and world wars. Dalton concludes that while both the poet and the mahatma sought *swaraj*, Tagore's effectiveness was reduced by his lack of faith in *satyagraha*. Postmodernist and feminist critiques are referred to either succinctly in the text or in detailed footnotes, their inclusion in this slim volume indicating that the author recognizes their relevance to the historiography of nationalism, ethnicity, and gender without subscribing to their arguments. While the author does not grapple effectively with the challenges posed by subaltern scholars, the book is well conceptualized, interpretive, and insightful, while its uncluttered eloquence and modern relevance make its fine scholarship accessible even to the lay reader unfamiliar with Indian politics.

Two chapters examine Gandhi's intellectual evolution through the interplay of ideas from India and the West. Dalton



places seminal importance upon the influence of Indian thought from the *Upanishads*, Jain texts, and the *Bhagavad Gita*, which conceptualize freedom in spiritual terms. However, he also shows that such modern Indian reformers had recourse to Sanskrit and Pali scriptures mostly through English translations embedded in an Orientalist vocabulary. Thus, Gandhi drew inspiration from the *Bhagavad Gita* in a version by Edwin Arnold, while the nationalist motto 'unity amidst diversity' based on *Upanishadic* monism was derived for politics by mystics like Aurobindo and Vivekananda, who rejected the individualism inherent in English liberalism while writing in that language. Dalton also cites Ruskin, Thoreau, and Tolstoy, as well as the stoic example of the British suffragists as inspirations for the mahatma's Gujarati tract, "Hind Swaraj" in 1909. This text served as Gandhi's blueprint for national rejuvenation, and he later translated it into English.

Dalton also probes Gandhi's fine distinction between *satyagraha* and its nemesis, *duragraha*, in which noncooperation disintegrated into the violent misuse of power. While this point has been enunciated earlier by Bondurant, Dalton integrates it neatly into his theme of cooperation and spiritual *swaraj*.

Two chapters examine *satyagraha* campaigns like the epochal Dandi March against the salt tax in 1930, and the 1946 fast against communalism in Bengal. The latter is a masterly exposition of a distraught leader's healing pilgrimage to Hindu and Muslim villages where tolerance had given way to hatred. By emphasizing Gandhi's dream for communal harmony, the author justifies his treatment of the fast as *satyagraha* despite the inherently coercive nature of this tactic. Gandhi's guidelines for political fasting included that it be undertaken solely for constructive purposes, and that it make an appeal to the finer instincts of the wrongdoer.

Constructive coercion also formed an element of the Dandi March, which has been a natural favorite with scholars as it combined dramatic activism with semi-mystical symbolism. Dalton highlights the veteran leader's tactical genius by focusing the media's attention on the event, and by forewarning the viceroy, thus thrusting the Raj into a moral quandary. Once again the book looks closely at Marxist critiques on two issues, which include the campaign's failure to attract Muslims, although it mobilized idealistic youths and women, and the fact that the leadership was now seized by the Hindu bourgeoisie whose basic interests collided with those of the proletariat. While admitting the justice of these points, Dalton's response is that Gandhi could not have simultaneously overturned the triple hegemonies of colonial rule, elite stranglehold of the poor, and domination by the Hindu majority. However, despite the pragmatism of such a policy at that time, in hindsight its ramifications for justice in India have been monumental.

A final notable chapter entitled, "Mohandas, Malcolm, and Martin," is likely to appeal to American readers interested in the relevance of *swaraj* and *satyagraha* for plural societies with endemic roots in racism, and in the feasibility of moral tactics against an intractable enemy. Dalton makes an intricate, but lucid comparative analysis of Gandhi, Malcolm X, and the pacifist Martin Luther King. He likens the "painful climb" of the mahatma's *swaraj* in which social inclusiveness coincides with self-mastery, to the evolution of Malcolm's views on racism due

to his candid self-examination throughout his career. The author concludes that although the Black Muslim leader could not accept *satyagraha* as a viable method of confrontation, he eventually separated his hatred of the racist phenomenon from hatred of all white people.

Paradoxically, Dalton shows that despite King's stature as this nation's nonviolent emissary, his personal struggle for *swaraj* floundered prior to his assassination, and he seemed unable to bridge the ideological chasm between blacks. How much more he may have achieved if he had lived is futuristic conjecture, but his canonization, as well as Gandhi's, could convert their message of nonviolence into an ideological fossil but for the ongoing work of such scholars. ■

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