

# Gandhi in the Company of Western Philosophers

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The main task that Shaj Mohan and Divya Dwivedi set for themselves in writing this book was to outline a system for gathering together both “Gandhi’s writings and practices” and presenting them within a “corpus” in which his “precise conception of nature, truth, violence, resistance and the end is classified” (p 1). These multiple tasks are undertaken against the background of Gandhi’s alleged opposition to philosophy, which the authors claim, he considered “satanic.” Notwithstanding this view, they do point out that philosophers, including Martin Buber, Maurice Blanchot, Hannah Arendt, Etienne Balibar and Slavoj Zizek “found it necessary to engage with him” (p 10).

Having juxtaposed this peculiar relation between Gandhi and the philosophers they turn towards another concept, namely “hypophysical.” They find this term within a parenthesis in a passage from Immanuel Kant’s *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*. They make an adventurous move to elevate it to the level of one of central ideas in Gandhian thought. Making an exact connection between Immanuel Kant and Gandhi, they go on to affirm that this Kantian concept “finds a highly developed articulation in Gandhi’s theory of nature where nature is value, the moral is the natural” (p 2). Gandhi, they claim, held that anything that conforms to nature is a virtue and that which does not is a deviation from “nature’s moral course.” These deviations consist of “the syndrome of civilisation, the perils of speed, and the desire for progenies” (p 1). It is this idea of nature as a value, as hypophysics, they claim, can explain a long list of Gandhi’s activities, many of them controversial and some experimental, including: his “sexual experiments; his resistance to democracy and women’s liberation movements; his racism towards the Africans and the untouchables

**Gandhi and Philosophy: On Theological Anti-Politics** by Shaj Mohan and Divya Dwivedi, *Foreword by Jean-Luc Nancy, New Delhi: Bloomsbury, 2019; pp i-x, 1-272, ₹9,341 (hardcover).*

of the subcontinent; his startling political positions with respect to great events of the early 20th century such as Nazi Camps and the atomic bomb”; and his experimental attempts to “determine Truth” (p 2). So, in their reading this concept of the “hypophysical” holds a central position for understanding the “systematic unity and uniqueness of his thought.”

To bridge the huge chasm between “hypophysics” as a term in parenthesis and its transformation into a central concept, the authors undertake, in Chapter 1, titled, “Hypophysics,” to build a larger scaffold around the term. In this context they take support from a long list of philosophers from the West, including Edward Tiryakian, Hippocrates, Plato, Rene Guenon, Stoa, Aristotle, Anaxagoras, Xenophanes, Marcus Aurelius, the Stoics, Diogenes Laertius, Hume, James Lovelock, Fritjof Capra and Rupert Sheldrake (pp 17–18). They go on to claim that “Gandhian hypophysics, however, obtains a precision which distinguishes it from both the precursors and successors, including some inheritors, of the synonymisation of nature and value” (p 18). Having made this claim regarding the precision, the authors do not actually state who these precursors, successors and inheritors are. More importantly, they do not state what is the distinctive nature of Gandhian hypophysics that distinguishes it from them.

The other theme that this chapter discusses is how to read Gandhi. After referring briefly to writers like Partha Chatterjee and Akeel Bilgrami on Gandhi, the authors land the discussion in front of John Alter who, they claim,

brought “in an explicit manner, the union of nature and value in Gandhi’s political theory, nature cure, sexual experimentation, and hypophysics” (p 20). The discussion continues by the authors recalling another long list of philosophers from the West, including Spinoza, Wittgenstein, Luc Nancy, and Stuart Kauffman (pp 23–26).

This method of entangling Gandhi with Western philosophy forms the common link across the chapters of this book. This approach becomes obvious when the authors, while discussing Gandhi’s attempt at associating the earthquake in Bihar with the practice of untouchability, do not refer to or discuss Ramchandra Gandhi’s important and focused paper on this same theme (“Earthquake in Bihar: The Transfiguration of Karma,” *Indian Philosophical Quarterly*, 1983, pp 125–51). Other papers by K J Shah and Amita Chatterjee that subsequently engaged with Gandhi and Rabindranath Tagore on this theme too elude the attention of the authors.

## Discussion on Speed

The next chapter discusses yet another important philosophical theme, namely speed. Measured by time and an important aspect in history, speed is the pulse of the universe. Moving, yet not moving away to the extent of derailment, is the characteristic feature of the universe. This moving yet not moving away and retaining equilibrium, it looks to me, is symbolically presented in the dance of Nataraja. This equilibrium, the authors claim, according to Gandhi, is however thrown out of gear with the advent of civilisation and subsequently by modernity which promotes speed. The continuous and habitual promotion of speed impacts equilibrium in a way that further dissociates nature from value. This fundamental philosophical concept, speed, is extensively discussed in this chapter. They again turn towards Western philosophers like Charles Bonnet, Jacques Monod, Hannah Arendt (p 33), Aristotle (p 35), Kant (p 36), Heidegger (p 36) Paul Virilio (p 37), Nietzsche (p 37), Milton (p 38) and especially towards Thomas Taylor who wrote

*The Fallacy of Speed*, to show the contrast between modern life and village life (p 39).

Having discussed two fundamental ideas, namely nature and value on the one hand and speed on the other, the third chapter discusses the concept of body. Rejecting the claim that Gandhi follows the middle path between mind and body, the authors claim that for Gandhi, “the body aggregates under the essence of good and evil which is not the same as the distinction of healthy and unhealthy” (p 68). The next chapter discusses the relation between mind and soul. Highlighting the “inverse relation” between the “powers of body and the soul” the authors quote Gandhi who said, “It is my firm belief that the strength of the soul grows in proportion as you subdue the flesh.” Taking the lead from this view they go on to claim that the “soul is defined as a distance between the body and the mind ...” (p 71). Again continuing their habitual style of argument, they relate Gandhi’s stand on the relation between the mind and the soul by bringing into the discussion another long list of philosophers from the West. In this chapter they go one step further when they claim that it is Gandhi’s “studies of Plato” that made him to establish “a certain relation between Truth and the soul, that is, soul is the faculty that has the power invested in it to recognise Truth” (p 84). This claim about Gandhi’s study of Plato is not substantiated by evidence.

Chapter 5, “Dynamics: Active and Passive,” identifies active force with history that is “dis-essentialising of man” and identifies passive force with “nature which is value” (p 90). As an illustration they suggest that going to a temple on foot is practising passive force whereas travelling by train to go there would be employing active force. The next chapter discusses “The Laws of the Maker,” about how Gandhi distinguished man-made laws from the laws of the maker. The laws of the maker are unbreakable; and all “illness is the result of the violation of the laws of nature” (p 116). Man-made laws are legitimate only if they are grounded in Maker’s Laws (p 127). Gandhi said that “if all of us regulate our

lives by this eternal law of *satya* and *ahimsa*, there will be no occasion for civil or other resistance” (p 130). The next two chapters discuss “Truth and Will” and “Violence and Resistance,” respectively. The summary of these chapters is aptly captured when they quote Gandhi who equates salvation of all the “exploited people of the earth and, therefore, of the world” with strictly adhering to the “reliance” on “truth” and “non-violence” (p 164). Thus, for Gandhi, truth and non-violence are both universal and absolute concepts.

### Age of Critique

The chapter on “Critical Nation” discusses Gandhi’s views of caste, untouchability and racism (pp 189–90); politics as a necessary evil (p 191); history as a disruption of passive force (p 194); and absolutising the virtues of non-violence and cleansing it of any shades of violence. The conclusion embarks on summarising the discussion in the preceding chapters through the broad categories of the “age of critique” that begins from the 18th century that “refers to the investigation

into the internal milieu of a system” (p 209); “age of criticism” that is interested “in the criteria, or ratio” (p 210) and the “age of criticalisation” that looks into what “happens to systems when their elements reach their limits, such as the heat of combustion, and heat tolerance of an engine” (p 211). The authors find “Gandhi’s efforts ... towards discovering the limits of politics to the point of criticalisation of the human animal itself” (p 212).

At one level one finds both: relating Gandhi with a word in parenthesis, namely hypophysics, and making it one of the central concepts in his thought both challenging and problematic; and relating Gandhi with Kant too is equally problematic. The problem with the former is with regard to the disproportion in the extend of concept in parenthesis and the philosophy of Gandhi. Regarding the latter, Kant is the major philosopher within the project of modernity and Gandhi is a strong critic of modernity, in fact he terms it as satanic. This difference, nay, antagonism, is not referred to. It looks as if both Kant and

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Gandhi belong to the same schools of thought. Yet another problem is, though the book is about Gandhi, there is less of him and far more of Western philosophy in it.

At a more scholarly level, there are ideas that are attributed to Gandhi without giving exact references. For instance, the authors maintain that he was “familiar with the theories of the mind discussed by his contemporaries, including the Darwinian theories of mind.” And that “he avoided a lengthy discussion of the subcontinental theories of the mind in the religious texts while giving discourses on them” (p 73). The evidence in support of this claim is not given. This ambiguity and not giving exact references to what is attributed to Gandhi is there when they maintain that there are “thinkers of speed before Gandhi and after him. But it is Gandhi’s resistance to speeding, which alone is resistance, which sets him apart” (pp 38–39). This indeed is a big claim and one needs to know who those

thinkers about speed, before and after him, are.

Similarly, the text does not set out those existing interpretations of nature, truth, violence, resistance of Gandhi with which the present book differs. This scholarly practice of clearly stating the view with which a paper or a book goes on to differ is the virtue of modern Western scholarship. This practice has intriguingly not been adhered to in the text. The inevitable outcome is that the text under review lacks scholarly presentation of its *purvapaksha*. For instance, there are Marxists who alleged that his politics either wittingly or otherwise promoted bourgeoisie interests; liberals who found him non-progressive; feminists who criticised his views on sex and women; and those like B R Ambedkar who found his views on Dalits less revolutionary or even promoting orthodoxy. This leaves the text merely to accumulate without cumulating. The development of thought through cumulative ideas is the dominant practice

in Western scholarship. The Western philosophers that are discussed over-crowd Gandhi. One wonders what are the new insights the book gives about him apart from several claims made about him.

**Welcome Addition**

Notwithstanding these, from another level the book is interesting and is well written; the philosophical prose is tight and is of high quality. In this respect the book is in the company of Ajay Skaria on relating Gandhi with Derrida; and Aishwary Kumar on relating Ambedkar and Walter Benjamin. A book of this nature on Gandhi is a welcome addition to the existing literature. It makes good reading for those who are already familiar with, and or want to be familiar with Western philosophers and or want to see Gandhi in their company.

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