

RICHARD ATTENBOROUGH'S 'GANDHI': AN ESSAY IN UNDERSTANDING

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Sir Richard Attenborough's film *Gandhi* has elicited various reactions. Some have admired the 'pathos and poignancy of its sensitive portrayal of Gandhi's basic philosophy of life', and its ability to bring out his relevance to our times. Attenborough, they add, 'has made Gandhi dynamic'¹. Others have complained that some major personalities of the Indian struggle for Independence appear but puny men in the film². Most of the critics however agree that it is a great film. I seek in this essay to merely unfold the fabric of this film as an art-work; and, in passing, to throw some light on such reactions.

I may begin by stating what I regard as necessary equipment for a task of this kind. One needs a fair knowledge of the following: the ancient Indian view of the good life; classical (North) Indian music³; the basic faiths of Gandhi; and his social and individual objectives. It would be of help if I quickly explain the last two of these.

There are quite a few faiths that determine Gandhi's life. The most important of these is his faith in God and prayer⁴; and in *ahimsa* as the best way to oppose evil and to realize God or (the ultimate) Truth. But he is also convinced of the superiority of ideals over merely individual life; equality of religions in respect of their life-giving value; and the intrinsic dignity of every human individual and of all (permissible) work. Besides, like all orthodox Hindus he regards vows (or *yanas* or *niyamas*)⁵ as essential to goodness of being and behaviour, and accepts the theory of *karma* if only in so

far as it posits an inexorable link between the quality of an act and its consequences. As for the goals he seeks to realize, those that relate to society are: Hindu-Muslim unity; removal of both untouchability and oppression of women; and of course the political independence of India. Gandhi's personal objectives are not all well known. Some of them crystallize in his closing years. He now longs to fill himself evermore with faith; and - as attestation of his faith in both God and *non-violence* - to meet, if necessary, the assassin's bullet with nothing but love in his heart and God's name on his lips⁶.

Almost all these shapers of Gandhi's life are in my view projected in the film⁷, sometimes as mere hints, yet always intelligibly. But the viewer has to know not merely what Gandhi's faiths are, but how he *interprets* them. Consider an instance. In the scene which shows Kasturba in deathbed Gandhi says: 'It is my time for a walk, but I will soon return'. Why is this utterance permitted? After all, Gandhi does not really leave for a walk; and what impresses the average beholder here is his appearing visibly moved, and shedding a tear in spite of his customary poise. What is then, I therefore repeat, the value of the words? Are they only the index of a habit? No; they are not so for those who are aware of the subtler details of Gandhi's thought. To them, the utterance is a sign of his living faith in God; and this because of his following way of thinking:

"He alone can claim to have faith ... who in life ceaselessly endeavours to observe the law of God. For, ... He and His law are one"⁹

God (Himself) is continuously in action¹⁰. I claim to have faith in God ... (and so) I keep my routine with clock-like regularity.¹¹"

At many a place indeed the film articulates by *distilling* what it is about. This is here unavoidable. Where only a small part of historical reality can be incorporated in a work, every detail picked must be somehow made multiple in meaning. Such is, I believe, the moment when (in the film) Gandhi suddenly leaves off serious parley with his colleagues to treat a limping goat with a mud-pack. It signifies on the one hand his faith in nature-cure to which there is no other reference in the film; and, on the other, his well-known view that, in so far as a good way to worship God is to serve His creatures, every act which gives relief to any one of them is of positive value. The second of these may seem odd to many. But it explains an impressive aspect of Gandhi's personality. He could lavish attention on, and imbue with significance what seems trivial to the average man. This must be foreknown to us. Otherwise, the scene where Gandhi initiates Margaret¹² in the art spinning would appear, *because of its manifest leisureliness*,

discordant with the situation; for Gandhi is here confessedly oppressed with the very serious matter of the Muslims' growing fear of Hindu domination after Independence, a factor which Jinnah turned into an argument for partition, and which therefore shattered Gandhi's dream of freedom for an *undivided* India. Attenborough seems anxious to ensure that we mark Gandhi's fairness for all necessary activity; and so during his very last meal before assassination we find Gandhi making two such remarks, both with *visible* relish,¹³ as appear disconnected and unequal in value: the one proclaiming his heroic resolve to go to Pakistan to assuage communal passion, and to show that 'Satan resides only in the hearts of men'; and the other drawing notice to the right way of eating a radish. In another context Gandhi declares his intention, with perfect non-chalance, to dwell in the same speech on both the evils of war and the place of goat's milk in human diet. Such a sequence of what appears trite and the clearly momentous is likely to bewilder us unless we remember that, for Gandhi, alertness in respect of every due concern is a mark of the man of faith¹⁴.

If what the film builds upon is thus an abstraction from a very rich fabric of faith, incident and action¹⁵, it must surely have been difficult to make the projection seem self-complete. How does the film manage to secure this requisith suggestion? I believe, by the use of a device which is perhaps quite rare in the region of films, but is commonly employed in our classical *sangeet*¹⁶. Attenborough makes the work emanate from and upgather itself in a focus. This is how I interpret the feature that the film both begins from and ends with the assassination scene. Is such a practice outlandish for art? I must answer in the negative. A clear source of self-completeness in north Indian music is the cyclic quality of its rhythm. The music freely begins from and flows back to the first beat which thereby appears as a focus. And a presentation of the *Bharata Natyam* style of dance commonly begins with the number called *alarippu* which is both begun and rounded by an identical disposition of the two hands (over the hand) known as *anjali hastakam*.¹⁷

I refuse to accept the suggestion (made by some critics) that the film's *similar* termini signify predestination. I am aware of the view, fairly common in India, that the whole course of a man's life may be regarded as but the unfoldment of a prefixed plan. But this is surely not the net import of the film under review. Its dominant look is one of resolute, ceaseless action¹⁸. It is not without purpose that the work is made to open and end with the sight of a movement: that of *gathering* for prayer in the one case and of flowers still *afloat* in the other. But in this context I attach greater value to some other

features. The opening assassination scene, for instance, is followed directly - and with an apt little suddenness - by a firm, if fleeting projection of many feet marching solidly as one before the whole funeral procession is shown at a distance. I see in this detail the hint of an attitude that distinguished the real Gandhi in crises: resorting to action with a will instead of mere sorrowing¹⁹. Further, in the second close projection of the funeral march, only one or two feeble wails ruffle the ear.

Throughout the film indeed action seems to overrun - and, I may add, to outpassion - spells of quiet thinking, leisurely reminiscence or immediate discomfiture. Thus, as we see him lit up by some happy, unhurrying recollections²⁰ on the seaside in Porbandar, Gandhi suddenly arises with a visible jerk, sets out so nimbly towards his ashram²¹, and voices an intent of such resoluteness²² that the suggestion of leisurely recall is forthwith cancelled. Gandhi's silences, be it noted, are no mere pauses between sounds, as in music²³; they either teem with self-searching, or they release an impulse to heroic action. In the case I just referred to, what issues is the resolve to undertake the famous Dandi March. But, be it noted, even in the interval that here separates resolution from action - I mean where he is shown as resting, with Ba²⁴ massaging his head - Gandhi does not appear to be at rest. He quickly 'appoints' successive commanders of the historic march; speaks with assurance of his ability to walk for full five hundred miles; and voices his faith in the success of the venture by repeating: 'Time will tell'.

The resolution is surely not ordinary. A little later I shall try to show that its emergence is not quite explainable in human terms alone. But at the same time, with a view to keeping Gandhi appear human all along, Attenborough is rightly careful to make the seaside reminiscence follow a quite natural linkage of ideas: the sea with its openness - the city itself, quite as open, to men of various faiths who freely inhabit it - the open-minded priest whom Gandhi knew as a child, and who would recite, with equal regard, from scriptures of different religions - and, sea-brine-salt law (to be broken). In fine, a passage of easy recall delivers a grantte resolve.

Turn now to a shot shows Gandhi moveless, listening intently to a harrowing account of the riots searing Calcutta as a result of partition. Here too, as the next step dawns on his inner eye, he suddenly arises - but sans nimbleness now, because he is ageing, and appears a little bent as he makes for the door. Intrepid in Calcutta, he begins a heroic fast. The end is Herculean, but is at last realized: the rioting ends²⁵.

But, be it marked, the two situations I have cited are also the Index of a feature of Gandhi's faith. To him God is always 'a very present help

in trouble'. This is hinted adroitly in the film, by opposing Gandhi's manner to that of Charlie (Andrews). The latter speaks of God but twice²⁶ in the whole film; and in either case he appears to think of God as merely transcendent. In the first situation, where they both manage to pass by three threatening lads (on the pavement) unharmed, Charlie thanks his stars, and Gandhi is made to appear a little surprised, saying that he had so far regarded Charlie as a believer (in God as a presence). Gandhi's own emphasis is on God as an indwelling Spirit on which he feels 'stayed'²⁷, and which is at once an impulse to moral endeavour and a norm of its excellence. It is faith as continual awareness of God *so regarded* that imbues his silences and even retrospective talk with a power to energize action. The following from his writings may here be cited:

' "Faith is nothing but a living wide-awake consciousness of God within²⁸. There is not a moment when I do not feel the presence of a witness whose eye misses nothing and with whom I strive to keep in tune.' "²⁹

But even if it be admitted that the film rightly projects Gandhi as (in the man) a man of action, a question remains. How is the assassination scene (as I have said) focal in value? As follows, I may argue:

The kind of death Gandhi actually meets is in truth the attainment of his *personal* destiny. A day before his death, we are told, he (yet again) longs 'to demonstrate by one perfect act the faith that filled him and which he had struggled through his life to express'³⁰. His own words here are:

"Note that if someone were to end my life by putting a bullet through me... and I met his bullet without a groan, and breathed my last taking God's name, then alone would I have made good my claim (to be a man of God)³¹."

The mainspring of Gandhi's dynamic life is his well-known dual faith — in God (or Truth) and *ahimsa* as loving but resolute opposition to evil; and this faith is clearly aglow in the manner of his death. If it is so taken in respect of its significance, the death scene would appear as a focus of the film as well. For what follows the opening scene — say, depiction of Gandhi's struggles in South Africa and of his trials in India, be they in courts of law or in the thick of public life — all teems with a display of the same resoluteness. And this is clearly also the effect of such dramatic situations in the film as the Gandhi March and the Calcutta fast. Indeed, if the opening projection of 'the end' and the film's evolution towards it be taken as one, the whole work would seem the story of a life that is self-fulfilling, *though not self-enclosed*.

I add the qualifier because of what I *see* in the film as it ultimately ends: the flowers that *keep afloat* when events and persons have all disappeared. Gandhi's disembodied words that here meet the ear reinforce the suggestion. The only utterance that occurs twice in the film³², they deepen the visual meaning, they firmly, if softly, declare that Truth and justice outlive tyranny. At this point, however, one may sense a discordance. Does not Gandhi himself disappear from the scene? How exactly then does truth abide? The answer may be had, I suggest, by recalling a detail of the opening: I mean, what the three commentators say about Gandhi as the funeral procession moves on. 'Here was a man who, without any specialized training in art or science, put tyranny to rout by force of mere humility and truth'. On the other hand, the finale and the way it is attained conjoin to bear out the opening tributes. If therefore the film's termini are taken along with the content they bracket, of effort and attainment, Gandhi would appear to pass away not without leaving a rack behind, but as blazing a trail of glory. In attaining to its close the film not only appears self-completing, but releases value for contemplation; and the viewer is not merely deeply moved, but feels edified.

Another question may now be taken up. How is the film made to seem undivided on the inside? I can here point to many details. There is first (I repeat) a single thread running through the whole film: the attitude of resolute but non-violent opposition to evil. Further, if a dialogue makes a point or projects a principle, accordant action also follows. The film is replete with instances of such balance. But here of course Attenborough is helped by the subject's own quality. Parity of practice and principle was a key feature of Gandhi's life. Besides, use is made at times of contrast and similarity so that sequences bring about a mutual heightening of effect. Thus, when the scene opens up for Gandhi's entry into the state of Porbandar after he has shown (as a votary of Truth) singular *steadfastness* in a legal trial, what meets the viewer's eye is not only the landscape, but a *boulder*³³ so jutting and close to vision that one does not miss it. Again, where the Dandi March is shown, Gandhi's frequent — and, at places, a little protrusive — *nama'skaras* (salutations with conjoint palms) along with his nimble pressing forward on the one hand, and the concave convergence of two rows of marchers from opposite sides on the other, unite to project the powerful sight of a popular, though peaceful uprising for a common goal.

As an instance of the use of contrast, I attach very great value to Attenborough's placement of the scene where General O'Dyer is tried for the Jallianwalah Bagh massacre. The bloodshed and the trial are in one way alike:

I mean their *calculated* quality which many little details, of words³⁴ and behaviour, clearly project. But, the *poise and the slow*, incisive accents in which the jury phrases its questions heighten by contrast the *tumult* of the preceding scene — the wanton killing; and the *threadbare* quality of judicial enquiry puts in relief the *intense* pensiveness, the blow-up of a mood, which follows in the figure of Gandhi, as it fills a very large part of the screen, and which the *Sarangi* music — a passage in *raga gurjari tidi* — makes beautifully manifest³⁵.

Take, again, the two visuals that bring out the immediate joy *and agony* of the way Independence dawns (as attenuated). In callous disregard of Gandhi's clear stand, partition is accepted; and the rival camps cheer as the flags are unfurled, of a newly born Pakistan and a sovereign India. As the cheering dies down we see an adroit use of the film-maker's distinctive ability to make an object *appear completing itself before the eye*. A pole erect but bare, unlike the flagstaves of the two new nations, slowly ekes itself towards the ground, revealing Gandhi in poor light literally³⁶, and as poring over the *charkha* (or the spinning wheel) which now hums to him, we may say, 'the still sad music of humanity'. There is no sound here, of music or spoken word. Yet the pathos is writ large, though it is made to issue very gently by means of the touching suggestion that the daughter by commitment — Mira Behn, here with her back towards Gandhi — cannot bear to look at her crestfallen Bapu³⁷! It is a consummate speaking through silence; and in my view the most moving scene. But its impact, I repeat, will be feeble on one who is not aware of Gandhi's following confession:

"My life's seems to be over ... I hope God will spare me further humiliation.... Today I find myself all alone... (The others all believe) that peace is sure to return if partition is agreed upon.... But I can clearly see that the future of independence gained at this price is going to be dark."³⁸

And if it is taken by itself — or as wholly apart from its context in the film and real life — the scene in question would seem what it literally is: quite without colour.

On the other hand, there are quite a few shots which, in respect of their ability to move us³⁹, are relatively independent of their context. Such a one, for instance, is the Ba death scene. And when I say so I have in mind not the detail which bespeaks Attenborouge's amazing eye for truth — that is, the *one* whole tear that comes to nestle in Gandhi's eye — but the quiet build-up of heartfelt pain as it wells up to, and for a moment dishevels and overruns a visage that is generally serene.

In most other cases, however, we must consider the context to see what a projected incident means. Or the detail may seem merely amusing, if not

quite unnecessary. I have here in mind Charlie's ascent to the roof of the moving train. His being pulled out in two opposite ways — by men sitting atop who are quick to befriend him, and by Kasturba (in the train) who does not want him to incur the risk — seems a little overdrawn and at best amusing. But the moment we take into account all that goes along with it the doubt disappears. It is now seen as an index, on the one hand, of Kasturba's motherly concern for Charlie, and, on the other, of the fact that the average Indian of those days certainly did not hate Englishmen as such. The latter suggestion is itself needful to see the true character of what follows⁴⁰: the sight of many corpses of Indians (on the railway track) killed as a reprisal for the derailment of an arms train by revolutionaries. The overall meaning is that unprovoked violence is not (yet) the creed of the average Indian. Above all, if taken with Gandhi's remark that there is anyway no room in the compartment, and also with the sight of many travelling on the top, the visual reinforces what the prior cloth-wafting scene⁴¹ expresses so poignantly: the idea that Gandhi's self-identification with the masses in their plight has begun.

A yet more embracing look is required to see how the characters *grow* in the film. From a hubby who has to coerce his own wife into discipline Gandhi soon matures into a father-figure for many, for the inmates of his *ashram* in particular, so that even the daughter by commitment (Mira Behn) quietly obeys his forthright orders⁴²; and lastly, he mellows (in his fasts) into a symbol of self-effacing love. Correspondingly, he rises also in the eyes of his opponents. During his first imprisonment an officer calls for Gandhi 'the goat'; later, he is 'Gandhi, Sir' for those who come to arrest him; again, when he is tried for inciting people to rise against authority once the whole court, following the chief judge, arises in respect as he enters; and ultimately, by virtue of his surpassing goodness culminating in martyrdom, he wins the superlative eulogy of Einstein.

I wonder if the other arts permit such an easy-to-follow *growth* of character, as against consistency of its portrayal. Attenborough makes the most of this power of his medium. It is *not* true of the way Patel is projected in the film. But Ba' to be sure, matures noticeably; and Nehru's meteoric moods could not have occurred earlier than where they do in the film. And if the work's focus is professedly on Gandhi, is it fair to expect that just because his colleagues seem great *to us* they should so appear also in relation *to him*?

Notes and References

1. 'Arun Gandhi on Attenborough's *Gandhi*' in *Imprint* (Bombay), December' 82, 7.
2. Abu Abraham in his essay: 'Unsupporting Cast' in *The Hindustan Times* (New Delhi) of Feb. 20, '83.
3. The music is by Pandit Ravi Shankar; and one feels impelled to refer to the very effective employment of what seemed to be snatches of *ragas* (melody-types) like *jog*, *gurjari* *todi* and *tilak kamod*.
4. Though mammoth gatherings at Gandhi's prayers are nowhere shown, there are at least three references in the film to prayer and his faith in it: his 'invitation' to pray for all those who are killed for (and in) derailing an arms train; his utterance, during the fast unto death, that he will regard his prayer as answered only when rioting totally ends; and the assassination scene which (twice) shows Gandhi breathing his last with the name of the Lord (Rama) upon his lips.
5. The five *yamas* are: truth, non-violence, non-stealing, non-acquisitiveness and celibacy; and *niyamas* are: purity, contentment, self-study, fortitude and surrender to God.
6. Pyarelal: *The Last Phase*, Navajivan Publishing House, Ahmedabad, 1958. p. 766.
7. Gandhi's penchant for vows is manifest where he rehearses his marriage with Kasturba; and the value of ideals as against merely individual life is openly affirmed by Gandhi during his Calcutta fast.
8. The *singleness* of the tear is here an index of Attenborough's consummate concern for truth. I can clearly recall that when Kasturba actually died the caption of the news item (with a Photo) in a leading daily was: "Even the great shed a tear".
9. *The Last Phase*, 242.
10. *In Search of the Supreme*, By M,K Gandhi, Compiled and edited by V.B. Kher, Navajivan Publishing House, Ahmedabad, 1961, Vol.11, 127.
11. *The Last Phase*, 242-43.
12. Margaret Bourke-White of *Life* magazine. Here, I may add, Attenborough also projects Gandhi's emphasis on constructive programme and village handicrafts.
13. Visible, yet unequal.
14. Thus see: "The mark of a man of faith is that, he is always awake and alert in every little thing." *The Last Phase*, 242.
15. This the film clearly is, on the maker's own admission. It opens with a screen projection of the notice that it is but a modest attempt to gain some insight into Gandhi's mind and soul, and into 'the essence of his Life-current'. So it is unfair to criticize the work because of its

- inadequacy to the wholeness of what it is about.
16. *Sangeet* is the Indian word for vocal-instrumental music and dance.
 17. *Bharata Natyam* is the well-known classical dance of South India. For knowledge of the detail I here speak of I am indebted to Smt. Tara Balagopal, researching with me.
 18. Which is only proper, for Gandhi's philosophy 'was essentially a philosophy in action'. Pyarelal: *The Last Phase*, Preface, V.
 19. Thus, even when, quite against his explicit wishes, partition of the country was about to be accepted. Gandhi "was not the one to waste a single word in futile sorrow. Resistent, wondrously more now than ever, he began teaching the people to start thinking in terms of their future and particularly their own immediate duty." *The Last Phase*, 215
 20. Gandhi is here talking to Hugh Walker. Such talk by Gandhi, we may note, does nothing to bedim his awareness of God as the indwelling spirit (*antaryamin*).
 21. An *ashram* is a place of rest cum moral and spiritual training, *The Last Phase*, 215.
 22. The utterance here is: "I shall first go to the *ashram* and then give a proof of the fact that the British government is not going to last."
 23. It is true that the pauses here make for the build-up of effect, and enable the listener to, so to say, get into the music; but they are not in themselves the locus of any activity.
 24. Or Kasturba, Gandhi's wife.
 25. When this happens, and before Gandhi ends the (sucessfull) fast, a serene sunrise is made to herald the ultimate victory of peaceful endeavour. I owe this notice to Mr. Shailendra Singh, the well-knowa playback singer.
 26. In the one case Charlie's remark is: 'Why should I disturb the peace of the One up there for my sake'; and in the other, where Kasturba wonders what he has in mind as he struggles to climb to the top of the train, he says: 'I am going closer to God'.
 27. *In Search of the Supreme*, Vol.1., 213
 28. *The Mind of Mahatma Gandhi*, compiled and edited by R.K. Prabhu and U.R Rao. Navajivan Publishing House, Ahemdabad, 1967, 63.
 29. *Prayer*, Edited and compiled by C. Kaji Navajivan, 1977. 35.
 30. *The Last Phase*, 765-66.
 31. *Ibid*, 766.
 32. Once during the fast unto death; and next towards the end, as accompaniment to the carriage of ashes.
 33. Towards the left upper corner of the screen.
 34. In the massacre scene, I recall, O'Dyer expressly commands: 'Shoot accurately'; and the shooters themselves lose no time in directing fire suitably when some men seek to escape by climbing the wall on the

- onlooker's left.
35. Another effective employment of *sarangi* music occurs where mass migration is seen to follow the country's partition. *Sarangi* is a musical instrument which Indians regard as eminently capable of reproducing the subtleties of classical vocal music.
 36. I wonder if the same purpose, of heightening Gandhi's isolation, is served if we couple in imagination the only two scenes projecting a downpour: the one following Gandhi's release without bail in Champaran where a huge crowd ovates him; and the other appearing after the abortive Round Table Conference appears quite lone with but two escorts all huddled under an umbrella.
 37. 'Bapu' is a simple Hindi word of reverence for 'father'.
 38. *The Last Phase*, 210-11.
 39. If not in that of being quite intelligible.
 40. Though not immediately, a brief glimpse of Jinnah-Nehru-Patel preceding the gory sight I here speak of.
 41. The reference is to Gandhi's letting his shawl float towards a lady who is very poorly dressed. This is the only occasion in the entire film where Gandhi helps someone with a *thing*. Henceforward, because he reduces his own possessions to a minimum, he can serve others only by *self-giving*, or by trying to get their grievances redressed with utmost devotion.
 42. I have here in mind Gandhi's following order to Mira Behn, when she wishes to participate in a movement: 'You first spin: let others join the *morcha*'.

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