

Still Making Us Work: Gandhi's Autobiography

Chandras Choudhury

Halfway through Part II of his autobiography *The Story of My Experiments with Truth*, we see the young Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, still only 24, preparing to leave South Africa in 1893 after the successful resolution of the court case that originally took him there.

Gandhi has, by this time, won not just the respect but also the love of the Indian community in South Africa. His unusually stringent and holistic approach towards authority, law, and morals, his keen interest in matters well outside his brief such as racial discrimination, religious division, and sanitation, and his enthusiasm for petitioning and pamphleteering, organising meetings, and travelling has made him many friends and admirers. In Natal his friends, and the merchant community in particular, pester him to stay back and set up a legal practice there. They are willing not only to send private legal work his way, but also organise funds for the 'public work' of reform and improvement that so preoccupies him. Gandhi mulls over their offer, and then refuses the second part of it. He explains: 'My work would be mainly to make you all work. And how could I charge you for that?'

My Experiments with Truth was first published in English translation in 1927, and in its ninth decade it still commands the power, just like its author did in his own person, to make us work should we come within range of it, to make us newly reflective, newly ambitious. It is, as Gandhi himself writes, not 'a real autobiography,' but a spartan, goal-directed one, closely focussed only on those incidents and encounters in his life 'which bear upon the practice of truth.' It reflects its author's impatience with inessentials, and his constant search for first principles; it is rich in lessons and maxims, in speculations about root causes and deep connections, and in an infectious moral restlessness and urgency. It can sometimes be vexing and crankish, as in the author's obsession with matters of diet and sexual self-control, or his imputation of a divine will at work in the most mundane matters. But as Gandhi himself writes, 'The useful and the useless must, like good and evil generally, go on together, and man must make his choice.'

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The *Autobiography* was written or dictated in haste, during the fallow years of the nineteen-twenties, when the energy of the independence struggle had subsided somewhat but the demands on Gandhi's time remained immense. It was published piece by piece from 1925 onwards in Gandhi's Gujarati weekly *Navajivan* (which explains the book's often arbitrary division into dozens of three- and four-page chapters). Gandhi's faithful associate, Mahadev Desai, translated it almost concurrently into English, supervised by Gandhi himself, but the paradox remains that the autobiography of one of India's greatest writers of English comes to us in an English translation by another hand. The copies found in most Indian homes are the unsophisticated, homely, cheap editions published by Gandhi's own press, The Navajivan Trust, but they are in keeping with the spirit of the author, who honoured substance and economy over show and style.

Notwithstanding the fact that most of it is set in England and South Africa, the *Autobiography* is the most quintessentially Indian of books. Indeed, it might usefully be prescribed as the foundational book for anyone approaching Indian life or literature for the first time. This is in part because of the range of fundamental Indian experiences, across both public and private spheres, with which it engages critically – that of travelling in third-class railway compartments across the length and breadth of India, of agonising over the filth and squalor of public and community spaces, of walking through temples and observing religious festivals, of reflecting on the inequity of power relations in Indian life all the way from marriage (beginning with the author's own marriage) to caste and class. But it also demands to be read because of Gandhi's own creative attitude – the insight offered by his specific strategies and responses – as a negotiator between the forces of tradition and modernity, as a seeker of a common ground where inter-religious dialogue can take place, and as an enthusiast when it comes to the multiplicity of Indian languages and systems. At different points in the book we see Gandhi trying to learn Tamil, the better to deal with indentured labourers from south India in South Africa; speaking in Hindi (or Hindustani) at a Viceregal meeting where the accepted practice was to speak in English; and trying to win over a predominantly Muslim audience in faltering Urdu. Gandhi always goes one step further than one would expect in dealing with the other; when we read him he always seems to be saying to us, 'You can do it too.'

Among the aspects of Gandhi's nature that emerge most clearly from the *Autobiography* are his considerable talents as propagandist, pressman, and editor. Gandhi's *Collected Works* run into a hundred volumes, yet relatively few writings

were conceived as independent books – they all made their first appearances as pieces in newspapers and periodicals, often those run by Gandhi himself. Although Gandhi began to read newspapers only in his teens, very early in his career he seems to have become conscious of the enormous power of the printed word to disseminate information, to stoke reflection, to offer considered criticism, and to forge durable relationships on a mass scale without the necessity of reader actually meeting author.

But – and this is characteristic of him – he also saw in the written word a means of pinning himself to the highest standards of fairness and justice (which are only other words for what he would have understood as 'truth'). Writing about the journal *Indian Opinion*, which he ran for over a decade in South Africa, he recalls:

Week after week I poured out my soul in its columns, and expounded the principles and practice of *Satyagraha* as I understood it. During ten years, that is, until 1914, excepting the intervals of my enforced rest in prison, there was hardly an issue of *Indian Opinion* without an article from me. I cannot recall a word in those articles set down without thought or deliberation, or a word of conscious exaggeration, or anything merely to please. Indeed the journal became for me a training in self-restraint...The critic found very little to which he could object. In fact the tone of *Indian Opinion* compelled the critic to put a curb on his own pen.

Here, as at many other points in the book, we see Gandhi advance a sophisticated understanding of the dialectical relationship between one's own actions and those of others, such as when he says, 'My experience has shown that we win justice quickest by rendering justice to the other party.' And sounded here, too, is the idea of responsible speech and action through self-scrutiny which is one of the root ideas of Gandhian ethics and is explained elsewhere in the book: 'Man is man because he is capable of, and only in so far as he exercises, self-restraint.' Gandhi often asks the impossible of us, but his appeal is in the radical possibilities he opens out before us; he expands our moral arena. We come away from Gandhi with an enhanced view of our relationship to others and to the world.

The word 'God' appears dozens of times in the autobiography, and God clearly has pride of place in Gandhi's worldview. But what kind of God is he? Sometimes Gandhi speaks of God in a way that would strike the secular reader as strangely angular but which is in fact characteristic of the pious, by ceding the very human

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agency that has so assiduously been forged in hostile circumstances ('Thus God laid the foundations of my life in South Africa and sowed the seed of the fight for national self-respect'). Sometimes the word appears in notes of gratitude towards a mysterious higher authority who seems to be watching over him ('Only vaguely I understood that God had saved me on that occasion' – the occasion being a visit to a prostitute that ends in Gandhi fleeing the scene); sometimes as the end of a human ideal or endeavour ('I worship God as Truth only'; 'I had made the religion of service my own as I felt that God could be realised only through service'); and sometimes as a retreat of language and intelligence before the mystery and ineffability of the divine ('I have no word for characterising my belief in God'). Most notably, this is not a God who belongs to a particular faith; he is a God available to any person who seeks him. How did Gandhi, a practising Hindu, arrive at such a God?

The *Autobiography* offers a very comprehensive record of the process of the development of Gandhi's views on religion. Gandhi was brought up in a staunchly Hindu household. But because the first years of his adulthood were spent as a student in England (he almost did not go abroad because his family feared that he would lose caste by crossing the seas) and then as a lawyer in South Africa, in these years he kept the company of Christians far more than he did that of Hindus. Indeed he had a sustained encounter with Christianity – attending church service with friends, reading the Gospels, debating the nature of Christ and of salvation, trying to resist attempts to convert him – and with Theosophy before he came to Hinduism in any sustained or coherent way. About his first stint in South Africa, he writes that 'it was Christian influence that had kept me alive in the religious sense.' He first read the *Bhagavad Gita*, for many the core text of Hinduism, at the behest of two Theosophist friends in England, in an English translation by Edwin Arnold.

This awakening of the religious spirit led Gandhi to explore, through his twenties, the intellectual heritage of Hinduism through correspondence with Indian mentor-figures, and to also read widely on other religions. The reading, he reports, 'fostered in me the habit of putting into practice whatever appealed to me in my studies'; as in other fields, Gandhi is a great improviser in religion. But although Gandhi was soon to be persuaded by what he calls the 'beauties' of his own faith, Hinduism, and came to regard the *Gita* as 'the book par excellence for the knowledge of Truth,' there remained in his thought a Christianised view of sin and salvation. At the same time, the roundabout, unorthodox, and graduated route by which he arrived at his Hinduism made his creed both a liberal and critical one in itself, and genuinely open (and not just 'tolerant') towards others. 'In matters of religion beliefs differ,'

he writes, 'and each one's is supreme for himself. If all had the same belief about all matters of religion, there would be only one religion in the world.' This would seem to be the starting point of peaceful coexistence in a society that is in part multi-religious and in part non-religious, yet individuals of all persuasions still have difficulty subscribing to this simple and dignified idea, which are both an endorsement of belief and a check on religious coercion.

Characteristically, Gandhi can be found in the Autobiography interpreting the word 'religion' not just as belief in God, adherence to scripture, rituals, and doctrine, but 'in its broadest sense, meaning thereby self-realisation or knowledge of self.' Looking at his own book similarly in the broadest possible perspective, we can situate it within a venerable tradition of the most ambitious human seeking and questioning. Nearly two-and-a-half thousand years ago, the Greek philosopher Socrates was sentenced to death in Athens for impiety and for corrupting the youth with unsound ideas. The main thrust of Socrates's defence in court – 'The unexamined life is not worth living' – has rung across the centuries as a ideal of human life. *My Experiments with Truth*, with its insistent questioning and refashioning of both self and world, and its pursuit of 'the higher law of our being, the voice of conscience,' might be seen not just as the central book in modern Indian literature, but amongst the most Socratic books in world literature.

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