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Chapter 8: Gandhi: A Global Icon for the 21st Century?

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Abstract

This paper interrogates the word, 'Icon' and then asks if Gandhi is in any sense a global icon for the 21st century, particularly in the light of the way modern India has departed fundamentally from his vision for the post-independence future of the nation. It does this by asking, and attempting to answer two key questions.

- How did Gandhi become a global figure rather than just a local religious leader?
- What is Gandhi's core message for the 21st century: in what sense might he be 'an icon'?

Keywords: Gandhi, M.K., India, British *raj*, non-violence, public image-making, mass communications

Introduction

The train station in Pietermaritzburg has global resonance because of what happened to Gandhi there in 1893. However, it is more accurate to say that Gandhi wanted it to have wide resonance. We know this from the emphasis he put on his ejection from a first class carriage at the wish of a white passenger in his autobiography[1]. I shall return to Gandhi's self-image making later in more

[1] Gandhi's partial autobiography (1927) was first published in serial form as a series of newspaper articles and was subsequently translated from Gujarati into

detail, but it is good to remember how powerful – even iconic – the image of an Indian, London-trained lawyer, thrown out of a train because of his ethnic background, became, largely because of his own portrayal of it. However, the use of the word icon is problematic. It goes back of course to the ancient Greek for an image or likeness, and in the Christian era took on the additional meaning of something more than an image, however powerful. It is an image through which the viewer sees profound truth. The truths it encourages the viewer to contemplate are both profound and universal.

This paper will ask if Mahatma Gandhi is in any sense an icon for our century. In considering this it is important to remember the irony that despite Gandhi's global image and considerable international following in the decades after his death, his own country, India, has in many ways turned its back on him. The nature and conduct of public life and politics, the goals of the state, even the identity of contemporary India, are very different from his vision of the future of an independent country. Opposing visions of Indian identity and of the shape of a new India were visible in his lifetime. Mainly they were subordinated to the primary need to create a united India to claim independence from imperial British rule until independence in 1947. Then, under Nehru's government in the 1950s, there was the need to demonstrate that India was a modern, democratic nation which welcomed diversity in a composite national identity, implicitly if not explicitly compared to an overtly Muslim Pakistan. This is no longer the case. The current ruling party (the BJP) emphasises the Hindu-ness of India, to the growing detriment of its significant religious minorities. Other aspects of Gandhi's core vision for India, such as a village-based economy, and the primacy of local self-governments as opposed to a large state, have also been abandoned.

In considering whether Gandhi might be a global icon, this paper asks and maybe suggests answers to two questions.

- How did Gandhi become a global figure rather than just a local religious leader?

- What is Gandhi's core message for the 21st century: in what sense might he be 'an icon'?

English and turned into book form by his secretary, Mahadev Desai. It has appeared since in many editions.

How did Gandhi become a global figure rather than just a local religious leader?

Historians, including myself, have spent much labour and time in trying to understand how Gandhi emerged as an all-India nationalist leader during and after the Great War. How did a lawyer from an obscure part of western India, who spent twenty years of professional life in southern Africa, come to be a name and a figure recognizable across at least the English-speaking world? (What other Indian contemporaries became so well-known globally? Tagore, the poet? Vivekananda, the well-travelled religious leader? Possibly.) It is an intricate and fascinating development for someone who returned 'home' after two decades in southern Africa, expecting to live a relatively obscure life as the leader of an *ashram*, a religious community of his associates and followers.

This is not the pace to rehearse the politics of Gandhi's emergence as a powerful figure on the Indian political stage, and as a result on to a global anti-colonial stage. (I have argued in detail elsewhere how the particular circumstances of the First World War and the failures of the existing Indian political leadership and their strategies to have a significant impact on British rule, opened up a space for Gandhi and for his suggested practices of non-violence, cf. Brown 1972.) Here I want to ask about the process of image-making which made him known through India and then far more widely.

An important preliminary is to remember how very different India was at the beginning of the twentieth century when compared to our world a century later. It was a time and place where there was none of the mass communications technology with which we are familiar. There was of course no internet, no television; radio and telephone existed; but access was confined to the wealthy. There was a flourishing English and vernacular press, but of course the vast majority of the population were illiterate. Even by 1921 only just over 13% of men in British India were literate, and a mere 1.8 % of women. Moreover, many of these literate persons would have been able to read and write only in their regional language, and far fewer had a command of English, which was the one language shared across the sub-continent. Literacy was greatest in urban contexts of course, and in the areas of Bengal, Bombay and Madras, where the British presence had been longest established. Given that the majority of Indians were country folk it was perhaps no surprise that any form of anti-imperial politics had been confined to a few big cities. (From this the imperial rulers took considerable comfort, and they often said that the 'real India' was to be found in India's villages.)

So, how was it possible for Gandhi to become such a well-known

figure, first in India and then more globally?

There were a number of important factors in this process. The most general one, which was felt across the globe and not just in India, was the rapid development of national and international communication technologies during the 20th century. News was able to travel faster and in more detail, illustrated with far better visual images, through the technology of the printing press, the newspaper industry, newsreels in the cinema, reinforcing the 19th century development of domestic and international telegraph systems. Radio, too, became more reliable and more widely available. But it was only in the second half of the twentieth century that air travel made it possible for political leaders to be more widely known. Gandhi's protégé, Jawaharlal Nehru, was the first Indian politician to make significant use of travel by air to make himself and India's international standing widely known. Gandhi himself travelled extensively in India by train. (It is a nice irony that the network the British had masterminded for reasons of security and trade, became a major political tool in the hands of one of the great opponents of the British imperial regime.) Gandhi often exhausted himself and his companions in the process; but he realised India's extensive rail network was vital for the communication and organization of all-India politics. The one time he returned to England where he had studied law, was in 1931, and he travelled by sea. Television, the internet, mobile phones, on which we rely for our access to news and our visual imagery of public people, and which politicians know well how to use and manipulate, came far later.

However, Gandhi was well aware of the growing power of print media in India and particularly of the vernacular press. We know so much about his activities and ideas because he wrote so much.[2] He wrote many letters of course, as did his contemporaries. (He was right-handed but sometimes his dominant hand hurt so much with over-use that he took to using his left hand. This is excruciating for historians to try read. But mercifully for us he had a brilliant private secretary, Mahadev Desai, who patiently took dictation, and edited much of Gandhi's writing.) Gandhi made thousands of speeches which were in turn printed in the newspapers. He had first embarked on journalism in South Africa with his *Indian Opinion* (1903-1914) Now in India he controlled two weekly papers – one in English, *Young India*, (1919 - 1932 and one in Gujarati,

[2] Gandhi's collected writings are so voluminous that they run to 100 volumes. A convenient selection is Brown (2008). An excellent edition of the early key text, *Hind Swaraj*, with introduction is by Parel (1997).

Navajivan (1919-1931) – as major ways of spreading his ideas. A third paper, *Harijan*, (1933-1948) followed in the 1930s as he began to pay more attention to the plight of those at the base of Hindu society, whom he called Harijans, 'Children of God', rather than Untouchables, as they were commonly known to denote their polluting status to those of higher caste. He also wrote at more length - pamphlets on specific topics, and a partial autobiography. Among his earliest pamphlets was one entitled *Hind Swaraj* (1910), which outlined his vision of Indian self-rule. His partial autobiography (1927) only took his life to the early 1920s, and he never wrote a sequel. He was clear it was not what historians think of as an autobiography when he gave it the subtitle, 'The Story of My Experiments with Truth.' It was highly selective in its account of his life, and was clearly designed as a didactic tool. One might properly say it was also a tool in the fashioning of his image as primarily a truth-seeker rather than a conventional political leader.

Another of the major influences on the development of Gandhi's public image in India and abroad is what I would call his 'politics of theatre'. By this I mean his use of his own body and person, and his lifestyle, to spread his image and message, as well as the way he crafted his political strategies. Let us look for a moment at the way he used himself and his way of living to create a very specific image. He was deliberately aligning himself with the poor and ordinary rather than the privileged, in contrast to the modes of dress and living common among wealthy and educated Indians. He was also demonstrating his difference from the imperial rulers with their imported codes of dress, and the distinctive life-style they created for themselves in India. In Africa he had at first dressed in formal professional European style clothes, as befitted a lawyer. He returned to India in 1915 wearing Indian dress, but within ten years had pared down his clothing to a loin cloth and a shawl. These changes were duly spread through the photographic image and the press. He also simplified what he ate, partly for religious reasons and partly to align himself with those who could hardly afford one meal a day. His mode of living became increasingly spartan. He continued a process begun much earlier when he abandoned a middle-class, professional home for simple community living in Tolstoy Farm and Phoenix in southern Africa. Once back in India he settled in his native Gujarat just outside the major industrial city of Ahmedabad and created a recognisable *ashram*. The lifestyle there was simple, all engaged in domestic and manual labour, and hours were given over each day to prayer. He himself had very few personal possessions. Later, in 1936, he moved his home to Sevagram in central India, consciously choosing to live in one of the poorest parts of India in the hope that the *ashram*'s

life style might help to resolve some of the chronic economic and social problems of India's poorest. It should be noted, as even some of his closest friends commented in his life time, that keeping Gandhi poor cost others money. A case in point was his decision to live in Sevagram. An Indian businessman paid for a paved road to the *ashram* so that his political associates could reach him more easily.

Gandhi maintained this simplicity of life style when he visited England in 1931 for a constitutional conference. He used his body and clothing and mode of life to distinguish himself from the imperial rulers, and also from the other Indian political leaders who also attended. Whereas they stayed in posh London hotels he chose to live in an East End Settlement among the poor. He made no concessions to the English winter climate, and he was a strange and compelling figure in loin cloth and shawl, standing on the steps of 10, Downing St., the heart of imperial government, or when visiting Buckingham Palace.

Back in India Gandhi's unique public image had already in a sense 'taken off', even in remote parts of rural India. As early as 1917 Gandhi challenged the district administration which wanted to keep him out of Champaran district in Bihar, where he was helping agriculturalists to protest against their conditions of indigo cultivation. The perplexed young British official who had to deal with him noted his unique public image and the way rural people were looking on him as a liberator and wonder worker[3]. Several years later in the neighbouring province of UP Gandhi was seen by country folk in semi-religious terms. His name and image were used in ways which would have horrified him (Amin 1984). And he became increasingly disquieted by the tendency of crowds to want to touch him as he travelled and addressed large audiences. At this time, too, he became generally known by the honorific title, *Mahatma*, or 'Great Soul', as Hindu ideas and imagery blended with and in his teaching, and in the way people responded to him, so creating an image unlike that of any other political leader.

The strategy of protest for which Gandhi became so well-known was non-violent resistance, or *satyagraha*, as he called it. Gandhi was self-taught in the politics of protest. But he recognised quite early in his career that non-

[3] A junior British official noted in April 1917 that to the peasants, Gandhi was 'their liberator, and they credit him with extraordinary powers. He moves about in the villages, asking them to lay their grievances before him, and he is daily transfiguring the imagination of masses of ignorant men with visions of an early millennium' (quoted in Brown 1972:68).

violent conscientious protest to the point of suffering retribution was a powerful publicity tool. It was to take many forms – individual disobedience to unjust laws, law-breaking by a select group of individuals as in the famous Salt March in 1930 from Ahmedabad to the coast to make salt, mass closure of shops in a gesture of public mourning, and large scale movements of resistance to symbols of imperial power. I shall return to this political mode later: but for now I want to emphasise how it, too, was political theatre. The Salt March, covering well over 200 miles, was one of the most ingenious and powerful of these – as the press followed the march by Gandhi and his handpicked followers from the *ashram* to the seaside while the imperial government made no move to stop Gandhi, as the march itself was of course not illegal. Mass gatherings drew in crowds of men and also women almost for the first time, and the sight of well-educated women a well as men going to prison was a powerful sign of a new, inclusive and also highly moral politics. Large public meetings and marches in urban areas were also in part designed to reclaim the public space from imperial control. Even the humble spinning wheel was brought into action to associate political leaders and followers with India's poor, and to protest visually at the import of foreign cloth. Large-scale *satyagraha* brought with it dangers of violence and internecine conflict, particularly if there was lack of discipline. Gandhi was painfully aware of this and through his Indian career he struggled to balance the risk of violence with the power of *satyagraha* as a politics of theatre.

Another significant factor in the making of Gandhi, the recognisable icon of resistance to British rule in India, was the emergence in the early 20th century of global ideologies of anti-imperialism. He was in a sense in the right place at the right time. In European empires around the world there were strong stirrings of nationalist feeling, and the development of various politics of protest and demand. In Europe and the USA there were also significant domestic movements of hostility to global imperialisms. These trends were magnified as a result of the two world wars. India's struggle for independence was the first successful one within the British Empire/Commonwealth which did not involve a colony of settlement. It thus became a beacon for global political change; and Gandhi's person and politics of non-violence became a world-wide inspiration. This was not his deliberate intention as he always insisted that his message and work were meant primarily for India: and he declined, for example, to visit the USA. He insisted that his life was his message. So, as his life became more widely known outside India, so did his message.

Let me turn now to that message. Is there a sense in which Gandhi still offers a vision for the 21st century. In what sense might he still be 'an icon'? It is important to remember that Gandhi was not an intellectual, trained in ethics, moral philosophy or politics. He was primarily a self-taught man who was constantly 'experimenting' in his personal and public life. (He flagged this up in the subtitle of his autobiography, 'The Story of my Experiments with Truth') Further, he never saw himself as offering a global message or vision. Instead, he sought local solutions to local problems, within India. He often quoted from a famous hymn ('Lead Kindly Light') by John Henry Newman: 'one step enough for me'. Despite these claims it became clear that by the time of his assassination in 1948 and afterwards he had begun to inspire people far beyond India's shores. He had in a sense become an icon through which many and diverse people saw different ideals. Let us consider three of them.

One of the most fundamental was a radical understanding of the nature of humanity and its true goals.
His personal and public struggles in the first half of his adult life convinced him that all people, whatever their social status, ethnic origins, or religious traditions, had the capacity to relate to a divine heart of all creation. Becoming truly human meant recognising this and following through its implications in personal and public life, in the context of relations between people, and the relationship of people to the natural environment. It was this vision which inspired his personal life style, his care and service of the very poorest in society whom others disregarded or demeaned, and his hopes for what an India free from British rule might be like.

His vision of self-rule or *swaraj* was profoundly different from that of most other political leaders and activists. They wanted to oust the imperial rulers and to inherit the British *raj*. Gandhi hoped for an India without a powerful state, where government was primarily in the hands of local people acting for their own locality; an India built on a rural and self-sufficient economy, where everyone would have enough without the need to exploit others or the natural environment; an India where all would be welcome and considered of equal value. Few other political leaders, then or now, have been so explicit about their fundamental understanding of the essential nature of humankind and its implications in pubic and personal life. (It is important to note that although Gandhi remained a Hindu throughout his life he drew on many different religious traditions, and his religious vision was far wider than the Jain and Hindu traditions in which he had been brought up.)

Another key element in Gandhi's thinking, which became so attractive yet so hard to put into practice, was his vision of the proper nature of public and political life.

It would be fair to say that throughout human history most people who have aspired to public roles and leadership have done so in order to exercise power in different public spheres. For some access to power has always been about personal aggrandisement and the acquisition of wealth and status. Contemporary kleptocracies, so-called, and the kleptocrats who milk state structures for their own ends, are a variation on a very ancient theme. Others have believed that access to state power would enable them to pursue particular social and religious goals – some of them extremely laudable. But Gandhi believed that entry into public life and the position to influence others should not be directed towards the exercise of public power but to service, particularly of those least able to help themselves or direct their own lives. He also believed that the modern, powerful state was inevitably immoral. It took away from people their capacity for self-direction or self-rule, it made ordinary people into faceless subjects rather than real people because of the scale of government and its distance from people's real lives and problems; and of course, it was a standing temptation to those who wated to exploit it and its resources for their own ends. (He would not have known the word kleptocracy but he would have known precisely what it meant.) As a result of his fears of the de-humanising potential of the modern state, Gandhi argued for minimal government on a small scale. The villages of India were to be the bedrock of government where officials as servants looked after the needs of their neighbours. Of course, as many have pointed out, this was unrealistic, a misunderstanding of what many Indian villages were really like. Discrimination, violence and inequality were features of village life just as much as life in the larger scale of towns and cities.

As Gandhi became more prominent in public life, in South Africa and in India, he began to wrestle with the perennial problem of means and ends.

How could one effect change in social and political relations, without harming the opponent – harm done most obviously by the use of varieties of force, but equally by denying the opponent's own vision of truth. He was absolutely sure that ends never justified the means: that evil means inevitably created bad outcomes, and *vice versa* that moral means inevitably created good outcomes[4].

[4] See for example Gandhi, writing in 1910 in *Hind Swaraj* (Brown 2008: 58).

So, he experimented with new ways of effecting change, and this led him to a commitment to non-violence and the development of varieties of non-violent action. This perhaps more than anything is what people would today associate with Gandhi, and how they would understand him to be iconic.

This paper has already examined the way varieties of non-violent action became a politics of theatre, public demonstration of principled opposition to different kinds of wrong, whatever that might mean for the *satyagrahi*. For Gandhi it was also, and perhaps even more, a means of moral conversion, leading to a transformation of vision in the opponent. Whatever the scale of *satyagraha* its aim was not **to force** the opponent to change but **to persuade** the opponent that change was right. Given that this sort of principled action required an acceptance that there might be severe legal consequences, Gandhi was emphatic that *satyagraha* was not a political tool to be used at will. It was more of a moral stance and as such had to be embedded in a way of life like his own. Simplicity of life, lack of excess possessions, self-discipline and courage – these were characteristics of the true *satyagrahi*, a person who had the moral courage and training to accept the consequences of his or her opposition to wrong. It has of course to be acknowledged that only a few of Gandhi's closest followers shared this understanding. For most of those who joined his larger non-violent movements it was a political strategy or tool to be used when it seemed appropriate, and to be abandoned when it became counter-productive. It was recognition of this which persuaded Gandhi on several occasions to stop larger movements, and on other occasions to restrict it to hand-picked people he felt he could trust[5].

There were other practical problems of large-scale *satyagraha* movements. Many of those who were drawn into them, particularly at local level, had their own agendas and their own grievances to pursue; and this could swiftly erode any commitment to non-violence they might have had. Moreover, the sheer size of the subcontinent, and the limited nature of mass communications, meant that though Gandhi might be seen as the all-India leader of a movement, this 'leadership' was often titular. Effective control, such as there was, might well be in the hands of those who had little connection with

[5] In 1922 Gandhi called off the first very large movement of non-cooperation with the British because of violence between Indians which left 22 Indian policemen dead in Chauri Chaura, and horrified him. Examples of campaigns with hand-picked *satyagrahis* are the Salt March (1930) and one protesting against the war in 1940.

Gandhi and even less understanding of his core vision. All too easily movements broke down in violence (between Indians themselves as well as towards the British); or they withered away as the hardships of opposition began to outweigh the perceived political benefits. It is for this reasons that historians who study Gandhi's *satyagraha* movements are as interested in their endings as their beginnings.

The issue of non-violence in action is perhaps the most difficult to evaluate. Did it 'work' in India and what might 'working' mean. Studying Gandhi's various 'experiments' with non-violence makes it clear that there was a contrast between small scale and larger campaigns. In small-scale and often more local campaigns, a positive resolution of problems was more likely. In these the issue at stake was clear, activists were controlled, and often the source of the wrong or grievance could be easily righted. This was particularly the case where different levels of the imperial political machine interacted. Here pressure from higher political levels where priorities were different could overrule the immediate concerns of lower, local representatives of the *raj*.

On a larger scale the impact of *satyagraha* was more doubtful – particularly if a campaign broke down into its disparate parts or disintegrated into violence. The primary question for later analysts is the degree to which the authority being opposed was itself vulnerable. If we concentrate on the British *raj* in India it is helpful to visualise it as a political enterprise at the juncture of 3 systems or worlds: these were the world of Indian politics, the world of British domestic politics, and the global environment. The weakening and then ending of the British *raj* happened over a long period, from at least the end of the First World War until 1947. Change happened in all three political worlds to destabilise an imperial enterprise which had seemed so invincible at the end of the 19th century. In the widest context British economic interests in India had been seriously eroded and with them the 'worth' of the Indian empire to Britain. International opinion was moving against empires in general, and American hostility to imperialism became particularly significant as Britain became increasingly dependent on American military and economic support during and after the Second World War. In Britain itself public opinion after 1945 was intent on rebuilding the country's profoundly damaged infrastructure and would have turned on any elected government which spent public resources on trying to control an unruly part of the empire. The post-war Labour government recognised this and knew that British troops returning war-weary would likely have refused to serve if asked to return to control India. In India itself hostility to British rule was eroding the loyalty of those Indians on whom the British

relied for the stability of their rule, and the last great *satyagraha* campaign, the Quit India movement of 1942, with its uncontrolled violence, indicated what might happen if there was not rapid movement towards independence. In the world of Indian politics and attitudes, Gandhi's non-violent movements had played a part in transforming the task of trying to rule India. But I would suggest that this was a small part. By contrast the shifts in the global and domestic worlds in which the British had to function had made the *raj* profoundly vulnerable. It is instructive to compare this with the later cases of China and Hong Kong, where people often inspired by Gandhi, attempted to engage in non-violent protest. Here the Chinese government was not vulnerable to other domestic or international pressures. It had the money and the will to use force in response to non-violence. The result was plain in Tiananmen Square in 1989 or more recently in Hong Kong.

Gandhi himself never thought in these terms. When *satyagraha* seemed to fail in terms of non-violence, and a campaign's internal integrity, he would call it off or organise a campaign just by himself and hand-picked trustworthy followers. After the violence involved in Quit India he lamented that those who purported to be his followers had never understood what he meant by non-violent action and had never seriously become *satyagrahis.*

For Gandhi public and political work was about service: and as such it had to be embedded in a moral life and motivated by a moral and even religious vision. So the issue of morality in public life is one of the most challenging insights he has offered to later generations. It is also left to people like us to try to understand and evaluate the place and potential of non-violent action in a highly complex political world.

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