



# Gandhi, The Mahatma: Evolving Narratives and Native Discourse in Gandhi Studies

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## Abstract

The scholarship on Gandhi tends to situate him in one of three camps: political leader, nonviolent revolutionary, or spiritual figure. But for Gandhi, his methods of *Ahimsā* (nonviolence) and *Satyāgraha* (passive resistance or Soul Force) were interconnected with his asceticism. The overwhelming focus in recent years is on Gandhi's nonviolent strategy in solving personal, social and political conflicts; Gandhi's ascetic practices are dismissed as nonessential or contradictory to political processes. It is difficult for most modern peace activists and scholars, as it was for Gandhi's contemporaries, to understand the native discourse of his paradoxical ideology. Today, there is an emerging debate in the search for alternative responses to war. Gandhi's methods are being deliberated as a possible way to resolve modern problems. But the question remains: Can the modern world borrow Gandhi's political strategies and begin to succeed at the level he did without accepting renunciation, the core of Gandhi's personal and political philosophy?

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Mahatma Gandhi is a complex combination of saint and political leader – renunciate and activist. This is apparent in such paradoxical statements as *Ahimsā is the mightiest weapon* and *Satyāgraha is an all-sided sword*. Traditionally and in the modern secular world such a combination is enigmatic, if not contradictory. Gandhi's revolutionary techniques in the field of social and political conflict have drawn attention from the international community since the beginning of his career as a political activist. Mahatma Gandhi has been the focus of a significant body of commentary by a wide variety of intellectuals including historians, psychologists, social commentators, as well as religious and political leaders, and scholars. Voluminous writings about Gandhi focus on various aspects of his life and works, including his renunciation practices, nonviolent activism, and political leadership, often studied separately. Thus, the scholarship on Gandhi tends to situate him in one of three camps: political leader, nonviolent revolutionary, or spiritual figure.

Despite the confusion about where to place Gandhi, or perhaps because of it, scholarship on Gandhi continues to proliferate. The overarching focus in recent years has been on Gandhi's nonviolent strategy and its relevance to solving personal, social and political conflicts; in this vein, Gandhi's ascetic

practices are simply dismissed as nonessential or contradictory to the field of politics. It has been as difficult for most modern peace activists and scholars as it had apparently been even for Gandhi's contemporaries to understand his paradoxical ideology. The following comment of Lord Reading, the Viceroy of India, represents the confused reaction that many might have shared about Gandhi's ascetic practices mixed with politics: 'Mr. Gandhi's religious and moral views are, I believe, admirable . . . but I must confess that I find it difficult to understand his practice of them in politics.'<sup>1</sup>

Many scholars, utilizing a variety of hermeneutics, seek to apply Gandhi's nonviolent strategies in the context of different fields – political, social, and psychological, for example – but tend to neglect the role of asceticism in Gandhi's practice of *ahimsā*. A study of Gandhian literature reveals that the ever-evolving narrative of Gandhian legacy also represents a movement toward isolating Gandhi's political method from his renunciatory practices. But Gandhi himself considered his ascetic practices, including the vows of chastity and poverty, to be integral to his personal, social, and political philosophy. He claims to be drawing ideas of the ascetic detachment for the worldly engagement from his favorite text, the *Bhagavad-Gītā*, which integrates the metaphysics of renunciation with action. Gandhi's asceticism became central to his identity: 'Those who want to become passive resisters for the service of the country have to observe perfect chastity.'<sup>2</sup> The honorific title of *mahātma*, which irritated him so often, also afforded him the mythical power to incite millions to sacrifice. These very practices have been considered by some scholars as merely his personal 'fad', and are often separated from his ideology of *Ahimsā* and *Satyāgraha*, and thought to be outdated for a modern context. As Pat Caplan suggests:

... [E]ven the recent rediscovery of Gandhi's ideas in the West, first by the civil rights movement in America, and more recently, by the peace movement, pays little attention to this aspect [*brahmacharya*] of Gandhi's thought. If it is acknowledged at all, it is dismissed, in a somewhat embarrassed fashion, as one of his 'fads'. For Gandhi, however, the link between celibacy and non-violence was crucial.<sup>3</sup>

Gandhi's ascetic practices, especially his vow of celibacy for his political activism, are, no doubt, unconventional. Traditionally and within the modern secular world there seems to be a consensus that politics and spiritual aspirations ought to be separated. Other factors also contribute to the distinctive viewpoints within the scholarship on Gandhi and bifurcation of Gandhi's ascetic and political ideology, including Gandhi's complex persona, his culture-specific ethos, and his voluminous writings interwoven with spiritual and mythical ideas and various health, education, social, and political issues.

Gandhi's writings and speeches spanning the years 1888 to 1948 – including published booklets on various subjects, correspondence, scribbled notes, newspaper articles, conversations, and personal letters – have been documented and recorded by his personal secretaries and his followers. These

records have now been published by the Government of India as *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi* comprising 100 volumes,<sup>4</sup> about 50,000 pages – a collection almost ten times larger than the epic of the *Mahabharata*.<sup>5</sup> The phrase ‘*Yannehasti, na Tadkvacit*’ (‘what is not here is nowhere else’), which describes the enormity of the *Mahabharata*, could easily be applied to Gandhi’s ‘epic’ literature. In the forward to *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, Jawaharlal Nehru comments:

In a collection like this there is bound to be a mixture of what might be called the important and the unimportant or the casual. Yet, sometimes it is the casual word that throws more light on a person’s thinking than a more studied writing or utterance. In any event, who are we to pick and choose? Let him speak for himself. To him life was an integrated whole, a closely-woven garment of many colours ...<sup>6</sup>

This tapestry of thousands of pages is interlaced with complex strands: on the one end with idealistic folklores and myths, ascetic ideals, nostalgia for the past, and emotions of detachment (*anāskti*); and on the other end with modern Western ideological aspirations, political propaganda, human feelings of love and reproach, and optimism for the future.

Scholarship on Gandhi is also wide ranging, extending far beyond the discussion of the political strategies of *Ahimsā* and *Satyāgraha*. Gandhian research is multifaceted and has gone through various phases over the years – from romanticization to a very realistic portrayal of Gandhi, to a critical examination of his personality and method. Ananda M. Pandiri’s annotated bibliography (1995) is a great source to view in one stroke the sheer volume of the books written about Gandhi and by Gandhi himself. Given the nature and capacious size of this metacommentary, it is impossible to survey the entire literature on Gandhi. There are many valid ways to categorize and organize this literature, but for the purpose of this survey, and for the sake of convenience, I categorize the writings on Gandhi into four time frames: the Gandhian era (during Gandhi’s life, 1909–1948); the post-Gandhian era (1949–1970); the modern era (1970–2000); and the current era (2000–present). Throughout these eras the scholars seek to unlock the secret of Gandhi’s success by understanding his personal life and method, even though each period is quite diverse with new interpretations of Gandhi for the emerging issues of the times.

The vast literature in the field of Gandhi scholarship is organized in different time frames, solely for pedagogical purposes, thus affording a coherent narrative for the present review. In general, in the Gandhian era and during the early years of the post-Gandhian era, the modes of interpreting Gandhi are primarily hagiographical. In the later periods, however, Gandhi’s personal practices come under closer scrutiny as he began to be studied more as a man, and the hermeneutics used to understand him become increasingly innovative with new challenges. In each of the eras, where there are parallel strands, there is also a diversity of themes; and it is evident that the trends in scholarship are by no means homogenous. The

ever-evolving narrative maintains a multitude of voices, which include innovative interpretations as well as a significant native discourse.

*Gandhian Era: Making of The Mahatma*

Unlike many influential people who become the subject of intellectual inquiry posthumously, Gandhi witnessed the emergence of a great deal of writing about himself during his own lifetime. The earliest work about Gandhi was published in 1909 by Rev. Joseph Doke, a pastor in South Africa, who was inspired by Gandhi's moral character and his movement of 'passive resistance'. Doke describes Gandhi's life from 1869–1909. At that time Gandhi was only 40 years old and was just emerging as a political leader. The literature following Doke's book is largely biographical and reports the development of Gandhi as a political leader, and the public response to Gandhi's unconventional method and his saintly persona.<sup>7</sup> Gandhi's contemporaries were inspired by his renunciatory lifestyle and his method of self-sacrifice. The early authors appraise Gandhi as a prophet, saint, or Christ-like figure, and develop their themes around the specifics of Gandhi's activities.

An example of this early phase commentary, Haridas Mazumdar's *Gandhi The Apostle: His Trial and His Message*, places Gandhi with the prominent apostles of peace and affirms his sainthood:

... [B]ut Gandhi, the personification of Peace, came upon the scene as if to say: 'Behold, I give unto you a new gospel and a new commandment: that ye kill not your (so-called) enemy, but kill yourself if you must. Non-Violent Resistance is the true way of Freedom and Self-Realization ...' A 'Saint'! – Yes; his frail figure, weighing less than a hundred pounds, Gandhi is more spirit than body. (Mazumdar 1923, p. 98)

Mazumdar sets the stage for Gandhi's emergence by showing the reader the 'panorama of Indian history', he then illustrates Jesus's principles in action in Gandhi's philosophy of passive resistance: 'The movement of Passive Resistance, inaugurated by Gandhi, and sustained by the people of India, is entirely unique in the history of the world ... Behold, there in India they are giving a trial to Christianity ... They have vowed to be friendly to everybody, including their oppressors' (Mazumdar 1923, p. 181). Mazumdar demonstrates the wide appeal of Gandhi's method with documentation of the quotes of admiration from world leaders and newspapers around the world.

In another biography of this early era, *Mahatma Gandhi: The Man Who Became One with the Universal Being*, first published in French, Romain Rolland covers Gandhi's life from birth to 1922 underlining Gandhi's philosophy, principles, and his contributions. He sees Gandhi as not merely a 'revolutionary', but also as 'a builder of a new humanity'. Rolland describes the response of the Indians who recognized their *Messiah*: 'More fortunate,

India has recognized her Messiah, and joyously the people march to the sacrifice which is to set them free' (Rolland 1924, pp. 122 and 239).

John Haynes Holmes, pastor of the Community Church of New York City and one of the leaders of liberal Protestantism in his day, was deeply impressed by Gandhi. He described Gandhi as 'my saint and seer', and published a number of articles praising Gandhi's moral integrity and charisma.<sup>8</sup>

Inspired by Gandhi's asceticism and the method of selfless love, the authors of these early hagiographic biographies portray Gandhi as saint, avatar, and prophet. But Gandhi is primarily viewed through a Christian lens. To them Gandhi is more of a Christian saint than a Hindu *Mahatma* or *tapasvi* (ascetic). However, this appreciative assessment by authors such as Rolland and Holmes is balanced by other more critical writings. John Robert Glorney Bolton's *The Tragedy of Gandhi* (1934)<sup>9</sup> offers a more impartial and balanced account of Gandhi: it highlights the positive qualities of his character, but also points to his failures. This era, in general, can be described as of the mythologization of Gandhi.

The literature on Gandhi takes on a more comprehensive form with the monumental volume, *Mahatma Gandhi: Essays and Reflections on His Life and Works*, edited by S. Radhakrishnan (2005, first edition 1939). This collection of writings by over 100 thinkers around the world – including Aldous Huxley, Coomaraswamy, Sri Aurobindo, Albert Einstein, E. M. Forster – was presented to Gandhi on his 70th birthday. This compilation of essays and reflections reveal the wide appeal of Gandhi's method and message. It was soon followed by another compendium of essays, memoirs, and homages: *Gandhiji: His Life and Works*, edited by D. G. Tendulkar and others (1944). This was presented to Gandhi on his 75th birthday. Tendulkar provides a detailed chronicle of Gandhi's life and accomplishments from 1869 to 1944. These two volumes set the stage for the wide-ranging and multifaceted scholarship that would follow.

During the 1940s Gandhian scholarship began to shift: a critical evaluation of Gandhi's actions and his method of *Satyāgraha* and *Ahimsā* began to emerge.<sup>10</sup> At this time the political independence movement of India was at its peak. This was also a time of confusion, anxiety, and tension within three communities: Hindus, Muslims and the English. In his book, *The Mahatma and the World*, primarily written for a Western audience, Krishnalal Shridharani, an admirer and critic of Gandhi, outlines the main events. He also elaborates on Gandhi's views about education, economics, and the complex relationship among the components of 'the communal triangle'. Shridharani gives a snapshot of Gandhi's hermitage (*ashram*) and provides an intimate personal portrait of the man, whose behavior is outlandish:

Gandhi is a man of almost incredible contrasts. Gaunt, ascetic, and self-denying, Gandhi is nevertheless the picture of health and agility. . . . Recently Gandhi announced that not only does he expect to live to be 125, but that he will soon reveal the formula so that others can do likewise. Like Thoreau he has ever been

seeking a Walden, but his white-coated cabin has become 'India's White House'. (Shridharani 1946, p. xiv)

*Post-Gandhian Era: A Search for Gandhi*

The literature immediately following Gandhi's death is composed of a mass eulogizing response to his assassination (1948) soon after India's independence. In his sudden and violent death, Gandhi – who was crumbling from the pain of the partition of India and Pakistan, the pressure of communal violence, and personal desperation – once more emerged as a martyr and savior for global society. In the Hindu context, for his admirers he became deified within the ever-expanding pantheon. A barrage of memoirs, tributes, emotional biographies, and glowing assessments cascaded to honor Gandhi, who was seen to have made the ultimate sacrifice for his mission of unity and the method of nonviolence.<sup>11</sup> Gandhi's name became ubiquitous in encyclopedias, compendiums of the great leaders, history books, and anthologies. Political leaders, religious leaders, and intellectuals participated in the broad commentary on Gandhi's unmatched life and accomplishments.<sup>12</sup> The government of India, in honor of 'the Father of the Nation', produced a pictorial biography of Gandhi, *Mahatma Gandhi: His Life in Pictures* (1954).

This storm of enthusiastic writings followed by a calm, more thoughtful, tradition of inquiry into Gandhi's life, philosophy, and method. Louis Fischer's biography (1950) was the beginning of the evolution of further nuanced scholarship on Gandhi. Even after five decades, Fischer's *The Life of Mahatma Gandhi* remains a classic because of its lucid and accurate narration of Gandhi's life and works. Fischer, who visited Gandhi twice, retells the complex story of Gandhi's life in 50 chapters, reviewing his accomplishments and failures, his life, and his death. Fischer begins his account with the death of Gandhi, and therein sets the tone with his heart-felt appraisal:

On January 30, 1948, the Friday he died, Mahatma Gandhi was what he had always been: a private citizen without wealth, property, official title, official post, academic distinction, scientific achievement, or artistic gift. Yet men with governments and armies behind them paid homage to the little brown man of seventy-eight in a loincloth . . . Gandhi was a moral man, and a civilization not richly endowed with morality felt still further impoverished when the assassin's bullets ended his life. (Fischer 1950, p. 10)

This fairly accessible biography was followed by a lengthy eight-volume chronicle of Gandhi, *Mahatma Gandhi: A Life of Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi*, by D. G. Tendulkar (1951). This encyclopedic recounting of various phases of Gandhi's life also includes Gandhi's correspondence, illustrations, maps, and comprehensive bibliography.

Gandhi's legacy and literature was advanced even further by Pyarelal, his private secretary and close companion, in two volumes, *Mahatma Gandhi: The Last Phase* and *The Early Phase*.<sup>13</sup> Both volumes consist of the authoritative

accounts and documentation of Gandhi's private, social, and political life. The two-part *The Last Phase* (1956 & 1958) presents the author's first-hand experience with Gandhi as well as detailed narration of historical events of Gandhi's last 4 years of life. Pyarelal analyzes Indian concepts to make the Gandhian ideology of *Ahiṃsā*, *Satyāgraha*, and self-sacrifice accessible; and also presents meticulous (photocopied) records of important letters and photos. This comprehensive narrative of Gandhi's life and death has historiographic as well as hagiographic tones as the author portrays the two-fold picture of ascetic politician. Pyarelal comments: 'In Gandhiji the prophet and the practical statesman met. The prophet has his eyes on the ultimate, the practical statesman on the immediate . . . Sometimes the two converged on a point of time or an event. He then performed "miracles" single-handed . . .' (Pyarelal 1956, p. 312). There are several noted biographers of this era.<sup>14</sup> B. R. Nanda tells the story of the man Gandhi in a fluid and balanced manner. His concern is to study him as a man rather than as a superhuman figure who is too transcendent to follow:

It is not easy to write the life-story of a man who made such a strong impact on his contemporaries. Yet it is important that the image of Gandhi does not become that of a divinity in the Hindu pantheon, but remains that of a man who schooled himself in self-discipline, who made of his life a continual process of growth . . . (Nanda 1958, p. 7)

Nanda organizes and analyzes the most significant events of Gandhi's life to portray a more rounded picture of him. In his view, Gandhi's ascetic practices are an essential part of his method, not eccentric or out of place. In the Epilogue, Nanda's tone becomes reverential: 'The question was often asked by Western observers whether Gandhi was a saint or a politician; he was a saint who did not cease to be one when he entered politics' (Nanda 1958, p. 517).

During this period of scholarly development, when Gandhi was beginning to be portrayed more as a revolutionary human being than as a saint, the Civil Rights Movement, led by Martin Luther King Jr., was developing in the USA. This political and social movement validated the broader applications of the Gandhian philosophy of nonviolence and passive resistance. King, an admirer of Gandhi, sought to adopt Gandhi's method and terminology for his movement by interpreting, for example, Gandhi's term *Satyāgraha* to signify the Western concept of Love Force. He translated the Gandhian principle of *tapas* (suffering) into the Myth of the Cross in his own Christian context. Although King's charismatic character moved the masses, it did not arise from personal practices such as celibacy and fasting. King seems to present an example of the triumph of nonviolent methods without ascetically reinventing himself as Gandhi did, although one might argue that the rigors and personal sacrifice of King's life constituted a kind of renunciation.

Other biographers of this era venture into the underlying complexities of Gandhi's persona for even deeper understanding beyond the level of

biographical details. Geoffrey Ashe (1968) narrates the saga of Gandhi's life and does not hesitate to recount Gandhi's idiosyncratic sexual practices, comparable to 'Tantric' practices, in his later life. Robert Payne (1969) underscores the complex behavior of Gandhi, and envisages it as a source of his 'fire':

... I have made no attempts to conceal the dark side of his nature, the thin black threads winding among the many-colored ribbons of his life. He was a bad father, a tyrant to his followers... He was fascinated by sex to the point of obsession... This stern, harsh, smiling, gentle man was even more complex than he suspected; and out of these complexes he built a fire that will never go out. (Payne 1969, p. 15)

In the life and death of Mahatma Gandhi, Payne sees a re-enactment of the drama of humanity: 'that a prophet should arise and sacrifice himself so that others may live' (Payne 1969, pp. 15–16).

These comprehensive biographical volumes paved the way to a more specialized study of Gandhi. In his acclaimed book, *Gandhi's Truth: On the Origins of Militant Nonviolence* (1969), psychoanalyst Erik Erikson examines Gandhi's method of nonviolence. Erikson closely studies a particular historical event, the Ahmedabad Mill Workers Strike, led by Gandhi in 1918. Erikson uses his psychoanalytical approach in this case study of Gandhi's method. Erikson notes: 'I was a psychoanalyst... men of my kind do not merely ask for facts that can be put on the dotted line but really want to discover hidden meanings within the facts and between the lines' (Erikson 1969, p. 65). Erikson attempts to understand the connection between Gandhi's vow of *brahmacharya* (celibacy) and his method of nonviolence. His analysis, undoubtedly, is provoked by Gandhi's 'obsession' with abstinence as it is problematically related to his political activism. The author opens up a new way to understand the complex behavior of Gandhi, especially for those who seek to discover the roots of success of 'spiritual innovators' in their psychological and emotional dimensions.<sup>15</sup>

Peering thorough the psychoanalytic lens, Erikson studies the possible underlying hidden meanings in Gandhi's compulsive celibacy. Erikson traces the roots of Gandhi's 'disavowal of all "fun and frolic"' to what he calls a 'curse', namely, Gandhi's arranged child marriage, which Gandhi despised and blamed on his father. Erikson interprets Gandhi's obsession for celibacy as arising from his feelings of guilt about his sexual relations with his wife at the time of his sick father's death. Gandhi laments and records this painful incident in his autobiography.<sup>16</sup> Interestingly, Erikson, who charges Gandhi with 'sadism', finds a resolution of the dilemma of Gandhi's antisexual behavior in the creative subliminal applications in Gandhi's nonviolent method. In his personal address to Gandhi, Erikson explains:

... Your aspirations, and your gifts (fed by the historical situation) led you to envisage a life of service to humanity on a level which called for self-discipline of a rare order... In your life, therefore, it makes supreme sense that you should have resolved your sexual conflicts by making it a matter of will, sealed by a vow,



that as you would not attack an inimical person with weapons, you would not attack a loved one with phallic desire . . . (Erikson 1969, p. 237)

Erikson's Gandhi is a human being, not a *mahātma*, although an extraordinary one who finds creative solutions to his inner conflicts. Erikson's approach is valuable to understand the complexity of Gandhi's behavior, but it is limited. Gandhi's eccentric conduct must ultimately be understood in a broader context – taking into account his own explanations, cultural context, religious convictions, myths, and methods.

### *Modern Era: Reinventing Gandhi for The Modern Secular World*

Scholarship on Gandhi becomes even more broad and versatile – and yet specialized – as it enters the modern era. Raghavan Iyer's *The Moral and Political Thought of Mahatma Gandhi* (first edition, 1973) is a comprehensive exposition of Gandhi's philosophy, which serves to make complex ideas more manageable. This book encompasses the entire framework of Gandhi's philosophy as it relates to his method, covering topics such as purification of politics and vows, as well as the philosophical and political concepts, including *satya*, *ahimsā*, *satyāgraha*, *swarāj*, and *swadeshi*. The author locates Gandhi within his context of Indian traditions and, at the same time, he also places him in a global context by comparing him to Western philosophers. Iyer is interested in Gandhi the man and warns against the danger of mythologizing him: 'Whether he was or was not a saint or *mahatma*,<sup>17</sup> to view him as such will hinder rather than help us in grasping his moral and political thought' (Iyer 1983, p. 6).

Margaret Chatterjee extends Iyer's research in her book, *Gandhi's Religious Thought* (1983). She focuses primarily on Gandhi's religious ideology and relates this to both Indian religions and Christian principles. Her elucidation of Gandhi's vows, religious language, and principles in light of Indian texts provides the reader with a more elaborate understanding of Gandhi. Chatterjee also analyzes the purpose and role of Gandhi's dialectics of religion in his political method. She does not propose to demythologize the *mahatmahood* of Gandhi because, for Gandhi, the boundary between a saint and *satyāgrahi* was not defined: 'Gandhi . . . firmly believed that the saint and the ordinary man were on the same wavelength. The vows taken by the monk and the satyagrahi are not so very different in kind. The satyagrahi needs to forgo the pleasures of the *grahstha* stage of life' (Chatterjee 1983, p. 86). Chatterjee, however, concentrates on Gandhi's religious thought and a general discussion of ascetic practices.

During the early 1980s, Sir Richard Attenborough's film *Gandhi* (1982) generated a renewed interest in him. Diverse Gandhian themes began to emerge, but two core questions still lurked in the minds of scholars and activists: How was Gandhi – a man bereft of any material means – able to mobilize the slumbering masses of India? And, are his strategies of nonviolence, so closely entwined with his asceticism, relevant to modern

global society? In 1983, Susanne Rudolph and Lloyd Rudolph revised a section of their earlier book under the title *Gandhi: The Traditional Roots of Charisma* (1983) tracing the roots of Gandhi's charisma in the philosophical beliefs of Indian traditions.<sup>18</sup> Through his ascetic persona, Gandhi was able to evoke the religious imagination of the people and move the masses that were aware of and responsive to the power of asceticism. The Rudolphs elaborate:

Gandhi's this-worldly asceticism took its meaning in the context of larger motives and meanings . . . Gandhi associated his reception by the Indian people with the potency of his charisma and saw it as a visible recognition that his worldly asceticism made him worthy. (Rudolph & Rudolph 1983, p. 75)

Gandhi's political style consisted of returning to 'traditional modes'. For him, self-restraint was a way to self-rule (*swarāj*). The people of India, immersed in the ancient lore of the ascetics, responded to Gandhi's call to bring social and political change. The Rudolphs' book is seminal in understanding the role of Gandhi's asceticism in his political activism within the Indian context. However, their exposé has psychoanalytical undertones and does not provide sufficient details concerning India's traditions, in which the 'roots for Gandhi's charisma' are so deeply seated. For example, Gandhi's restraint of sexual impulses is compared to 'Freudian sublimation theory', not to the traditional ideology of ascetic *brahmacharya*: 'Asceticism was also thought to bring with it a higher potency, an implication arising out of a theory of sexual hydrostatics reminiscent of Freudian sublimation theory. He who controls himself gains the strength to shape the environment' (Rudolph & Rudolph 1983, p. 94). Yet in the Indian context, the ultimate goal of *brahmacharya* is to transcend any desire for personal or political gains.

While the Rudolphs probe into Indian traditions to some extent to find the roots of Gandhi's charisma, Mark Juergensmeyer develops a creative strategy to solve the daily conflicts by using Gandhi's own activist methods. In his *Gandhi's Way: A Handbook of Conflict Resolution*,<sup>19</sup> Juergensmeyer draws the reader directly into the discussion of Gandhi's activism vs. pacifism. He opens his book:

Gandhi was a fighter. Whatever else one might say about him – that he was a saint, a clever politician, or a 'seditious fakir', as Winston Churchill once put it – Gandhi certainly knew how to fight. In fact, his approach to conflict resolution is one of Mohandas Gandhi's most enduring legacies. (Juergensmeyer 2002, p. ix)

Juergensmeyer strips off other layers of Gandhi's persona to uncover his activist personality, his spirit of engagement for 'what is right'. For Gandhi, action is inevitable. Living means action and action involves conflict. The author develops a list of the basic rules for fighting a good fight – i.e., be flexible, find a resolution and hold fast to it – in light of Gandhi's method of *Satyāgraha*. He then applies these rules to five case studies of conflict resolution – ranging from family feuds to the battle against nuclear weapons. However, Juergensmeyer's ideas of 'fight' and 'resolution' are not based in

any religious or spiritual teachings, whereas Gandhi's model for fighting is based in the philosophy of the *Bhagavad-Gītā*. Gandhi's essential principle is to fight without desiring the result of the actions by cultivating a state of *sthitaprajña*, wisdom, and detachment. For Gandhi, the wisdom to fight as a *satyāgrahi* is acquired through self-discipline and renunciation – the ascetic practices for transcending ego and selfishness.

Throughout the modern era of Gandhian studies, scholars continue to state and restate Gandhi's personal and political philosophy in order to clarify his method.<sup>20</sup> A fresh and comprehensive study of Gandhi's political philosophy is presented by Bhikhu Parekh in his *Gandhi's Political Philosophy* (1989). In this influential study, Gandhi is depicted as a unique revolutionary: 'He was one of the first non-Western thinkers of the modern age to develop a political theory grounded in the unique experiences and articulated in terms of the indigenous philosophical vocabulary of his country' (Parekh 1989, p. 3). Parekh applauds Gandhi's political theory, which 'rests on an unusually broad foundation', and sees his contribution to the Indian context. However, Gandhi's austere practices, which Gandhi himself deemed as indispensable to his political theory, are perceived as arising from a 'narrow view of man and a limited understanding of Indian civilization.' Parekh states: '... [Gandhi's] austere view of man led him to stress the moral at the expense of the intellectual, aesthetic, sexual, and other dimensions of life ... A critic once remarked that his *āshram* only grew vegetables and had no room for flowers' (Parekh 1989, p. 209). Despite Parekh's endorsement of Gandhi's political actions, he is unable to see Gandhi's methods in the same light.

In more recent years, scholars have continued to use innovative approaches to decode meaning and purpose of Gandhi's ascetic practices. Anthropologist Joseph Alter, in *Gandhi's Body: Sex, Diet, and the Politics of Nationalism* (2000), claims that Gandhi's physical body is the locus of his political, social, and moral experimentation – a body that has not received adequate scholarly attention. Alter, who is primarily interested in the study of wrestlers and their 'preoccupation with sex, food, and self-control', chooses Gandhi as an example among other case studies (including Gama, the wrestler) to explore the purported relationship between the discipline of the body (including diet and celibacy), power, and health. Alter further relates Gandhi's practices of bodily health and vigor to the building of the health of a nation, creating healthy citizens. He begins to examine the contribution of bodily practices and outward applications of asceticism, yet the reader is left with an unsolved question: Could Gandhi's asceticism (as he himself perceived it) only be located in the body? Perhaps it is beyond the scope of this anthropological approach to analyze the deep spiritual convictions, which distinguish Gandhi as a *mahātmā*. Published in the same year (2000) Vinay Lal's article, 'Nakedness, Nonviolence, and Brahmacharya: Gandhi's Experiments in Celibate Sexuality', provides insight into the possible spiritual signification of Gandhi's 'bodily' practice of celibacy.

*Current Era: Relevance of Mahatma Gandhi for The Twenty-first Century*

Even at the dawn of the twenty-first century, in our current age of technological advancements, new challenges, and fresh cultural discourses, the drive to understand Gandhi continues. Stanley Wolpert's biography, *Gandhi's Passion* (2001), is another attempt to understand Gandhi, including his asceticism. Wolpert locates the impetus of Gandhi's power in his 'passion' in contrast to renunciation. However, by Wolpert's own inadvertent admission Gandhi's passion arises not from sensory desires, but rather from his desire for ultimate renunciation. 'By re-creating himself, through the power of his passion, in the humble, vulnerable, image of India's poorest starving naked millions, Gandhi could . . . call upon that unarmed ragged army, whose pain he mirrored and magnified in his own naked body, to follow him barefoot . . .' (Wolpert 2001, p. 4). Wolpert sees a semantic corollary of *tapas* (literally, heat) in the Western notion of 'passion' and finds the force of this passion in Gandhi's vow of *bramacharya*, for which he 'struggled most passionately'. Wolpert's book presents a new interpretation of the ancient principle of *tapas*, which is generally translated as asceticism; but his depiction of Gandhi is more reminiscent of Christ, who sacrificed himself for the masses, than of a Hindu ascetic, who retreats in seclusion for the sake of personal liberation.

While Wolpert identifies Gandhi as a *Great Soul* who suffered passionately for his people, many scholars seek to assess the relevance of Gandhi's method for the twenty-first century – an age where the threats of ecological disasters, confusion about religions and races, and terrorism loom large. A movement is emerging to place Gandhi's philosophy and method of nonviolence into a global framework to solve current conflicts. The present tenor of Gandhian Studies is sympathetic in tone and revolutionary in approach. David Hardiman's *Gandhi in His Time and Ours* (2003) exemplifies the momentum of this wave to appropriate Gandhi for the *new world*. Hardiman frames Gandhi's vision as 'dialogic', rooted in tolerance and allowing for a diversity of opinions. The author, whose interest lies in subaltern studies, makes a unique contribution to Gandhi studies by demonstrating the ways Gandhi interacted with various groups, including Dalits, Adivasis, Muslims, and the British. This calls to mind the fact that Gandhi drew criticism from his own fold for assimilating the marginal and minority classes into the nationalist movement.

Hardiman's portrait of Gandhi is complex, a man filled with inconsistencies and at times having hegemonic tendencies. The author delves into the subject of Gandhi's vow of celibacy and late-life experimentation 'to test his celibacy' in a section, 'Gandhi and sexual desire', but he leaves his discussion of asceticism with only the assessment that Gandhi did not seem to be 'concerned with the psychological effects that this experiment might have on the young women with whom he slept', but was not involved sexually. On the other hand, Hardiman's detailed assessment of Gandhi's social and political legacy in India and abroad is glowingly positive. 'Gandhi and his

movement were of central importance in the development of modern pacifism, which stands for a principled rejection of the use of violence at all levels of politics' (Hardiman 2003, pp. 105, 245). Hardiman states that Gandhi became a paradigm for those who stand for 'a human spirit that refuses to be crushed by the leviathan of the modern 'system' of violence, oppression and exploitation . . .' (Hardiman 2003, p. 301).

Nicholas Gier, in *The Virtue of Nonviolence: From Gautama to Gandhi* (2004), sets the stage to view Gandhi as a 'Postmodern Thinker'. Gier argues that Gandhi is 'one of history's most eminent examples' of the ideal of constructive postmodernism because he synthesized 'Vedic and ascetic views of nonviolence and making *ahimsā* a powerful moral and political tool' (Gier 2004, p. 1). Gandhi combines his private ethics with political issues and transcends the distinction between individual salvation and political freedom. Gier states: 'One of the goals of constructive postmodernism is to overcome the Cartesian dichotomy of inner and outer and reaffirm the fusion of personal virtue and sociopolitical action' (Gier 2004, p. 2). Gier reviews Hindu and Jain readings of Gandhi's, but argues that Gandhi came closest to Buddhism by interpreting nonviolence as virtue, even though Gier understands Gandhi's ascetic practices to be incompatible with the Buddhist Middle Way. Gier presents Gandhi in the context of his own native culture, yet compares him to Western figures such as Jesus and Martin Luther King. Gier's interpretation of Gandhi is progressive and comprehensive: he prefers to construe Gandhi's *ahimsā* as a virtue rather than as an ascetic practice which, for Gandhi himself, mandated an austere vow of *brahmacarya*.

In their new book, *Postmodern Gandhi and Other Essays* (2006), Lloyd Rudolph and Susanne Rudolph also classify Gandhi as a postmodern thinker. In this volume, the authors combine core chapters from their earlier book, *Gandhi: The Traditional Roots of Charisma*, with new interpretations of Gandhi. Despite objections to interpret Gandhi as a postmodern thinker by some earlier scholars, such as Ajit Kumar Jha and Ronald Terchek, the Rudolphs 'make a case' for a postmodern Gandhi.<sup>21</sup> The book explores this tendency in various facets of Gandhi's life and theory: for example, Gandhi's epistemology – his definition of truth and his process of experimentation to discover it – and his hermeneutic, how he 'sought meaning in context, a perspective he brought to the interpretation of practice and of texts' (Rudolph & Rudolph 2006, p. 7). Furthermore, the Rudolphs make a unique contribution to the field by tracing a chronological history of Gandhi's meaning in and for America. Among various images of Gandhi in America, the Rudolphs include the anti-imperialist, the fraud, the *mahatma*, and the Guru. Gandhi's depictions as 'the little Saint Francis of India' by Rolland; 'Jesus Christ' by Holmes, and a 'Prophet' by Reinhold Niebuhr, were certainly the direct result of Gandhi's ascetic performance that stimulated America's religious imagination. Martin Luther King saw Jesus' doctrine of love at work in Gandhi's method of nonviolence such that it became an impetus for the Civil Rights Movement.

During the past few years, debate and desperation have emerged in the search for alternative responses to war. The terrorist event of September 11, 2001, and the ensuing 'war on terror' have fostered dialogue on nonviolence. Human history has often glorified war and sacrifice, but history is also a witness to the suffering caused by war. There may be another way to fight war and perform sacrifice. Peter Ackerman and Jack Duvall (2000), Jonathan Schell, (2003) and David Cortright (2006), for example, review successful applications of nonviolent movements throughout the world. Peter Ackerman and Jack Duvall in their book, *A Force More Powerful* (2000), give an account of various movements during the last hundred years that have used nonviolent strategies to confront social injustice and political problems.

Schell argues that 'forms of nonviolent action can serve effectively in the place of violence at every level of political affairs. This is the promise of Mohandas K. Gandhi's resistance to the British Empire in India, of Martin Luther King Jr.'s civil-rights movement in the United States, of the nonviolent movements in Eastern Europe and Russia . . .' (Schell 2003, pp. 8–9). Schell shows the connection of Gandhi's *Satyāgraha* with his asceticism but questions its wider applicability: '. . . Gandhi's asceticism – and especially his vow of celibacy even within marriage – which he regarded as essential to the practice of satyagraha, seems unlikely to serve as a model for very many' (Schell 2003, p. 117). Whether it is possible to replicate the effect of *Satyāgraha* without some form of asceticism is left unanswered.

David Cortright, in his recent work, *Gandhi and Beyond: Nonviolence for an Age of Terrorism* (2006), analyzes the difficult question of the relevance of Gandhi's nonviolent method for confronting terrorism. He extols Gandhi's nonviolent contributions but admits, as various scholars have, the challenge of understanding Gandhi's complicated personal philosophy:

Every time I tried to approach Gandhi, I found myself intimidated and overwhelmed – not only by the enormity of his accomplishments but also by the austerity and eccentricities of his personality. Gandhi seemed almost inconceivable. How could one so spiritual and detached from the material world achieve so much in altering the course of history? . . . I found Gandhi's asceticism too extreme, his views on sexuality and women bizarre and offensive . . . (Cortright 2006, p. 9)

Despite the hesitancy of certain scholars to see the essential connection between Gandhi's asceticism and nonviolent methods, others still strive to bridge the gap between Gandhi's personal asceticism and public activism, and between Gandhi's Indianness and Western thought. Anthony Parel's recent work, *Gandhi's Philosophy and the Quest for Harmony* (2006), is a serious attempt to outline the core of Gandhi's philosophy of harmony instead of fragmentation. He concludes, 'The Gandhian paradigm teaches everyone, not just Indians, how to seek wealth and power without sacrificing ethics, beauty, and transcendence' (Parel 2006, p. 205). Analyzing Gandhi in his native context as well as placing him within the global context, Parel invites Indians and Westerners alike to learn the secret of a harmonious world from Gandhi's approach. This

book reflects the ongoing debate about how to integrate Gandhi's ascetic practices into a comprehensive understanding of the man and his method.

The sustained and extensive tradition of Gandhian studies by scholars from diverse disciplines, and the attempts by activists from many backgrounds to apply Gandhi's strategies to various situations, is a testament to the broad appeal of Gandhi's method. It also evinces the complexity of Gandhi's personality and philosophy, which combined religious, political, and ascetic practices. Scholars have illuminated the complexities of his character and broadened the scope of Gandhi's teachings by analyzing them from different angles, using new interpretive lenses, and testing their efficacy in new situations. His ascetic practices have inspired some writers to mythologize Gandhi and have provoked others to deconstruct his mythical persona to see what lies beneath the façade of the 'naked fakir'.

However, in general, scholars and activists admire Gandhi's moral courage that brought forth a new method – rooted in nonviolence, truth, virtue, dialogue, mutual respect, self-service – which is proving to provide a compelling avenue to solve modern conflicts. The character of our current era – of secularism, materialism, and globalization – has also guided the framework of Gandhian scholarship. In the current phase of scholarship, one is made to wonder if asceticism was merely an incidental factor in Gandhi's method. Gandhi's asceticism – in spite of its radical, hegemonic, other worldly, misplaced, or culture-specific practices – was for him the prerequisite for his method of *Satyāgraha*. The method of *Ahimsā* and *Satyāgraha* (not harming and self-suffering), by definition, mandates some form of renunciation. Can the modern world borrow Gandhi's political strategies, without accepting the personal practices that Gandhi himself saw as essential to the struggle, and still succeed at the level Gandhi did? Would it have been possible for Gandhi to execute his method and mobilize the masses without his asceticism and the mythical power of *mahatmahood*? Gandhi would have said no. If we seek to apply Gandhi's method for solving today's conflicts, the apparent reluctance of modern culture to accept Gandhi's religious asceticism presents us with an invitation to construct new forms of 'renunciation' and creative 'myths' that could incite the imagination of the people of the modern world. Could it be that the future implementation and expansion of Gandhi's methods depends on an adaptation/modification of renunciation for our times?

### *Short Biography*

Veena Rani Howard's interest lies in Hindu thought and comparative religion. Her current research is on ideological debates that take place within the native discourse of Indian thought, as well as in the recent interactions between native and Western interpretations. She analyzes the intersection of different discourses, such as that between classical Indian philosophical logic and Western philosophical and political dialectics that mediate emerging conversations in the field. She received her higher education in India as well

in the USA and has master's degrees in English Literature, Indian Philosophy, and Western Philosophy. She is currently writing her doctoral thesis on Mahatma Gandhi at Lancaster University, UK. She teaches courses on Hinduism and other religions of India at the University of Oregon and Lane Community College. She has translated two books of the Saint Tradition of Northern India, *Mokṣa Darśana (The Philosophy of Liberation)* and *Sarvadharmā Samanvya (Harmony of All Religions)*. Her articles have been published in essay collections, including *Who Exactly Is the Other? Western and Transcultural Perspectives*, University of Oregon Books (2002) and *Asceticism, Identity and Pedagogy in Dharma Traditions*, Contemporary Issues in Constructive Dharma, vol. 3 (2006). She is a frequent presenter at conferences, including most recently: the Association for Practical and Professional Ethics (2003); Justice Will Kiss Mercy: A Conference on the Vocation of Peacemaking in a World of Many Faiths, Marquette University (2005); East-West Philosophers' Conference, University of Hawaii (2005); Dharma Association of North America at American Academy of Religion (2005); and Deep Listening, Deep Hearing: Buddhism and Psychotherapy East and West, University of Oregon (2006).

### Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Lord Reading comments on Gandhi after his first meeting with Gandhi. Nanda, B. R. *Gandhi and His Critics*, p. 72.

<sup>2</sup> Gandhi, M. K., In Jordens, J.T.F., *Gandhi's Religion A Homespun Shawl*, p. 185.

<sup>3</sup> Caplan, Pat, 'Celibacy as a Solution? Mahatma Gandhi and *Brahmacharya*', p. 271.

<sup>4</sup> Gandhi's main writings, such *The Autobiography*, *The Bhagavad-Gita According to Gandhi*, *Vows and Observances*, etc., are published separately and also included in *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*.

<sup>5</sup> *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi* is now also available in electronic form.

<sup>6</sup> Nehru, Jawaharlal, in the Forward to *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi* (Electronic CD), p. 9.

<sup>7</sup> There are a great number of biographies published at this time, e.g., Mazumdar, Haridas, T., *Gandhi The Apostle: His Trial and the Message*; Athalye, D. V. (1923), *Life of Mahatma Gandhi*; Rolland, Romain, *Mahatma Gandhi: The Man Who Became One with the Universal Being*; John Hays Holmes published a number of books and pamphlets which included *Mahatmajī: Reincarnation of Christ*, and *World's Greatest Man of Today: Mahatma Gandhi*.

<sup>8</sup> Juergensmeyer, Mark, 'Saint Gandhi', In Hawley, *Saints and Virtues*, p. 192.

<sup>9</sup> Paresh Kar's, *Romantic Gandhi: A Search for Mahatma's Originality* (1933), is also a critical evaluation of Gandhi's complex personality and ideologies.

<sup>10</sup> Noted authors of this period also include Walker, Roy Oliver, *Sword of Gold: A Life of Mahatma Gandhi*.

<sup>11</sup> Literature of this period includes the authors, Sheean, 1949; Polak, 1949; and Devas, 1949.

<sup>12</sup> Various intellectuals like George Orwell, could not resist writing about Gandhi's complex personality and his unique accomplishments.

<sup>13</sup> *The Last Phase* in two books covers Gandhi's life from 1944–1948; and *The Early Phase* from birth to 1896.

<sup>14</sup> B. R. Nanda (*Mahatma Gandhi: A Biography*, 1958, this edition was expanded in 1981); Kripalani Krishna, 1968, *Gandhi: A Life*, National Book Trust (reprint edition by National Book Trust, 1982), and Ashe (*Gandhi*, 1968).



- <sup>15</sup> Wolpert elaborates: 'Erikson following Kierkegaard's analysis of the lives of "spiritual innovators," calls this "the curse" of Gandhi's life.' The 'account' with his father could never be settled, leaving a lifelong 'existential debt'. Wolpert, Stanley, *Gandhi's Passion: The Life and Legacy of Mahatma Gandhi*, p. 17.
- <sup>16</sup> Gandhi, M. K., *Autobiography: A Story of My Experiments with Truth*. p. 30.
- <sup>17</sup> Iyer elaborates: 'He has been vividly portrayed as a saint by Romain Rolland, Carl Heath and Stanley Jones, a portrait confirmed by those who were closest to him.' Iyer, Raghavan, *The Moral and Political Thought of Mahatma Gandhi*, p. 5.
- <sup>18</sup> *Gandhi: The Traditional Roots of Charisma*, was originally appeared as part two of *The Modernity of Tradition: Political Development of India* 1967, The University of Chicago Press. In 1983 the section was revised, and was published separately by the same press.
- <sup>19</sup> *Fighting with Gandhi: A Step-by-Step Strategy for Solving Everyday Conflicts* (1984) was later reissued as *Gandhi's Way: A Handbook of Conflict Resolution* (2002).
- <sup>20</sup> For example, Gene Sharp, *Gandhi as a Political Strategist* (1979), Bhikhu Parekh, *Gandhi's Political Philosophy* (1989), and Dennis Dalton, *Gandhi's Power: Nonviolence in Action* (1993).
- <sup>21</sup> The Rudolphs quote Jha, 'To describe (Gandhi) as a postmodernist is a gross misunderstanding of his philosophy ...' (Rudolph & Rudolph 2006, p. 6). Ronald Terchek argues that 'to try to make Gandhi into a postmodernist would be misleading' (Terchek 1998, p. 14).

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