



# Frontline

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## Gandhi's legacy

**For fifty years we have enshrined him. We must now enfranchise him again.**

**GOPALKRISHNA GANDHI**

IS there such a thing as Gandhi's legacy?

There is, well, the name; a legacy for some. Legacy of a kind.

His natural heirs have come into it through the accident of birth. They have had an immeasurable advantage, as a result. For the name works. Let those who say Gandhi is irrelevant ask the heirs. But they, the descendants, would be foolish (apart from being insufferable) if they wore the name like a glowing badge on shirtfronts or shawls. Much better for it to be a tailor's label on the inside; a point of curiosity, not proclamation. For if the name can work, it can also mock, depending on what the wearer is doing.

In the curse and kick of our times, the badge can turn into a bandage. Over a concussion that hurts. (I have heard it said in deliberate earshot: *voh* Father-of-Nation *hain*, *sirf inkey nahin*.)

Paths open, potholes close to let people bearing that name pass. I can never forget the Customs official who, seeing my passport, asked "Gopalkrishna *Gandhi*?" and waved me through, the perfectly legitimate single carton of cigarettes turning inside my box to ashes. Nor can I feel I deserved the honour of detraining at Pietermaritzburg railway station, earlier this year, to a welcome from the Mayor of the city with the words: "This, Mr. High Commissioner, is an act of atonement for what was done to your grandfather here, on this very platform, in 1893." I shivered no less, in my *bandgala* affair, than the tossed-out barrister that winter night 103 years ago.

The opposite happens as well. I was on the dais, as an IAS probationer, at a family planning meeting nearly three decades ago. The main speaker, a Minister, told his audience, made up wholly of men: "The sex urge is natural, it is nothing to be ashamed of. You have only to learn to manage it to your advantage." And then, suddenly, wagging his finger at me, he declaimed: "This young man here is as much the child and the grandchild of the sex urge as you and I are. His grandfather took to *brahmacharya* only after siring four sons." Not one person in the audience laughed or even sniggered. But I was aware of 500 pairs of eyes turning to see my reaction. Which was to look stonily at the Minister's averted face. I wished I hadn't been on that dais.

And I am glad I was not present at last year's Aurangabad meeting where, wanting to

diminish the Mahatma, things were said that insulted Manu and Abha, his grandniece and grandniece-in-law; of sainted memories both.

Every advantage carries an equal and opposite disadvantage.

The legacy of the name has had an interesting career. A restaurant-owner in London calls his enterprise 'Gandhi Steak House'. Gandhi sells, he has figured, as does steak. The two together will work like magic. He is greedy for profits. But he is frank. Honest, almost, in the pursuit of higher sales. And perhaps - who knows? - his own family name is Gandhi. In which case, he is using it with exactly the same right as McDonalds does. But the name, the steak-maker must admit, has come in handy.

Handy. Many in the West, and in South Africa, mispronounce the name to rhyme with that noun. His name has been that. Handy, convenient, useful. To those who have come into it by natural descent and also to those by the accident of matrimony and matching names. The gutsy and self-respecting Feroze Gandhi ("no kin of the Mahatma", as the Western media used to describe him) would never have known what his accident-of-name was going to do accidentally to the course of Indian politics.

BY SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT



**"If we are true to him, we will be true to ourselves": a photograph of Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, with an inscription by his friend and colleague Hermann Kallenbach, Johannesburg, 1909.**

THE name apart, there is the aura. A legacy as real as it is insubstantial.

I have never been disturbed by the appropriation of the Gandhi aura, by shopkeeping or small manufacturing establishments. Similar use has been made of Nehru and, more extensively, of Subhas Bose. There is something about the Gandhi legacy that makes it almost obligatory for our films to have a Gandhi lithograph in every 'court scene'. The benign and bespectacled image, right above His Lordship, serves to heighten the credibility of the judiciary. But more often, to heighten the irony of legal miscarriages. He appears in those frames hurt but helpless, mortified but mute; powerless in his benevolence as villainy carries the day. But there is an innocence in these 'misusings' that exculpates the commerce. And little, if any, of ulterior motivation.

Where I find invocation of the Gandhi aura unacceptable is in the *political studios* of our time. Where money fills the cushion of incumbency, or lines the pullable rug of betrayal. Where the players have deceit on their minds, flattery or abuse on their tongues. Where they have turned Gandhi into a mascot. And where they have done something worse than kill him: make the most vital, transformative, disturbing, challenging, redemptive man of our times seem to be the one thing he was not, a bore.

British India locked him up in jails; we have jailed him in museums. They placed him behind bars; we have put him on pedestals. We too have immobilised him. Put him out of the reach of people, for statues are meant to be looked up to, not rubbed shoulders with. Not to have eye contact with.

For the last 50 years we have enshrined him. We must now enfranchise him again. Free him so that he can return, in his rhythmic restless steps, to where he is needed. Return in his ideas, techniques which we badly need. Eye contact, I said. See his South African photographs; see even the later ones where he is looking at you. God, his eyes have

power in them! The power to trouble thought, consciences. Which is why so many of us, particularly in government offices, prefer the meditative Mahatma, eyes closed in contemplation. The Mahatma who does not disturb. We do not like the inconvenient Gandhi, the one who raises questions, very inconvenient questions, about ends and means. About veracity. The legacy we rather did not have is the legacy we need. The legacy of the inconvenient Gandhi. The one who assembles facts, lawyer-like, and who questions the accused in us. The accused, plaintiff, witness, judge and jury in us. We need that Gandhi legacy, not the encased, showcased, marigold-loaded Mahatma.

BY SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

**The author as a four-year-old plays in the sand while ashes are gathered at the Mahatma's funeral pyre.**

HOW is that Gandhi, that Gandhi legacy, to be regenerated? Not by holding drowsy seminars on 'Gandhi's relevance', certainly not by re-enactments of his marches that turn into picnics. Rather by spotting injustice and iniquity and tackling them through means available to us, *but without personal agendas*.

Gandhi's legacy needs to be retrieved from that political studio and returned to the people. Returned to his great electrifying link among the people where his legacy can and does work - namelessly. By setting up or supporting others' initiatives similarly engaged. And there are ever so many initiatives in India, so many causes where his legacy is alive. Where it works.



As where Sushila Nayar, in her great age, takes a band of satyagrahis to Ayodhya and they are "allowed" to sing *Raghupati Raghava* by the *kar sevaks* until the lines "*Isvara Allah Tere Naam*" are reached; then the blows begin to rain. As where Anand Patwardhan makes the brave film *Ram Ke Naam*. And where films like *Kaise Jeebo Re?* are made telling us about tribal people flooded out of home and hearth by the Narmada project. Where Baba Amte and Medha Patkar agitate for these oustees, where Aruna Roy demands to know how government moneys are being spent, where Sunderlal Bahuguna and Chandi Prasad Bhatt show what trees and mountains mean, where Subhashini Ali pickets the Miss World contest in Bangalore, where women in Andhra organise against liquor-shops, where processions are taken out on the subject of child abuse, where Sheela Barse rescues the girl-child from her captors, where Swami Agnivesh campaigns for *bandhua-mukti*, where P. Sainath can raise a fist on behalf of rural poverty, where Anna Hazare fasts to make the corrupt resign their high offices, where the District Collector of Surat rids that city of its dirt. And where India and Bangladesh agree to sharing the Ganga waters equitably.

I am not suggesting that India erupt in agitation; far from it. Only, that Indians become less smug, less self-absorbed. If we lack the time to think of causes beyond ourselves it is because our time is misapplied, not because it is short. Gandhi was never short of time. Either to write, or to wrestle.

He wrote on May 12, 1920 in *Young India* something that needs to be better known: "...if I seem to take part in politics, it is only because politics encircles us today like the coil of a snake from which one cannot get out, no matter how much one tries. I wish, therefore, to wrestle with the snake as I have been doing..."

*There* he is not boring. He is crucial. *There* he is not a mascot, not a logo. *There* he is a

legacy.

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