

GANDHI, WITHOUT THE MYTH

James H. Forest

That power ultimately comes from the barrel of a gun is not the hypothesis of Chairman Mao alone; it is a conviction common to Richard Nixon, Eldridge Cleaver, Hubert Humphrey, Andre Kosygin, Georges Pompidou, Jerry Rubin, Edward Heath, the editor of the *New York Times*, Al Capp, and more than several archbishops. To name a few! In fact, across generational and cultural, political and economic frontiers, a belief in the final efficacy of violence seems, ironically, to be one of the few ties that bind us. Century upon century, at least as far back as Cain, violence has been the principal means to public power and vies with sex as a source of stimulation and satisfaction.

Should it happen that our species and planet survive, an enormous portion of the credit will belong, in Churchill's words, to "that seditious, half-naked Indian fakir"—Mahatma Gandhi. For, more than any other in human history, it is Gandhi who initiated the search for nonviolent alternatives to military methods—a search at once pragmatic (in its determination to accomplish concrete and revolutionary goals) and therapeutic (in its recognition and treatment of the damaged and incomplete forms of human consciousness presently prevailing).

Despite all that Gandhi accomplished and inspired, however, the fact is that he has been fundamentally misunderstood outside his homeland (and often understood but slightly better there, where he suffered the fate of being run through the saint machine). For many, Churchill's colonial aside remains valid and worthy of a smile. Others excuse Gandhi from importance because of his sexual or dietary mores—or, more often, because of the myths that circulate about them ("You know, of course, that Gandhi used to sleep with naked young girls."). Still others engage in condescending appreciation: Gandhi is credited with having found an effective method for resolving disputes with tea-drinking, near-pacifist English churchgoers—but a method obviously useless in dealing with the Hitlers and

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Stalins (and Nixons) who stand immune to reason or manners. Even the pacifists have frequently made a comic book of Gandhi's "experiments with truth," as he called his public campaigns, as well as of his dealings with himself, family and associates; some devotees of nonviolence are exclusively preoccupied with the confrontational dimensions of Gandhi, others with his reliance on negotiation and compromise, others with his attempted (and often successful) rapport with opponents, and still others with his life-style. Almost invariably it is a system, and not a way or spirit, that is left entombed at the end of these people's digressive process.

And so Gandhi is written off, or hopelessly caricatured, by senators, New Left revolutionaries, liberals and conservatives alike—all those who find these myths irrelevant.

Now there is a book which, despite its unhurried length and despite the nearly Quaker quiet of its tone, may, in Dan Berrigan's phrase, make "the small, almost imperceptible difference."

Erik Erikson's book, *Gandhi's Truth* (New York, 1969), has accidental (one might say providential) origins in a 1962 visit to India, during which he stayed at the home of an aged mill owner, Seth Ambalal Sarabhai, in India's belching Pittsburgh-like Ahmedabad. It was to Ahmedabad that Gandhi returned, aged 48, after more than twenty years in South Africa, and it was there, over the Ides of March in 1918, that Gandhi led a campaign on behalf of the city's textile workers. Here, too, he made the first of his seventeen fasts. Gandhi's principal opponent then was none other than Erikson's recent host; his chief ally, the Seth's sister, Anasuya Sarabhai. Across the Sabarmati River from that home was the old *ashram* Gandhi had founded in 1915 (now a museum and orphanage), taking as its name *Satyagraha*, Gandhi's word for the way he had developed—literally, the action that comes from clinging to the truth, what Westerners would later call militant nonviolence.

So Erikson found himself a guest in the home of Gandhi's one-time foe, and at the scene of a campaign that had occasioned curious ambiguity in Gandhi's autobiography: despite the fact that the sought-after 35 per cent wage increase had been won, Gandhi would later describe the effort

as more a mistake and failure of nerve than a success—though, at the time, he had confided to his secretary that the fast had been “the best deed so far.” In the Mahatma’s brief autobiographical account (less than half a page) of the 21-day project and fast, Erikson discovered two “mis-memories”: and untypically, the chapter (originally a column for the *satyagraha* movement’s newspaper, *Navajivan*) concluded without moral, or even a conclusion. In addition, the following column (or chapter in the *Autobiography*) is preoccupied with the snakes which infested the *ashram* grounds in Ahmedabad, a mysterious detour that inevitably whetted psychoanalyst Erikson’s imagination. “I came to suspect,” he said, “that that strike and that fast represented a demonstrable crisis in the middle age of a great man and was worthy of study as such.”

Beyond that, Erikson admits, he was looking for a way to further develop the psycho-historical method that had resulted earlier in his exploratory study, *Young Man Luther*. And finally, there was his alarm with the state of planetary affairs and his conviction “that man as a species can no longer afford . . . to cultivate illusions either about our own ‘nature’ or about that of other species, or about those ‘pseudo-species’ he calls enemies—not while inventing and manufacturing arsenals capable of global destruction and while relying for inner and outer peace solely on the super-brakes built into the super-weaponry. . . . Gandhi seems to have been the only man who has visualized and demonstrated an over-all alternative.”

As he attempted to resurrect the “crisis,” Erikson probed into the past, via autobiography and other sources, into a Gandhi who was the last son of a fourth and final wife to an Indian statesman of western India, a Gandhi who loved to laugh, who lived in a crowded family commune not unlike the *ashrams* he was later to found, who had an early sense of “being elect” in some special way, who abhorred being watched when outdoors, who had no taste for competition but sought a mediator’s role in games, who was “straight but not stiff, shy yet not withdrawn, intelligent but not bookish, willful and yet not stubborn, sensual and yet not soft . . .” and who bore, in Erikson’s word, a curse, and one for which he alone was responsible. The curse was excruciating: married at thirteen, not rare in the India of 1882, he became passionately sexual; tending his sick father one night, he gave over the charge to a brother, and was making love with his wife when his father died—“a blot,” as Gandhi wrote, “which I have never been able to efface or forget.”

It was in this combined search of biographical

evolution and middle-age crisis that Erikson glimpsed a pattern: political life as re-enactment of “curse,” not as compulsion but with a “pertinacity and giftedness which make it meaningful for the awe-stricken audience’s every member . . . a transcendence of an infantile curse marking the man.” For Gandhi had gone on to devote his life energies to caring for the sick on a scale the planet had previously not experienced, not allowing any private love-making, and not limiting his understanding of illness to the sick-in-bed or those suffering from singular delusions; he was, rather, concerned with the terminal illness of injustice and with the injustice of violence.

Inevitably, the “curse” of Gandhi’s life resulted in certain distortions that have served as obstacles to many readers of his *Autobiography* and other writings. He rivals St. Paul in his incomprehension of the positive value of sexual love: the *Autobiography* is riddled with references to “lust” and “carnal passion.” The dogmatic momentum for purity pours over, however, with major historical profit, into a passion for public sanitation, dietary improvement, and generally a non-coercive life style that, for Gandhi, increasingly deepened and which he was able to share with rare verbal lucidity.

In the mix of that same exploration of evolution and crisis in Gandhi’s life, Erikson came upon a key—the Hindu concept of *dharma*—that contributes in a major way to understanding the mental matrix in which nonviolence, as something *other* than tactic,

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is made possible. *Dharma* is life task, one’s vocational path, something determined by facts reaching beyond present existence and even family; *dharma*, Erikson translates, is that which integrates individual experience and yet weds us to the wider community of life.

Politically applied, the *dharma* concept makes possible the perceiving of others, including one’s enemies, as being followers of a path not of their own

choosing. A culture emphatic about free will at every turn in life makes easier the equation of evil works with evil person. Yet even an Indian must have been surprised to receive in the midst of the Ahmedabad strike—as did Ambalal, the most stubborn of the mill owners—a letter from Gandhi which stated, “Kindly look deep into your heart, listen to the still small voice within, and obey, I pray you.” And, in the same paragraph, “Will you dine with me?” (They did.)

It was during the Ahmedabad strike that great ambiguities developed for Gandhi, and these were focused most particularly on his attitude toward Ambalal and on the *dharma* concept. Early in the campaign, for example, on March 2nd, a strike leaflet was reminding the strikers of the *employers'* fears and of the importance of not falling prey to class warfare (described by Gandhi as the “modern, Western, Satanic notion of justice”), but six days later Gandhi is writing a colleague in South Africa that “Ambalal . . . is the most stubborn opponent in the strike.” The following day’s leaflet, written by Gandhi, denounces the employers’ tactics as “unworthy,” “exaggerated,” and “twisted”—the mill owners were offering a 20 per cent increase, plus a money reward, to any worker who persuaded five others to return with him, and hinting that another 15 per cent would be granted soon after the strike ended.

A letter from Ambalal on March 11th, in which he complained that Gandhi was placing undue pressure on the workers, also proposed that the two take a meal together (the *satyagraha* roles reversed!). The emerging Mahatma ripped up the letter and ordered his secretary not to retain a copy of the reply, in which he refused the invitation. As recalled by the secretary at a later date, Gandhi did respond at the time with an offer to personally escort to the mills any worker who wished to give up his vow—for there had been a solemn vow by the strikers not to return to work until the 35 per cent increase was granted. Two days later, during a reception at which both Gandhi and Ambalal were present, Gandhi pointed out the mill owner to the guest of honor, remarking, “These people have decided to destroy the mill workers.” Ambalal again appears the *satyagrahi* in the situation, coolly responding, “And they want to do the same to the mill owners.”

The next day—March 14th—was crucial. The strikers’ enthusiasm had by now receded altogether, no more cheerful anthems around the babul tree, no more giant throngs, no hope at all. An assistant of Gandhi’s returned that day from one starving area of the city, the Jugaldas Chawl, and reported the

angry taunts he had witnessed there: “[You leaders] come and go in your cars! You eat elegant foods! And we suffer death agonies! Meetings don’t keep us from starving!” And indeed Gandhi *was* eating, if not elegantly, *and* driving from place to place in the 1915 Overland belonging to Anasuya Sarabhai.

The criticism of these dying followers cut Gandhi to the heart; very likely he felt guilty to be eating in any event. Nor was the car really his style. Concurrently, as his letters and leaflets of the time indicate, Gandhi was experiencing a crisis in his faith with *satyagraha* and, with it, his ability to have faith in others on the basis of *dharma*. “If [the owners] have any regard for *dharma*,” a biting leaflet declared, “they would hesitate to oppose the workers. You will never find in ancient India that a situation in which the workers starved was regarded as the employers’ opportunity. That action alone is just which does not harm either party in a dispute.” A terrible contradiction! He knew his chief opponent to be a remarkable and conscientious man, not at all selfish—and yet, understanding his own mill-owner *dharma* to require paternalistic control of the workers.

Workers starving while Gandhi dined, walking while he rode, a mill owner less angry and more gentle than himself, strikers despairing of their vow and their leaders, the *satyagraha* campaign, and with it all that he hoped would lead directly to the liberation of India—all seemed to rush toward disaster. Gandhi decided to fast.

As Erikson rightly comments, “There cannot really be any ‘pure’ decision to starve oneself to death. . . . A martyr, too, challenges death, but at the end he forces others to be his executioners.” Gandhi was forcing others to be his executioners—the workers by giving up their vow and, though he insisted otherwise, the mill owners by refusing to give in. However, all this was undoubtedly secondary to the stated intention, his determination to demonstrate to the workers what he had pledged at the start: “We shall not ourselves eat or drink without providing food and clothing to such of the workers as are reduced to destitution in the course of our struggle.”

Upon making his fast pledge at a strike meeting (at which he stated, too, his determination to abandon the car and walk), “a meeting that was up to now . . . totally unresponsive . . . woke up as if by magic”—as he wrote soon afterward to the *Bombay Chronicle*. And several days later, the strike was over. Ambalal had almost immediately offered the 35 per cent increase if only Gandhi would stop the fast; but Gandhi had rejected this on the basis of

its being a concession to him personally while the real purpose of the fast was to encourage the strikers to fulfill their pledge. Ambalal came back with a casuistic variation: Let the strikers return victorious for one day at a 35 per cent increase; let the owners win a second day at a 20 per cent increase; then let the workers continue at a 27.5 per cent increase while arbitration resolves the matter.

Gandhi accepted with reluctance and in the knowledge that it was not the strikers' pledge but his fast that had won. "My weak condition left the mill-owners no freedom," he declared in dejection and shame. Notes Erikson: Gandhi felt that, in undertaking his fast, he had forgotten the most elemental principle of justice, "that nobody should be forced to sign his name to anything under duress."

Yet, hours later, he had gotten past the excruciating dissection of his own conscience and its contradictions and had grasped the larger dimensions of the process. His letter to the *Chronicle* concludes: "I have not known a struggle fought with so little bitterness and with such courtesy on either side."

These 21 days were, as Erikson states, "a real and craftsmanlike rehearsal, in spite of devastating [to Gandhi] shortcomings such as earnest rehearsals bring to light." In his first experiment with *satyagraha* on a large scale in India, he had discovered much unresolved violence and coercion within himself, as well as certain residual contradictions between profession and life-style. There would be other contradictions, other crises, but Ahmedabad not only brought economic victory but led the Mahatma toward a wholeness almost unprecedented in human history. After the Ahmedabad strike, all that was left for him was a final exploration of the temptation to violence—inner as well as outer-directed—when he would seek to demonstrate his protective concern for his colonialist foes by volunteering to be the recruiter-in-chief for the British Army, to recruit, in effect, for the slaughter of World War I. The peasants' unwillingness to be so recruited, plus the overwhelming political and moral incongruities involved, led directly to a nervous breakdown and a nearly fatal illness. Yet, in the end, recovered and newly enlightened, the tools of nonviolence were fully in Gandhi's grip. In 1919, under his leadership, the first nationally coordinated act of civil disobedience—*hartal*—occurred.

In 1920, the Mahatma was entrusted to the leadership and complete reorganization of the Indian National Congress: he had become *the* one, as Erikson writes, "to accomplish the political job of anchoring the independence movement to the spirit of the Indian masses. He could now live and function as a

whole man: spiritual leader as well as astute lawyer and craft politician, and this not in search of the insignia of power, but in a position above all defined jobs—a position which would permit him to combine *caritas* with rationally effective political power."

The accomplishment—and no one has demonstrated it so convincingly as Erik Erikson—is far more than personal to Gandhi or historical to India. To put it in terms of another important figure of this century, Frantz Fanon: as a self-cure for an oppressed people, Gandhi discovered, at least in broad outline, an alternative to killing oppressors; for there is no question of the accuracy of Fanon's studiously documented psychiatric histories of torturers and the tortured. Gandhi and Fanon hold in common "the intuition that violence against the adversary and violence against the self are inseparable." But Gandhi makes evident, in theory and experiment, that there is a way of dual conversion: conversion of the hate-burdened oppressed person "by containing his egotistic hate and by learning to love the opponent as human," thus confronting and converting the opponent "with an enveloping technique . . . that will permit him to regain his latent capacity to trust and love."

In the Ahmedabad example, the essence of Gandhi's approach—"engagement at close range," as Erikson terms it—is seen as giving Ambalal and the other mill owners every opportunity for an informed response: there is also the determination to take not a jot more than is possible *and* just, but—at the same time—to die rather than take less. Both sides are equalized—the mill owners and the mill workers are seen as sharers in a common identity, not as tribes or species apart. Nor is either side allowed to undermine the other. If the mill owners in fact turn to threats, counter-threats are barred as a response; at every turn, no matter the justifications for vilification, not even the destruction of the opponent's "good name" is tolerable. It is a process—in fact, a revolutionary ritualization—of "*giving the opponent the courage to change.*"

Stripped of myths and the biographically explicable dogmatizing of certain sexual and dietary choices, the essence of Gandhi's potential historical contribution is a pragmatic passion for achieving justice while establishing a wider identity, a *pax humanitas* embracing tribes, races, classes, and nations—something more possible because of the communications and transportation technology at hand.

As for Erikson, his accomplishment, despite its academic form, is on a par with Gandhi's—a sometimes painful, sometimes joyous pilgrimage after truth and away from stained-glass windows.