Gandhi was a terrible father and husband

Judith M. Brown and Anthony Parel (eds), ***The Cambridge Companion to Gandhi***

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Gandhi was an indifferent father; an authoritarian husband; and a demanding and eccentric friend. He was politically and socially conservative and saw no inherent virtue in the idea of the independent woman or emancipated untouchable. His reading of religion, as of political theory, was idiosyncratic and his pronouncements apodictic. He was willing to lay his life on the line and fast whether it was for communal harmony, for concessions from the colonial state or to put the lid on social radicalism. Anyone attempting to refine a theory of Gandhianism is reduced to perplexity at the myriad inconsistencies and conjunctural certainties.

Yet, the appeal of Gandhi is universal, probably because of the simple take home message of non-violence, peace and green economics. He is seen as having brought imperial power to its knees through a recalcitrant ethics of moral engagement. However, this insistence on moral engagement produced bizarre pronouncements like his advice to the Jews of Germany in 1938 to resort to non-violent means against Nazi persecution. Perhaps it is precisely because Gandhi's thinking cannot be easily rendered as consistent or coherent that it presents a perennial challenge. One may be drawn if one is a philosopher to the challenge of recreating the "integrity" of his thought, or as a historian to the sheer contradiction and non-coherence of his ideas that make sense only within discrete historical moments. Or one may opt, like the editors of *The Cambridge Companion to Gandhi,* to produce a set of anodyne reflections, rather like the Gideons Bible, on different themes: Gandhi on economy, on non-violence and so

on. Barring a few essays that engage with the sheer singularity of Gandhi's thinking, on the whole the book sticks to the straight and narrow.

Many of Gandhi's earlier perceptions survive into the present in more or less sophisticated renditions. Churchill's dyspeptic dismissal of Gandhi as a half-naked fakir, finds a reprisal in Perry Anderson's recent broadside in the *London Review of Books* which is uncomprehending, as befits a rational Marxist, of Gandhi's religious idiom. Rajni Palme Dutt, stalwart Stalinist of the Communist Party of Great Britain in the 1940s, saw Gandhi as a bourgeois mascot, suborning the masses to the imperatives of capital. This has been reiterated by the eminent political thinker, Partha Chatterjee, who sees the Gandhian moment within Indian nationalism as the moment of "manoeuvre" because the subalterns are disciplined into future citizenship. George Orwell's take on Gandhi – that his tactics were feasible only against an empire such as that fashioned by the British, premised on the rule of law – has had a different life, with neo-imperialists like Niall Ferguson using the idea to reiterate the glories of Empire.

Eccentric and brilliant readings like that of the historian Shahid Amin who showed that Gandhi was nothing more than the sum of his perceptions among people in the countryside – a man whose image was forged in the crucible of rumour – have been few and far between. The book under review takes the idea of Gandhi for granted. There is no indication of changing perspectives, except that the careful and informed reader can see that most of the essays are informed by the spectres of renditions past. And nowhere is this more evident in the chapter on Gandhi and social relations which provides a Palme Dutt-like indictment of Gandhi's pusillanimity and vacillations.

Gandhi is generally studied as an Indian thinker, and nothing could be more patently untrue. He spent most of his adult life in England and South Africa, returning to India only when he was in his forties. Once in India, he was plunged *in media res* as he reshaped the

idiom of the nationalist struggle, moving it beyond the petitioning of discontented elites to a political arousal of the peasant, the worker, and women in general. Within limits of course. His movements were characterised by a start-stop rhythm, as he put the brakes on any movement that exceeded the bounds of the nationalist leadership. His ashrams in India were devoid of books, and much of what he wrote was based on reading that he had done while in England and South Africa. Leela Gandhi, in a superb book shows how Gandhi was deeply influenced by the fashions of his time in Victorian England: pacifism; animal rights; vegetarianism (his first ever written tract was on the vegetarian habits of Indians); theosophy and Christian Esotericism.

His first broadside against modern civilisation *Hind Swaraj* (1909) was written while returning to South Africa from London after a failed mission to England to argue for the rights of Indians in South Africa as imperial citizens. Gandhi did not begin life as a nationalist, nor indeed did he experience a moment of epiphany against empire and racism when he was thrown out the train at Pietermaritzburg. Almost until the commencement of the First World War he remained committed to the idea of imperial citizenship and in Keith Breckenridge's memorable phrase, saw himself as a "voluntary bureaucrat" helping the South African state in its initial efforts at building a surveillance state, lauding the accuracy of fingerprinting and reading up on recent advances.

His first setback came in 1909, after the failure of the mission to get the English government to stand by its promise of imperial belonging to the Indian. *Hind Swaraj* apart from its rejection of modern civilisation carries within it the detritus of Victorian thought: the romanticism of Ruskin; the critiques of industrialisation and of "white slavery" within factories echoing Edward Carpenter and Richard Sherard; and strangely enough, the idea of "degeneration" as a counterpoint to civilisation read through the works of the late nineteenth-century theorist of degeneration, Max Nordau. It carries critiques of early marriage and unrestrained sexual activity, and bears the shadow of eugenics which was to emerge as a major movement

in the early twentieth century. The crisis of liberal democracy with the entry of the masses into electoral politics was writ large in the book and the idea of the *satyagrahi* as the disciplined leader of the masses, owed not a little to Gandhi's reading of Carlyle as much as Nordau. The idea of the *satyagrahi* arose at the juncture of the crisis of liberal democracy and it was forged in England and South Africa and carried over to India. The *Cambridge Companion* has little to say on any of this.

Two essays out of the dozen or so in the volume stand out for their originality, clarity and commitment to a fresh interpretation. Akeel Bilgrami addresses the issue of Gandhi's deeply personal and idiosyncratic reading of religious texts within the latter's opposition between literalism and the spirit of texts. Gandhi was robust in his disavowal of external authority: "I decline to be bound by any interpretation, however learned it may be, if it is repugnant to *reason* or *moral sense*" (p 95). There is an emphasis on individual experience over universal predicates as a touchstone of truth; an informed and proper subjectivism, as it were. But at the same time, Gandhi was concerned with the question of how we are to give ourselves the right to universalise our own moral and religious convictions to others instead of lapsing into what Bilgrami calls the diffidence of relativism. He then provides a brilliant gloss on *ahimsa*. If *himsa* is present even in criticism made of individual human beings based on principles, what if one were to make a judgement based on one's conscience rather than on principles? Then, as Bilgrami argues, others could arrive at truths other than one's own in an experiential way "without contradicting one's own experience" (p 99). It is the move from saying, "When I choose for myself, I generate a principle for everyone to follow" to the position that, "When I choose for myself, I set an example for everyone else" (pp 100, 101). Bilgrami also glosses Gandhi's insistence on cultivated patience as virtue; his anxieties on the cognitive enslavement of India to the West; and his resistance to the "exile of God" that placed God outside the universe, desacralised nature and led to its ruthless plunder. In the end, Gandhi understood that what is bad in humans cannot be constrained by mere good politics as in becoming citizens. The transformation had

to be in *swaraj* or rule over oneself.

Anthony Parel, the editor of the definitive text of Gandhi's classic *Hind Swaraj*, provides a complex reading of Gandhi's thinking on the state. Gandhi has been claimed by anarchists and anti-colonialists alike in their misunderstanding that he rejected the state altogether. Parel draws careful distinctions between the state that Gandhi wanted and the one he did not. He rejected the aggressive state, the state as a soulless machine, states based on religion and the notion of reasons of state. He put forward the idea of a "civic nationalism" in which the nation was not a homogeneous organic community, but, rather, a pluralistic political community. On the other hand, Gandhi was for the state as the protector of rights, even if it required the enforcement of human rights by coercive means. However, he believed that no state could redeem the poor from their poverty unless the poor "on their own, willed to get out of it" (p 164). An important facet of his political philosophy was support for the legitimate use of coercion by the state for maintaining internal order and external security. Parel cites the neglected *Bulletins* that Gandhi wrote in 1918 which argued that Indians ought to learn how to bear arms and to reject the "pseudo-philosophy" that separated *artha* from *dharma,* or duty from morality. Gandhi tacitly approved India's intervention in Kashmir in 1947: moral idealism was tempered by political realism. And Parel reminds us that it was Gandhi's clear understanding of the omnipresence of violence, and the impossibility of perfect non-violence that underlay *ahimsa*. In his precise, and somewhat chilling, words:

> *The world is bound in a chain of destruction. In other words himsa is an inherent necessity of life in the body … None while in the flesh, can thus be entirely free from himsa because one never completely renounces the will to live (pp 168–169).*

The *Cambridge Companion* ignores the transnational aspect of Gandhi's thinking, except for an excellent essay by Jonathan Hyslop. Nor does the volume engage with the recent interest in Gandhi as a bilingual intellectual, someone who wrote both in Gujarati as well as English; texts in neither language were exact translations of the other. Both Ajay Skaria and Tridip Suhrud have explored the slippages, evasions and aporia opened up by Gandhi's choice

of words combining textual, linguistic and historical scholarship. There has been, too, a resurgence of interest in Gandhi as a moral philosopher since 2009 (marking a 100 years of *Hind Swaraj*) which has enlightened us about his attitudes towards history, politics and ethics. Essays by Uday Mehta, Akeel Bilgrami, Faisal Devji and Aishwary Kumar (in the journals *Modern Intellectual History* and *Public Culture*) while marred by an ahistorical approach and a tendency to treat Gandhi as a brain in a vat, have enlightened us on issues other than non-violence and truth alone. For instance, Aishwary Kumar shows with great theoretical sophistication how Gandhi saw himself as an exemplar enacting a universal ethical politics, rendering the world at large and its actors as Gandhi's unequals. This performative solipsism meant that social movements, particularly for political resolutions to untouchability, broke against Gandhi's recalcitrance. With forthcoming books by these writers on Gandhi in 2012, this year promises to generate a new paradigm. The *Cambridge Companion* can be safely consigned to undergraduate reading thereafter.

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