

Gandhi 1914-1948

Review Number: 2356

Publish date: Thursday, 5 December, 2019

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ISBN: 9780307474797

Date of Publication: 2019

Price: £40.00

Pages: 1140pp.

Publisher: Penguin

Publisher url: <https://www.penguinrandomhouse.com/books/196463/gandhi-the-years-that-changed-the-world-1914-by-ramachandra-guha/>

Place of Publication: London

Reviewer: Michael Young

‘The speed king of Asia’ (p. 472) is not an honorific normally associated with the subject of this new biography by Ramachandra Guha, the Indian historian, cricket writer, and journalist. It was found in a letter from a British Quaker admirer of Gandhi who had accompanied the 64-year-old on his vigorous campaigning tour through southern India in support of rights for *Harijans* or ‘untouchables’ in 1934. Its inclusion typifies the depth of Guha’s research.

Guha introduces this work as a free-standing sequel to *Gandhi before India*⁽¹⁾ in which he had given an account of Gandhi’s life as a schoolboy in India, a law student in London, and a lawyer and political activist in South Africa until 1914. In the prologue he declares that the purpose of his new volume is to track Gandhi’s arguments in the four fields of politics, social reform, religious relations, and self-improvement and this he achieves with meticulous research and a flowing style of writing. He acknowledges that his biography is inextricably linked with the history of the Indian National Congress and its machinations, and Gandhi’s involvement with the INC pervades it.

This book is enormous. It consists of 1,140 pages spread over 40 chapters including a preface and an epilogue. The index is 96 pages long and there are 94 pages of detailed reference notes. It takes the reader in chronological order through Gandhi’s arrival in Bombay in January 1915 to his assassination in New Delhi in January 1948. Guha maintains his focus on his four key fields throughout his mammoth undertaking.

He identifies Gandhi’s four personal goals as: the deliverance of India from British rule; the forging of harmonious relations between India’s different communities; the ending of ‘untouchability’ in the Hindu faith; and the development of economic self-reliance for India and moral self-reliance for Indians. He addresses these themes with consistency and interprets Gandhi’s life and his responses to events with much insight and relevant criticism. He shows how his subject maintained his overall political direction while highlighting his ability to refine his actions through experience when faced with the exigencies of power and the adulation of millions. At times the book reads like a travelogue of the many towns and villages across India which Gandhi traversed and the speeches and letters he wrote associated with them. The reader can appreciate the weariness of his British Quaker companion as Gandhi’s energetic and never-ending travels

unfold.

There have been numerous biographies of Gandhi in recent years, such as those by Yogesh Chadha(2), Jad Adams(3), and Faisal Devji(4) but none are cited by Guha. All such previous publications, writes Guha, had relied heavily on the 97 volumes of Gandhi's *Collected Works* and numerous references reveal his familiarity with them. However, the author states that he wished to go beyond Gandhi's own writings to identify what his contemporaries had written about him and so he studied over 60 different archival collections. Where his work differs from other biographers is in his use of many of Gandhi's own letters and papers which have only recently been released. The origin of such newly-available primary resources requires explanation.

In about 1920 a Punjabi man, Pyarelal Nayar, joined Gandhi's community as the assistant to his chief secretary Mahadev Desai and, when the latter died in 1942, he took over the role himself. Pyarelal's sister, Dr Sushila Nayar, joined Gandhi's entourage in the 1930s. Guha comments on how possessive Pyarelal was of these papers and speculates that he had hoped to produce the definitive biography himself. After Pyarelal's death in 1982 his sister lodged the collection with the Nehru Memorial Museum and Library (NMML) in New Delhi but she reserved, and regularly exercised, the right in her lifetime to restrict their access by researchers. She, too, failed in her intention of competing her brother's task.

When Dr Nayar died in 2000, the NMML took on the laborious task of cataloguing the thousands of files which were now made available. The library released them in batches in 2007 and 2012 and Guha became one of the first academics to study them. He expresses the debt which scholars today owe to the foresight of the Nayars in preserving such valuable primary sources. No doubt speaking from his professional experience he also acknowledged, with mischievous insight, that 'Possessiveness is not an unusual trait among historians, and it is very nearly ubiquitous among biographers' (p. xix). Reader, do you recognise yourself in this confession?

Guha's premise is that Gandhi arrived from South Africa with a fully-formed social philosophy and a model political strategy which he intended to transplant to the wider theatre of colonial India. The deaths of the nationalist leaders Gokhali in 1915 and Tilak in 1920 left Gandhi as the undisputed leader of the militant wing of Congress. Guha chronicles how, after his return to India in 1915, Gandhi turned his successful city-based and elite-dominated campaigning against British rule into a mass movement involving millions across the country. The techniques he used to achieve this, the relationships he developed to promote it, and the personal self-examination he underwent form a major part of the author's narrative.

Because of the size of the work I have selected two topics for consideration as these give a flavour of the high quality of the author's research. The first concerns Gandhi's championing of *Harijans* and the second concerns Gandhi's personal torments in his attempt to transcend his sexuality.

Chapter 20 is entitled 'Arguments with Ambedkar,' though debates between the leader of the 'untouchables'—or, to give them their official title, the *Depressed Classes*—and Gandhi are covered throughout the book, notably in Chapters 32 and 34. Guha demonstrates clearly how Gandhi transformed his views of the Hindu caste system in the 1920s and 1930s. Thus, in 1920 Gandhi condemned untouchability but would not presume to impose on Hindus his own practice of the intermingling, intermarriage or inter-dining of castes (p. 485). By 1934 he had shifted his position, stating firmly that he believed that character was the only determining factor in a person's status, and not birth or religious observance. Gandhi became increasingly willing to challenge Hindu caste prejudices and proscriptions after his meetings with radical reformers. Guha observes how Gandhi's words, and attitudes, had changed because of his deep commitment to ending untouchability.

A comparison is made of the political similarities and differences of the two men and the breakdown in their relationship. Both campaigned for the equal entry to Hindu temples for all castes and to the opening of wells, schools, and roads for 'untouchables.' Ambedkar, however, is portrayed as the reformist who was prepared

to sit on the Viceroy's Council, believing this was a necessary tactic for the best interests of his own community while it was boycotted by other nationalist leaders (p. 665). In contrast, Gandhi was suspicious of state power and emphasised, writes Guha, 'moral transformation through individual and social-self correction' (p. 908). Guha views Ambedkar as an isolated figure with an intense dislike of Gandhi, resentful of the latter's high caste origins, and someone who later seemed to conveniently forget just what Gandhi had achieved for Ambedkar's community.

One of the successes of the book is the author's ability to portray the human side of Gandhi, detailing his strengths and weaknesses, his permanent self-reflection, his stubbornness and eccentricities, his friendships and humour. The description of his troubled relationship with his sons is particularly poignant. Guha records how Gandhi was often disappointed in them and wished to mould them in his own image, even when they had reached middle age (p. 499). Gandhi's personal characteristics are underpinned by references from research into primary resources. Guha maintains that an important factor in understanding Gandhi's life is to accept that for virtually all of his adulthood he had no private life. He was under permanent scrutiny from his associates and critics, from the thousands he encountered on his campaigns, and from international journalists. In addition, there were always the British imperial authorities in the background, monitoring his activities and ready to threaten him with—or to actually deliver—imprisonment if he was thought to be a danger to the Raj.

In chapter five Guha illustrates the development of a close friendship from 1920 between Gandhi and Saraladevi Chaudhurani, a niece of Tagore. Saraladevi was a highly educated writer and gifted singer who brought her talents to nationalist activism. Like Gandhi, she was also already married and Guha writes how the two became besotted with each other. Gandhi referred to her as his 'spiritual wife' and his 'intellectual wife' and he hinted to friends that he might take their relationship further. He was urged by one Congress leader, C. Rajagopalachari, to desist from such an open friendship, in order to avoid bringing shame and ruin on both himself and on the nationalist cause. The warning was heeded, and Gandhi reduced his contact with Chaudhurani, though he never forgot her; Guha points out some of Gandhi's veiled references to her in later life. Guha, however, does not suggest physical intimacy between the two, pointing out that Gandhi had chosen to be celibate about 15 years before their friendship began.

A further example of the challenge to Gandhi's moral status forms the subject matter of chapter 35, entitled *The Strangest Experiment*. His autobiography was called *The Story of My Experiments with Truth*⁽⁵⁾ and in this chapter Guha records and evaluates one of the most unusual of tests; one that is still highly controversial today. Guha argues that Gandhi believed the rise in religious violence in the final years before Independence was connected to his own failure to become a perfect *brahmachari*, a person totally celibate in mind and body. In order to test his commitment to *brahmachari*, and perhaps as a form of penance, he decided in 1946 to sleep chastely with his 19-year-old grandniece, Manu. He spoke with and wrote to many friends and correspondents, justifying the spiritual nature of his actions and seeking their mandate but the response was one of almost universal disapproval. Some warned of the political fallout should his critics, whether imperialist or nationalist, learn of his actions, or the world's press discover and sensationalise his conduct.

Guha argues that Gandhi was seen by his closest associates as a mother-father figure, someone who had transcended gender and left lust behind. He records Gandhi's view that the 'experiment' or *prayog* was in part a product of Manu's own need to be sexually pure. Guha discounts this in view of the asymmetry in age, Gandhi was by then aged 77, and power. He concludes that had his closest confidants—his wife Kasturba; his secretary Mohadev Desai; and Charlie Andrews, the English priest who worked with him for over 30 years—still been alive they would have advised him strongly against the unwise and unnecessary *prayog* and would have persuaded him against it. It was as if, remarks Guha, Gandhi was trying to 'tame the (stark, manifest) violence without by taming the (probably non-existent) passions within' (p. 825).

Guha assesses Gandhi's contribution to the emancipation of women in India. He stresses that, while Gandhi might appear conservative in terms of sexual politics today, he was progressive for his time; he cites his active encouragement of women in Congress campaigns and in politics in general, as well as his requirement

for gender and caste equality in his *ashram*. Guha attributes the rise of women to positions of distinction and influence in modern India, against an intensively patriarchal religious background, to be one of Gandhi's major, if less acknowledged, achievements.

One criticism of the book is that it includes no analysis by modern scholars of Gandhi's actions and politics. The origins for Gandhi's words and actions stem generally from contemporaneous primary sources, whether from India or the wider world. They come from visitors to Gandhi at his *ashrams*, from newspapers, from Government of India documents, and so on; personal opinions from a wide range of backgrounds. Perhaps Guha will inspire a new round of scholarship centred on the recently released archival material.

The epilogue to the book provides a fascinating summary of Indian views of Gandhi since his death in January 1948. Gandhi's politics were marked by an absence of dissemblance and a total lack of any reliance on 'spin' as opposed to spinning (Guha's pun not mine!) (p. 928). This honesty in Gandhi's writings and his regular and public self-criticism, maintains Guha, are in sharp contrast to the arrogance of today's politicians. Gandhi's candour leaves him open to criticism and fault-finding from both Right and Left in modern India.

Gandhi's commitment to the struggle for Indian independence is downplayed by the current leaders of the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). The BJP show respect for him in public but seek to lower his status while elevating that of their own heroes. The BJP, argues Guha, prefer a more muscular Hindu assertiveness rather than a quest for peace and accommodation with opponents through passive resistance and interfaith harmony.

The Left in India have also denigrated Gandhi. He has been dismissed by communists for using non-violence as a diversionary tactic, suppressing the revolutionary instincts of the masses and so keeping the ruling classes in power. Other socialists condemn him as a supporter of the caste system and an enemy of the untouchables, or Dalits as they are now known. Guha does not suppress his anger at this latter suggestion, which he regards as a blatant untruth, as he has tried to show in the biography.

The 2 October 2019 will mark 150 years since Gandhi's birth and this anniversary may inspire interest among a new generation with little knowledge of the man. Guha has produced a comprehensive overview of the second half of Gandhi's life which seems likely to become compulsory reading for anyone trying to understand the history of modern India and Gandhi's role in it.

Guha has mastered the organisation and delivery of huge amounts of information. Whilst far from being an uncritical *paean* of Gandhi's life Guha does not always hide his admiration for the man's achievements. Nevertheless, his biography seems likely to be regarded as a source book for future scholarly critique. In summary, Guha concludes that Gandhi achieved much in his lifetime, such as 'the ending of the British Empire [in India] and the delegitimizing of untouchability' (p. 929). He ends the book with a declaration that Gandhi's most remarkable attainment was probably 'the practice of, and the largely successful quest for, truth' (p. 929). It is a fitting way to finish an outstanding, readable and comprehensive biography.

Notes

1. Ramachandra Guha, *Gandhi before India* (London, 2013). [Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Yogesh Chadha, *Rediscovering Gandhi* (London, 1997). [Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Jad Adams, *Gandhi: Naked Ambition* (London, 2010). [Back to \(3\)](#)
4. Faisal Devji, *The Impossible Indian: Gandhi and the Temptation of Violence* (London, 2012). [Back to \(4\)](#)
5. Mohandas Gandhi, *An Autobiography or The Story of My Experiments with Truth* (London, 1927, republished 2007). [Back to \(5\)](#)

Other reviews:

The Guardian

<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2018/oct/04/gandhi-1914-1948-ramachandra-guha-review> [2]

Los Angeles Review of Books

<https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/my-life-is-my-message-ramachandra-guhas-gandhi-the-years-that-changed-the-world-1914-1948/> [3]

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[1] <https://reviews.history.ac.uk/item/300807>

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[3] <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/my-life-is-my-message-ramachandra-guhas-gandhi-the-years-that-changed-the-world-1914-1948/>