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Mahatma Gandhi: A Life So Keenly Observed¹

When one learns that Gandhi was the *fourth* and *last* child of his father's *fourth* and *last* marriage, one wonders if his birth—exactly 150 years ago in a coastal town in western India—was not ordained by a sacred celestial decree.

Few historic figures intrigue, fascinate and excite the intellect as Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi. While the world called him *mahatma* (great soul) and his fellow Indians *rashtrapita* (father of the nation), to the common man he was simply *babu* (father)—a diminutive, bare-bodied and saintly man in whose presence the subjugated and the colonized felt inspired to believe that the cloak of human indignity could be cast aside and humanity reclaimed.

So boundless and timeless is the relevance of Gandhi's lifework that in felicitating him in 1939 on his 70th birthday, Albert Einstein said, 'Generations to come ... will scarce believe that such a man as this one ever in flesh and blood walked upon this earth.'² And, so relevant is he for the youth of today that in 2009 when Lilly, a 9th grader at Wakefield High School in Arlington, Virginia, asked President Barack Obama, 'If he could have dinner with anyone, dead or alive, who would it be,' Obama, without

¹ Inspired by: A. Singhal, 'Mahatma Is the Message: Gandhi's Life as Consummate Communicator,' *International Journal of Communication and Social Research* 2, no. 1(2014): 1-16; A. Singhal, 'The Mahatma's Message: Gandhi's Contributions to the Art and Science of Communication,' *China Media Research* 6, no. 3 (2010): 103-106.

² See <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/131951-generations-to-come-will-scarce-believe-that-such-a-one>

hesitation, picked Gandhi, noting that he brought change ‘Not through violence, not through money, but through the force of his personality, and his ethical and moral stance.’³ Whether Einstein or Obama, or mere mortals like us or a 9th grader like Lilly, Gandhi inspires our spirit, churns our mind and rouses our humanity.

That is why 150 years after his birth and 71 years after his death, comes this finely edited and thoughtfully compiled anthology. In between its covers, through events and anecdotes, texts and utterances, thesis and antithesis, analysis and reflection, the editor—Professor Biswajit Das—and a diverse set of carefully chosen authors allow us to rediscover and reclaim the historic Gandhi for contemporary times. With a deft and critical eye, the authors offer a diverse set of interpretations of Gandhian thought and philosophy, bringing attention to his communicative practices—whether rhetorical, metaphoric or symbolic—as in the adoption of *charkha* (spinning wheel); his belief in the transformation of others through satyagraha (insistence on truth) and ahimsa (non-violence); his subjecting of all aspects of his life—private and public—to full and open scrutiny; and his embodiment of *aparigraha* (non-possession)—to manifest poverty, chastity and self-denial. So steeped was Gandhi in this ethos of *aparigraha* that when he was asked why he travelled in train in third class, he said, ‘Because there is no fourth class.’

For this and other reasons, Gandhi continues to fascinate. Eknath Easwaran tells the story of a woman who came to Gandhi’s Sevagram Ashram in Wardha and asked the Mahatma to persuade her little boy to stop eating too much sugar. ⁴ ‘Sister, come back after a week’, Gandhi said. Puzzled, the woman left and returned a week later. ‘Try to not eat too much sugar, it is

³ See <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/world/us/Obama-says-he-would-like-to-have-dinner-with-Mahatma-Gandhi/articleshow/4988799.cms>

⁴ E. Easwaran, *Gandhi the Man: The Story of His Transformation* (Tomales, CA: Nilgiri Press, 1997).

not good for you', Gandhi told the little boy. The boy's mother asked: 'Bapu, why didn't you say this to him last week?' Gandhi responded: 'Sister, last week, I too was eating sugar. First, I had to try to see if it was possible.'

In the ultimate analysis, such 'small' communicative actions are Gandhi's intellectual gift to us. That is why the editor and authors have assembled this anthology. Their prose is rich and their analysis rigorous as they revisit Gandhi's journeys in colonial England, in fragmented South Africa, and in a colonized and, finally, an independent India. They look backward and forward while honouring the present.

I invite you to read this book. In so doing, you will understand the debt we owe to a life so keenly observed.

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