
RAMACHANDRA GUHA'S GANDHI BEFORE INDIA – A CRITICAL REVIEW

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Abstract: In his book *Gandhi Before India* Ramachandra Guha challenges the Indo-centric portrait of the Mahatma and uncovers the formative years spent in England and South Africa. This is a fascinating period of metamorphosis from Mohandas to Gandhi Bhai to Mahatma. When Guha lists Gandhi's major callings – freedom fighter, social reformer, religious pluralist and prophet – he clearly identifies each of these as having their roots in Natal and the Transvaal in South Africa. Guha portrays the minutiae of his African life and work and argues that those years shaped him and produced his philosophy of non-violence. Using this wealth of material the author describes the social, political and personal worlds inside of which Gandhi began the journey that would at a later date earn him the honorific Mahatma. And, he elucidates how Gandhi's work in South Africa profoundly influenced his evolution as a political thinker, social reformer and ultimately an iconic leader.

Keywords: Mahatma, Satyagraha, Civil disobedience, Non-violence

Introduction: An adage says 'Some men are born great and some others have it thrust upon them', but in the case of Gandhi, mythologised by his umpteen hagiographers, he seemed to have stumbled towards it on a path marked by historical conjuncture and circumstance. Nothing in his insular Bania origins explains his subsequent universal appeal nor the continuing scholarly interest in his ideas and tactics. In his book *Gandhi Before India*, Ramachandra Guha has set himself the task of challenging the Indo-centric portrait of the Mahatma and uncovers a new backdrop of Gandhi – the formative years spent in England and South Africa, thus giving the whole restoration a new frame. This is a fascinating period in the life of Gandhi, hitherto not widely known or written, a period of metamorphosis from Mohandas to Gandhi Bhai to Mahatma. Using this wealth of material in a detailed narrative, Guha describes the social, political and personal worlds inside of which Gandhi began the journey that would at a later date earn him the honorific *Mahatma*. And, more clearly than ever before, he elucidates how Gandhi's work in South Africa – far from being a mere prelude to his accomplishments in India – profoundly influenced his evolution as a political thinker, social reformer and ultimately an iconic leader.

Myriad are the chronicles on Gandhi's life. These apart, Gandhi like many other revolutionaries, expressed his ideas in print throughout his career. His *Collected Works*, which provides an extraordinarily intimate picture of the man – but from an Indian point of view and published by the Indian government in a series of about a hundred volumes – is an accumulation of speeches, essays, editorials and interviews in Gujarati and English between 1903 and 1948. Yet, the profusion notwithstanding, not enough is written or spoken of him before his time in India. Rather than reinterpret Gandhi's oeuvre, Guha's book seeks to understand the lawyer-turned-activist from multiple angles – fresher evidence like previously untapped documents, including private papers of Gandhi's contemporaries and co-workers, contemporary newspaper clippings and court documents, the writings of Gandhi's children and secret files kept by the officials of British Empire to complement the existing troves of Gandhi's biographies and hagiographies – to discover the man through those years and develop a far more rounded portrait. Noteworthy point here is that he sticks to material that was written when the events took place, and avoids material embellished by hindsight. Guha felt that Gandhi's time outside India comprising half his life is often viewed teleologically -- interpreted to inform what came later.

Spanning his subject's early era, the author moves from Gandhi's rather middle-class upbringing in the Bania caste of Kathiawar, the youngest son of a polygamous civil-servant father and a pious, vegetarian mother. On being suggested by a family friend to qualify as a barrister in London, pawning the family jewellery and persuading his devout mother to let him go after swearing an oath that he would not "eat meat or drink wine, or be unfaithful to his wife" besides braving the condemnation of community elders and leaving his wife and a new-born son behind, Gandhi set off in 1888 to London. Being a vegetarian law student in London brought the young Gandhi into the eclectic circle of the London Vegetarian Society, influenced by the work of Henry Salt. Gandhi also befriended numerous people of different religions and backgrounds, cultivating the kinds of rich friendships transcending class, ethnic and gender lines that defined his evolving work as a social reformer.

In addition to Gandhi's childhood in Gujarat and his two years as a student in London, Guha focuses on the almost unknown period of his life – the two decades as a lawyer and community organiser in imperial South Africa before and after the Second Boer War¹. When Guha lists Gandhi's major callings – freedom fighter, social reformer, religious pluralist and prophet – he clearly identifies each of these as having their roots in Natal and the Transvaal in South Africa. As if destiny had carved out a trajectory for him, he continued with the principles he had adopted early in life from his surroundings. Ambitious, purposeful, and a stickler to habits, his legal, analytical acumen helped him assess differing viewpoints from diverse angles and thus challenge discriminatory policies.

Upon returning to India in 1891, and attempting to practice in Bombay, Gandhi was ostracised as an outcaste by the Bania community and he failed to get clients. It was then as a failed barrister, Guha points out, and Gandhi's acceptance of the case of a Gujarati Muslim merchant to fight in the British colony of Natal, South Africa that was a turning point in Gandhi's life and the opportunity "was the consequence of particular historical circumstance." Gandhi ended up spending about ten years each in two distinct regions – the British-administered Natal on the coast and the Republic of Transvaal governed by the Dutch-descended Boers. Though the Britons and the Boers despised each other, both the governments strictly limited the rights of the non-whites through segregations policies. Had Gandhi not gone to South Africa, he might never have experienced the endemic racial prejudice that sparked his sense of social injustice. The incident of his refusal to vacate the 'whites-only' carriage leading to him being thrown off the train was – as Gandhi later described 'an epiphany' – the moment he came face to face with the "disease of colour prejudice" and his responsibility to fight it.

Guha depicts the fitful course Gandhi's political awakening has taken during his stay in South Africa. After yet another failed attempt to make a living as a lawyer upon returning to India in 1901 with the intention to settle permanently, Gandhi returned to South Africa in 1902. This second coming cemented his reputation and his signature tactics and launched him onto the path of becoming the Mahatma. Leading a resistance movement of the Indian community against an Asiatic Ordinance of 1906, Gandhi was one of the dozens of Indian to have been jailed in Johannesburg in 1908. It was during these days that the term 'Satyagraha' denoting 'passive resistance' was coined, which along with 'civil disobedience' became the watchwords of the movement led by Gandhi. Satyagraha became Gandhi's slogan and its force went on to fuel causes from Indian independence to the Civil Rights Movement in the United States.

Gandhi's non-Indian side becomes even more distinct when Guha describes the minutiae of his African life and work and argues that those years shaped him and produced his philosophy of non-violence. Notwithstanding the assault in 1897 by an anti-immigrant mob on the Durban waterfront, he retained an enduring faith in British justice, going so far as to organise an Indian volunteer ambulance corps to serve British troops in the Boer War. The degree to which the future Mahatma was so completely in tune with the wider ethos of the British Empire, emerging, somewhat bizarrely, as an empire loyalist is quite a big surprise. Guha still wants to nail an Anglo-centric Gandhi before his final return to India and now

¹Fought from Oct 1899, to May 1902, between Great Britain and the two Boer republics — the South African Republic (Transvaal) and the Orange Free State: Source - <http://www.britannica.com/event/South-African-War>

does so with the intriguing revelation that it was none other than G K Chesterton who helped inspire the text, *Hind Swaraj* (or Indian Home Rule) with which Gandhi would make the transition to his role as the father of Indian independence.

Guha focuses on the transformation that Gandhi had undergone from being an 'insular Bania in Gujarat' to Mahatma in whom 'a universalism' developed during his years in South Africa and who was 'reacting and opening his eyes to the heterogeneity of India in the diaspora.' It is here, Guha says that Gandhi 'gets to know about the linguistic diversity of India...' He also gets to know the heterogeneity of class and caste because the diaspora was composed of all kinds of people. The caste structure still existed to some extent, it wasn't fully broken down and he could see that. This diversity and heterogeneity of India, he wouldn't have understood had he not gone there. Yet, Guha is at pains to demonstrate that, up to his final return, aged 46, Gandhi had almost no knowledge of India in the wider sense. Despite visits to Calcutta and Madras in 1896, Gandhi had never actually "spoken to a single Indian peasant worker living or working in India itself". Rather, Gandhi's ideas, beliefs and deepest political instincts had been shaped by his remarkable career as a crusading lawyer in South Africa.

During the twenty years' living in and around Durban and Johannesburg, Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, once a mediocre student, a shy speaker, and an unsuccessful barrister, turned into a prolific author, a committed social activist, and a galvanising leader with an international reputation. Nelson Mandela put it quite aptly, on a visit to India: "You gave us Mohandas; we returned him to you as Mahatma."²

In addition to dealing with Gandhi's greatness, physical courage, profoundly cosmopolitan and pluralistic philosophy, the book also focuses to some length on Gandhi's shocking failures as a husband and father. Gandhi's remarkable capacity for self-denial anchored his moral authority and charismatic allure to legions of followers. He was becoming obsessed with the simple life, by solitude, diet, meditation and celibacy. In 1906, he took the vow of *brahmacharya*, curtailing all sexual relations with his long-suffering wife. He had screaming quarrels with Kasturba, forcing her to undertake menial chores and sparring with her over the children. To his sons, Guha notes, "Gandhi was the traditional overbearing Hindu patriarch." They clashed and it's a very anguished, tortured complicated relationship. Gandhi responded with cutting simplicity: "For the present at any rate, I have ceased to think of him as a son." When his second son had an affair with a married woman at Phoenix, Gandhi forced him, too, into celibacy "until such time as he, Mr Gandhi, should release him from his vow." Based on the many letters, Guha concludes that the sons were clearly casualties of Gandhi becoming a Mahatma. With the wife, Guha says, they adapted to each other, where Gandhi became slightly more tolerant. She became more assertive and over time a companionship did evolve. If Guha's work has a weakness it is that, in focusing so intently on its new portrait, it neglects the human toll inflicted on those around the incipient Mahatma. Guha attributes Gandhi's shocking failures as a husband and father partly due to the fact that his children were born very early – he got married in the conventional Indian way and he had his son when he was just 18. Gandhi was 36 and undergoing his midlife crisis when the son was undergoing his adolescent crisis. While critically putting these failures in context, Guha does not censure them.

The complicated nature of cross-cultural relations in the 19th century is clearly demonstrated in the book. On one hand several freethinking British Jews, identifying themselves with Gandhi's fight against injustice, promoted him, on the other hand even crusty empire stalwarts such as Sir Lepel Griffin, who thought "the prejudice against the Indians is encouraged, by the aliens, by Russian Jews, by Syrians, by German Jews" have also backed him. And these figures are brought to life in the book, notwithstanding the extraordinary prejudice against him borne by the white press and the white racists in South Africa often caricatured, abused, vilified, and even physically attacked him. Guha describes how a couple – a Jew and a Christian – shared a household with the Gandhis in Johannesburg in 1905. Guha says it was "revolutionary, an interracial household whose members befriended one another, influenced one

²Jasanoff, Maya: <http://www.newrepublic.com/article/117802/gandhi-india-ramachandra-guha-reviewed-maya-jasanoff>

another.” Then there was a Baptist minister. The established church was Anglican and they supported the racist regime, but the dissidents like the Baptists and the Methodists and the Wesleyans saw Gandhi’s struggle as a kind of born-again Christian kind of a struggle for justice. This kind of group of eccentrics and dissidents around him, including some Indians, shaped him and really made him Mahatma. In Durban he was attacked by a white mob and nearly killed, but he was saved by an English couple. This gave Gandhi an insight into the humane side of the whites though the colonial and imperial rule is bad, thus developing a universalism in him. Guha opines that all his core ideas on interfaith harmony, ending caste discrimination, his philosophy of nonviolence, all were forged then.

Yet for all of Gandhi’s ecumenism, he kept a troubling distance from the African majority population. The indigenous people who formed the overwhelming majority of the population of South Africa remain nearly invisible in Gandhi’s life. Objecting to a law in Durban in 1896, Gandhi argued that an Indian worker was not “a barbarian” like an African who lived in “indolence and nakedness”, and thus deserved better treatment. Guha deals with this subject gingerly, describing Gandhi’s extraordinary capaciousness as being ‘constrained in one fundamental sense’ because he had no professional or social interaction with black people during the two decades or more he lived in Africa. The point is not that someone born in the 19th century is expected to have 21st century racial attitudes: it is that, even by the reformist standards of his own time, he was regressive. Gandhi’s blanking of Africans is the black hole at the heart of his saintly mythology. Guha painfully tries to depict that Gandhi’s prejudices softened over time and it was only around 1908 that he finally stopped referring to Africans as kafirs.

While providing evidence to support Gandhi’s failure to address the socio-political conditions of Africans, Guha says that during much of his stay in South Africa, Gandhi had a genuine belief in the British Empire’s ability to correct itself vis-à-vis the treatment of Africans. Further, Guha says that there is a change in Gandhi’s attitude after about 1906, which while recognising “that all races other than Europeans suffered from structural discrimination in South Africa,” he believed that “each community had to work out its own path” to equality. Besides, Guha adds that Gandhi was straightforwardly racist, in the sense that he stubbornly (if perversely) echoed the contemporary discourse that classified Africans as ‘uncivilised’ and inferior to Asians and whites. In a farewell speech, he told the Gujarati merchants, indentured Indian labourers and white officials that he hoped “the Europeans of South Africa would take a humanitarian and imperial view of the Indian question”. But he said goodbye to not a single African. “To them alone were Gandhi’s connections too slight to merit a formal and public farewell,” notes his biographer. For all that his attitudes evolved, Gandhi’s studied ignorance of Africans and African affairs played right into the insidious “divide-and-rule” logic of empire. “The Indians should really be considered to be among apartheid’s first victims,” writes Guha, and Gandhi “should really be more seriously recognised as being among apartheid’s first opponents.” But it was precisely these divide-and-rule techniques that made apartheid so hard to defeat. It took a later generation of African, Indian, and coloured leaders to recognise—as Gandhi had not—the importance of joining forces in a common struggle against it. The idiom of non-violent resistance he developed, ironically, was to become an inspiration for generations of black leaders: Du Bois, King, Mandela – they all invoked him.

In what can be assumed as the summary of the book, Guha steps back from his subject to ask, “In what ways did the first forty-five years of Gandhi’s life shape him as a social reformer, religious thinker and political actor? What is the significance of his South African years for those who know Gandhi as the leader of the Indian freedom struggle?” This chapter reiterates Gandhi’s striking “ability to transcend his class, religious and ethnic background” and his power to inspire “devotion by the exemplary nature of his life and conduct.” Guha does note that “Gandhi’s capaciousness was constrained in one fundamental sense. He forged no real friendships with Africans” and also that critics found his austere lifestyle “confirmation of how irrelevant his entire world-view was to the modern era.”

Guha’s book reveals how the totality of circumstances tackled by one with tact, skill and finesse ultimately became his calling card in life. South Africa catapulted him as Mahatma and proved to be the training ground to return for playing a much bigger role in his own country. The World War II and the developments in India on educational, social, economic and political fronts provided a happy ground for

a leader with his stature to take on the leadership for harnessing the mood in India. He had the skill and experience to coax, cajole, nurture and identify areas for accelerating the resistance against the British rule.

But for certain minor observations in Gandhi's personality, Guha, who otherwise does a splendid job with the research for the texts, chooses not to delve too deeply into the murky waters of the rich minefield that the personality offers for the professional historian, sociologist and psychologist, nor does he ponder on the implications for a nation of a billion people following in the footsteps of a Father who had very disturbing ideas. Guha seems to be extremely comfortable in highlighting the positives in the man's personality. South Africa catapulted him as Mahatma and proved to be the training ground to return for playing a much bigger role in his own country.

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