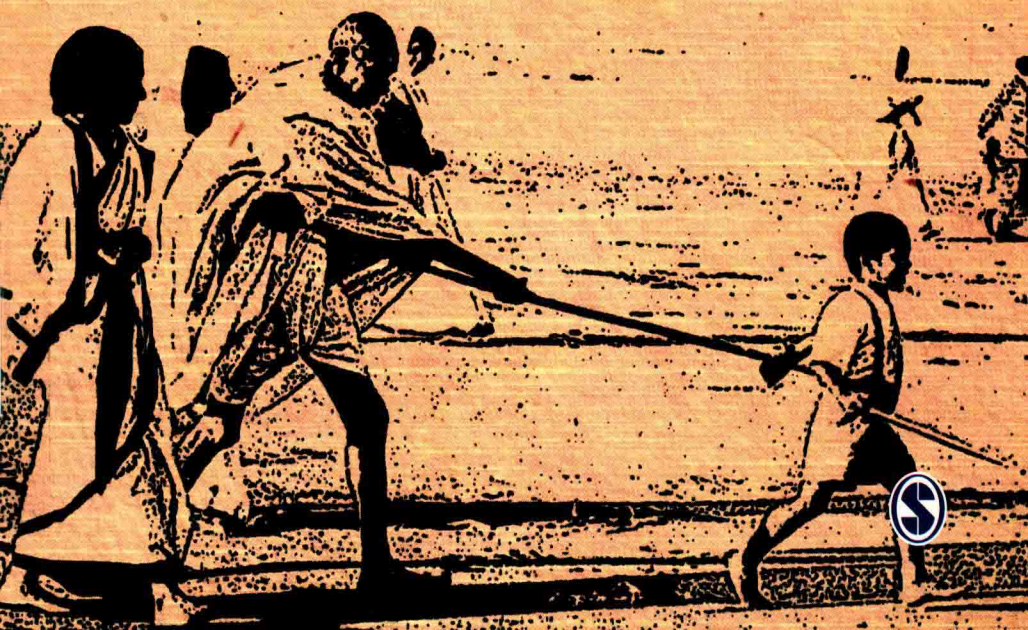


Understanding Gandhi

Gandhians in Conversation
with Fred J Blum

Usha Thakkar
Jayshree Mehta



Understanding Gandhi

GANDHIANS IN CONVERSATION WITH FRED J BLUM



www.sagepublications.com
Los Angeles • London • New Delhi • Singapore • Washington DC

Copyright © Usha Thakkar and Jayshree Mehta, 2011

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or utilised in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording or by any information storage or retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publisher.

First published in 2011 by



SAGE Publications India Pvt Ltd

B 1/I-1 Mohan Cooperative Industrial Area
Mathura Road, New Delhi 110 044, India

www.sagepub.in

SAGE Publications Inc

2455 Teller Road
Thousand Oaks, California 91320, USA

SAGE Publications Ltd

1 Oliver's Yard
55 City Road
London EC1Y 1SP, United Kingdom

SAGE Publications Asia-Pacific Pte Ltd

33 Pekin Street
#02-01 Far East Square
Singapore 048763

Published by Vivek Mehra for SAGE Publications India Pvt Ltd, Phototypeset in 10.5/13 Sabon by Star Compugraphics Private Limited, Delhi and printed at Chaman Enterprises, New Delhi.

Second Printing 2011

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data Available

ISBN: 978-81-321-0557-2 (PB)

The SAGE Team: Elina Majumdar, P.K. Jayanthan and Deepthi Sexena

Understanding Gandhi

*To all those who struggle for a just society,
and in particular,
the late and much-missed
Usha Mehta*



Foreword

A STUDENT OF GANDHI is puzzled by many aspects of his life and legacy. Gandhi said that religion and politics were inseparable and that his own politics was motivated and shaped by his religion. But he also insisted that the state must be thoroughly secular, and should not have any formal ties with or give any kind of political or financial support to religious institutions. He was committed to non-violence and its 'absolute efficacy'. But he made several exceptions to it in personal and political life and gave it a kind of militancy that deeply worried and even alienated some of the traditional Christian, Jain and even Hindu votaries of non-violence. Gandhi undertook fasts, even fast unto death, that were *prima facie* coercive, but he insisted that they were wholly non-violent and did no more than exert 'pure' moral pressure on their intended targets. He was deeply religious, but also claimed to be a scientist engaged in 'experiments with truth' with a view to arriving at experimentally corroborated scientific principles of a new moral and social order. He appealed to what he

took to be the central values of Hinduism to attack its ugly social customs and practices, and argued from within the Hindu tradition. However, he also appealed in the manner of Enlightenment thinkers to 'universal reason' and enlightened world opinion and judged the tradition by their standards.

Gandhi's political life and influence too raise puzzling questions. Although the Left was highly critical of some of his beliefs and actions, it remained closely associated with him and some even came under his intellectual spell. Jawaharlal Nehru was highly critical of some of Gandhi's views and some aspects of his style of leadership and was offered an influential constituency by the Left. He not only never left Gandhi, but under his influence moderated some of his socialist aspirations and developed a markedly spiritual outlook of the Gandhian type towards the end of his life. He told Louis Fischer in 1948 that as he grew older, he felt drawn to 'Christ and Buddha, especially the Buddha' and moved closer to Gandhi. Jayaprakash Narayan, who was an even stronger critic of Gandhi, parted company with him for some time. Yet he not only continued to be haunted by him, but became an ardent Gandhian barely a decade after his death. Even M.N. Roy, the strongest critic of Gandhi and whom he regarded as his most dangerous opponent, not only paid him a moving tribute but borrowed his ideas such as decentralization, partyless democracy, the need to build up a cadre of committed and locally based social workers and the importance of personal example. Like Nehru, Narayan and Roy, scores of prominent socialists and communists who rejected many of Gandhi's

ideas never really managed to break out of his personal and ideological spell.

Why the Left, especially the Hindu Left, felt drawn to Gandhi is a difficult question that has received little attention. It is, of course, true that his hold over the Indian masses was so powerful that no one dared challenge him, and in any case he was shrewd enough to outsmart anyone who did, as Subhas Bose painfully realized. Many Leftwing leaders with political ambitions, therefore, thought it prudent not to fall foul of him. The Left also knew that its best hope of propagating its relatively unfamiliar ideas and policies lay in securing his patronage by means of quiet persuasion and persistent pressure.

All this, however, represents only part of the story. Both Gandhi and the Left did, of course, need and use each other. Nevertheless, as the examples of Nehru, Narayan, and others show, they were bound to him by deeper bonds. The bonds, further, were not entirely personal and emotional, for many on the Left did not enjoy the kind of intimacy with Gandhi that Nehru, Narayan, Rajkumari Amrit Kaur and others did. The Left was morally overwhelmed by the fact that while they were content to preach their doctrines, Gandhi actually lived by his, and that his concern for the poor and his critique of British colonialism were in some respects deeper than theirs. It also seems to have felt that he had raised basic questions about the nature of man and the character of Indian society which they had long ignored and with which they needed to come to terms. Even as Marx claimed to discover a radical kernel underneath Hegel's apparently conservative vocabulary, many on

the Left felt that Gandhi's apparently conservative and religious form of thought had a radical and secular content which they could ease out and build upon. Obviously none of these and other explanations fully account for the Left's fascination with Gandhi. That only shows that the question deserves far more attention than it has so far been given.

Gandhi enjoyed the loyalty and support of both the Left and the Right, the intellectuals and the masses, the Westernized as well as the traditionalist intellectuals, the conservative as well as the radical masses, the industrialists and the workers, the landlords and the landless workers, and various groups. Although no group of Indians, not even the upper and middle peasantry whose life-style he symbolized and who were his most loyal supporters, was entirely happy with all his ideas and actions, each felt able to accept enough of them to give him its allegiance and support. As a result Gandhi enjoyed their loyalty and love and was able to hold them all together in a way no one before had been able to do.

This is apparently puzzling, for it is not clear how one man could build bridges between such diverse groups of people. In order to answer it satisfactorily, we must examine the manner in which he went about cultivating different constituencies and appropriately reformulating his programme and vocabulary. He began his political life in India by organizing and winning over the textile workers in Ahmedabad, one of the most industrialized cities in India. In so doing, he demonstrated his concern for the industrial workers in general and sent out appropriate messages all over India. He then went about championing

the causes of other groups such as agricultural workers (Champaran), Muslims (Khilafat movement), peasants (Bardoli), middle classes (Non-cooperation Movement) the poor and the lower middle classes (the Salt *Satyagraha*) and the scheduled castes (Vaikom *Satyagraha* and his 'fast unto death' in 1932). Each of his *satyagrahas* took up the cause of and consolidated his hold over a particular constituency and broadened his political base. Each was carefully conceived and formed part of a larger strategy of mass mobilization. Since the interests of different groups conflicted, Gandhi resisted the pressure from the Left to offer a clear-cut socio-economic programme. He knew that such a programme would break up the delicate and precarious unity he had forged among them.

We also need to analyse Gandhi's rich and complex language of discourse that enabled him to communicate with different constituencies in their native idioms. He knew that his followers came from different economic, social, religious, educational and cultural backgrounds, that they lacked a common language of communication, and that he was the first political leader in India to bring them all together. He also knew that he had to reassure such mutually hostile groups as the industrialists and their workers, the rich landlords and their land-hungry workers, the Westernized middle classes and the conservative masses, and the high-caste *Brahmins* and the untouchables. Accordingly, he developed a language of discourse that allowed him to speak to each group in its own idioms and also left him enough room to escape when the idioms conflicted. Gandhi's speeches at the time of Vaikom *Satyagraha* are a

brilliant example of how he placated both the orthodox *Brahmins* and the impatient untouchables.

It is striking that while he dominated pre-Independence India, he became a solitary and marginal figure soon after Independence. His countrymen who had once adored him grew tired of him, and some even wished his death. 'Let Gandhi die' was a popular slogan in Delhi during his last fast. And Justice Khosla had no doubt that had Godse been tried by a jury, he would have been acquitted! Soon after 1947, India embarked upon a path of development to which Gandhi was totally unsympathetic. And his old comrades adopted a life-style wholly opposed to the one he had long advocated and practised. Neither encountered opposition from the masses who had for nearly three decades adored his simple and austere life. Gandhi's schools and *ashrams* were also swept away, and his passionate concern for the poor, his plea for the development of the villages, and the tradition of social service that he had assiduously nurtured were all abandoned or diluted. Even the Gandhian language of discourse was reduced to an esoteric dialect spoken by a small and understood by an even smaller minority.

It is not easy to explain all this. No doubt, Gandhi's ideas were difficult to practise and had been resisted even during his life time, and bore only limited relevance to the huge political, economic and social problems of independent India. One would have thought, however, that the process of de-Gandhification would have begun after at least a decent interval and encountered some sustained opposition for at least a few years. Instead, it started and gathered

momentum from the very day India became independent, as if the country had suddenly woken up from a long Gandhian nightmare and could not wait to make a clean break with its past.

While one can see why the new leadership was anxious to marginalize Gandhi, it is difficult to explain the attitude of the orthodox Gandhians. Barring a small group of committed men and women, hardly any of them continued his great work in the villages, acted as the moral conscience of the nation, or raised their voice against the policies of the new government. None, again, conducted *satyagrahas* against glaring social and economic injustices at the national and local levels or even built up a dedicated cadre of workers. Among the scores of able leaders Gandhi had trained, none even reinterpreted his thought in a manner that connected with the problems of independent India.

Vinoba Bhave was the only obvious exception. And even he was a pale and barely recognizable copy of the original. He relied on moral persuasion and never forced an issue, organized a boycott, demanded impartial inquiries, or launched *satyagrahas*. He never built up an organization or created a cadre of dedicated workers, and remained little more than a one-man pressure group. He travelled from village to village as if he alone had the power to persuade people, and dissipated his energies. He lacked Gandhi's fierce sense of justice, uncompromising commitment to the poor, capacity to forge brilliant and evocative symbols and flair for action. Unlike Gandhi, who freely used the material resources of prominent industrialists but never hesitated to attack their lack of patriotism and the capitalist

system, Vinoba was overwhelmed by the attention paid to him by Nehru and Indira Gandhi and could not even protest against the Emergency. Not surprisingly, he remained a politically marginal figure whose voice could not frighten the government or command its attention.

The absence of any kind of systematic and nationwide Gandhian movement in independent India cannot be explained in terms of the personal limitations of individual Gandhians, for not all of them were devoid of the qualities of leadership and, in any case, leadership does not precede but grows out of a social movement. Nor can it be explained in terms of the ethos of post-Independence India. Although the new political leaders rejected many of Gandhi's ideas, they continued to swear by his concern for the poor and the 'downtrodden'. The Gandhians could have capitalized on and built a movement around it. Nor could the absence of a movement be explained by pointing to political groups and parties that had taken over Gandhi's social and economic concerns and thereby rendered a separate Gandhian movement superfluous. Apart from the communists, no other political party had taken serious interest in them, and even the communists were mainly focused on the industrial working classes. There was thus ample room for an independent Gandhian movement.

Gandhi's close associates, who survived him by several years, are among those best equipped to help us answer these and related questions. They knew him well, and had a good understanding of his thought. Later in life they also had the opportunity to reflect on his ideas without being

overwhelmed by his presence and in the light of the turn India took after his death. This blend of an intimate knowledge of Gandhi and the benefit of reflective hindsight gives them a unique vantage point. Fred J. Blum interviewed twenty-four such men and women at length and left behind valuable material. Usha Thakkar and Jayshree Mehta consulted it, and selected six of the most interesting interviews for inclusion in the volume. Like them I had the opportunity to read the transcripts of all the twenty-four interviews, and agree with their judgement. They locate the interviews in the historical context and show with great care in their Introduction the light they throw on Gandhi's life and legacy. This excellent volume fills a gap in the extensive literature on Gandhi. It provides valuable information and insights and assists a balanced and just critical assessment of him. As the editors show, Gandhi still has much to offer to contemporary India's struggle to create a just society and a healthy and self-critical political culture.

Prof. Lord Bhikhu Parekh
University of Westminster

Acknowledgements

WE ARE INDEBTED to many friends and colleagues who have helped us in our understanding of Gandhi and preparation of this book. This book has been possible mainly because of the unstinted support and encouragement received from Prof. Bhikhu Parekh. We value his help to us in the project at all stages, from location of the interviews to the fruition of the project as a book. Discussions with him have been immensely stimulating and intellectually motivating. Our special thanks to him.

We are thankful to Mrs Arna Blum for giving permission to use transcripts of the interviews taken by the late Dr Fred J. Blum and for contributing his life-sketch for the book. We gratefully acknowledge her graciousness and help. We thank The Abbey Sutton Courtenay for making the material available, as part of its Gandhi library.

We appreciate and thank Gandhi Foundation, its trustees and especially its President, Lord Richard Attenborough; Vice-President, Prof. Bhikhu Parekh and Secretary, Mr John Rowley, for their support.

We would also like to record our appreciation of Mrs Pramila Parekh who helped us in our project in her own quietly efficient manner.

Our discussions with Mr Yogesh Kamdar, Prof. Diwakar Shastri, Prof. Ronald Terchek, Mr Vasant Pradhan, Prof. Nagindas Sanghavi, Mr Satish Sahney, Dr Jyotsna Tanna and Prof. Douglas Allen have been rewarding. We acknowledge our debt to them. We thank Mr Meghshyam T. Ajgaonkar, Mr Sajeev Rajan, Ms Ranjan Bharuchi, Ms Sandhya Mehta and the staff of Mani Bhavan Gandhi Sangrahalaya for their help. We also thank Ms Kashmira Rao for her assistance.

We sincerely thank Prof. Dasharath Shah and Mr Gautam Patel for providing details about Jhaver Patel's life.

Ms Elina Majumdar has been very cooperative in seeing the book through the various stages of publishing. We sincerely thank her and Mr P.K. Jayanthan, the copy editor, for all their efforts.

Contents

<i>Foreword</i> by Professor Lord Bhikhu Parekh	ix
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	xix
1. Introduction	1
2. Fred J. Blum (1914–1990)	53
3. J.B. Kripalani	59
4. Raihana Tyabji	155
5. Dada Dharmadhikari	243
6. Sushila Nayar	301
7. Jhaver Patel	351
8. Sucheta Kripalani	409