

Seeking Truth and Practicing Satyagraha

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Tracing Gandhi: Satyarthi to Satyagrahi by *Samir Banerjee*, Routledge, Oxon and New York and Indian Institute of Advanced Study, Shimla, 2020; pp ix + 205, ₹995.

There are many books on Mohandas Gandhi ranging from the historical to the analytical. Given this range as also the simplicity of Gandhi's own words, it is difficult to produce works with new perspectives on Gandhi. The book in review manages to do this in an interesting way by tracing how Gandhi evolved from being a *satyarthi* (seeker of truth) to a *satyagrahi* (practitioner of satyagraha). In doing this through the framework of the shift from the personal to the social, Banerjee offers a socio-philosophical reading of Gandhi. While these core concepts of Gandhi have been written about in great detail, the author's understanding of Hinduism, and in particular its philosophical traditions, adds value to his reflections.

By tracing the path Gandhi's ideas took him from being a *satyarthi* to *satyagrahi*, Banerjee argues that Gandhi traversed a path from the personal to the social. It is a book filled with very important insights about the influence on Gandhi as well as on fresh interpretation of some common Gandhian terms. At a time when Gandhi is both reviled and appropriated (including by those who have always been inimical to him), it is extremely important to understand the conceptual implications of certain core Gandhian concepts. Gandhi's use of these terms comes from a deep *sadhana*, a reflection borne out of rigorous practice. In this sense, it is not easy to appropriate Gandhi without doing sufficient work—both at a personal as well as a social level.

Any task of reading Gandhi today will involve the expansion of the conceptual space of Gandhian ideas, through critically probing and expanding their original frameworks. This is precisely what Banerjee does by beginning with Gandhi's early experience in South Africa and then moving to his personal and political practice in India. Concepts such as *ahimsa* and *satya* were essential for Gandhi and can be seen as the walking stick of his mind. These concepts for Gandhi were not ideologically derived; he had to work hard to attain them as something meaningful to his life and praxis. These notions arise from the experiences of the personal as well as the expectation of the social and it is this intermingling that Banerjee is able to set out in front of the reader.

The book begins with Gandhi's initiation into becoming a truth-seeker (*satyarthi*). The evolution from *satyarthi* to *satyagrahi* is, according to the author, an evolution from "being a truthful human being focused on living an honest life to a socially committed individual aspiring to help everyone live an honest life" (p 11). Banerjee distinguishes two phases of his life in South Africa that capture this transition: *satyarthi* phase from 1893–1903 and *satyagrahi* phase from 1904–14. The *satyarthi* phase was characterised by his involvement primarily with his family, profession and the local Indian community. The unique situation of his work in South Africa also led him to greater social involvement. In the second phase, at the end of which he left South Africa for good, he becomes more socially engaged through leading protests, going to jail, and starting the journal *Indian Opinion*.

The Personal and the Social

Banerjee foregrounds this transition in terms of three fundamental themes that ground Gandhi's ideas: the relation between the personal and the social, the importance of ashrams and the nature of *tyag* (sacrifice) of different kinds. The first part of the book details how many of the experiences that Gandhi faced in South Africa built his character of being a satyarthi. It is important to realise the influence of multiple religions on this aspect of truth-seeking as much as the influence of his growing family and his decision on their schooling.

Gandhi's evolution into a satyagrahi was catalysed by a growing social awareness. An important influence was John Ruskin's book *Unto This Last* from which he understood that the "good of the individual is contained in the good of all." Most importantly, it gave him new ways of understanding and respecting all kinds of labour. It was through this realisation that he could bring the personal and the social together. Following this, Gandhi bought land and created the Phoenix settlement. Banerjee notes that "this event truly marks Gandhi's advent into what we can call his *satyagrahi* phase." This phase, coupled with his interest to more deeply understand Hindu scriptures, led him to Bhagavadgita. This text was extremely influential since it gave him entry into notions such as "non-possession," "equability," sacrifice. In the second phase leading to becoming a satyagrahi, Gandhi had to resolve deeply felt contradictions in his struggle, his relationship to his family and also the formulation of the nature of protest. In all this, he was privileging the social against the interests of the individual. By the time Gandhi returned to India, he had made the transition from the consciousness of the I to that of the We. This transition was already present in the move from satyarthi to satyagrahi. He had already worked out a number of important concepts for him, including ahimsa, *brahmacharya* and satyagraha.

The book then goes on to discuss with profound insight many well-known Gandhian concepts but within the new framework of the dynamics of moving from the personal to the social, from I to We. Banerjee points out that an important conceptual theme was the distinction between I, me and mine. In an interesting argument, he suggests that the dilemma of give and take for Gandhi was seen by him to be one between "owning" and "owing": "the simultaneity of owning and being indebted." He argues that because of this Gandhi shifts the focus to the "me" instead of I and mine. From this contradiction, Gandhi derives three important terms: tyaag, tapas and ashram. Succinctly, Banerjee writes: "an individual needs to prioritise the social within so as to minimise the acquisitive, while simultaneously acclaiming the indebtedness. This is tapas ... to consolidate the benefit of tapas it has to be preceded and escorted by tyaag." (p 59) Finally, Banerjee argues that Gandhi "institutionalised these as an ethos in his ashrams." What the author is doing here is trying to make sense of why certain ideas become so important for Gandhi and his attempt to do this through the tension between the personal and the social adds new dimensions to our reading of Gandhi. For example, through the analysis of tyaag (sacrifice, renunciation) into three types, namely *phala-tyag* (not expecting returns), *krodha-tyag* (giving up anger) and *trishna-tyag* (giving up longing), he shows how ahimsa and brahmacharya are closely related to these forms of giving up. Gandhi does not accept renunciation as the giving up on the social and going away to a forest. He also does not renounce his family. It is this deeper questioning of renunciation that leads Gandhi towards his ashrams and the author suggests that the ashram evolves to take into account the "bipolarity of being a renouncer and a householder" (p 62). Thus, the aim of the ashrams was self-realisation but through social service. Thus, for Gandhi, the satyagrahi should be a "socially involved renunciate."

With this background, Banerjee then analyses brahmacharya, satya, ahimsa and satyagraha in Chapter 5. This is an important exercise in opening up new ways of reading these concepts. Gandhi's experiment with his desire is well known, most notably through his own recountings. Banerjee points out that after the Zulu war, Gandhi took a "vow to practice brahmacharya." In its simplest form, it is primarily a rejection of giving in to lust and to partake in sexual relations. But brahmacharya becomes a metaphor for many other kinds of desire, including the lust for power since for Gandhi "brahmacharya means control of the senses in thought, words and deeds" (p 75). Importantly, brahmacharya for Gandhi was more than just a personal choice and he argued that swaraj is possible only through the control of individual lust. There is much that may sound problematical about Gandhi's view on sex, procreation and lust. Banerjee discusses a few of these points and in particular points to how this view influenced Gandhi's understanding of women and gender. The theme of truth (satya) in Gandhi needs a book on its own. In this book, the author discusses satya within the larger thematic of the book and, in particular, by focusing on the unbreakable and essential relation between satya and ahimsa. The author notes that "Gandhi came to the conclusion that while the end is satya, ahimsa is the means; while duty is satya, rights belong to ahimsa; while give is satya, take is ahimsa" (p 90). The remaining part of the chapter examines the different contours of satyagraha and its relation to the satyagrahi.

Gandhi and Religion

With this conceptual background, the remaining half of the book deals with religion as well as aspects related to the social aspects of Gandhian practice. The chapter on religion is the largest in the book and I believe that it is an important contribution to this theme within Gandhian thought. It is impossible to understand Gandhi without understanding religion but it is impossible to understand religion without engaging with its complex practices and philosophy. It is also one theme that marks the uniqueness of Gandhi's approach to these issues. At a time when Gandhi is being appropriated by groups like the Sangha pariwar, it is important to remember and re-emphasise his central belief about religions that "all great religions are fundamentally equal" (p 108). What was needed, according to him, was not just "mutual tolerance but equal respect." The notion of brahmachari, important for the Sangha pariwar too, does not have the same "truth-force" for them as it does for Gandhi. Gandhi's search for truth (drawn from different religions) can only be done without hate, through pure ahimsa. If the Sangha pariwar wants to appropriate Gandhi, they need to take the whole package and not choose something selectively. Any person who says they look up to Gandhi, does violence to him if they do not renounce hate in all matters of their personal and social lives.

Gandhian principles cannot be decoupled from such fundamental tenets about religion, ahimsa and satya. Banerjee attempts to understand Gandhi's take on religion through his transformation from a satyarthi to satyagrahi. It is also important to note that for Gandhi, God was not a personal being and was nothing more than Truth. The influence of other religions on him has often been noted but it is useful to remember that while Gandhi saw himself as "one of the humblest of Hindus," he nevertheless emphasised the importance of other religions. Banerjee discusses in detail Gandhi's arguments about Buddhism, Islam and most importantly, Christianity. His deepest engagement was arguably with Christianity given the range of his experiences in Britain, South Africa and India. Banerjee points out that there "was a time when he was drawn close enough to Christianity for some to even think that he was contemplating conversion" (p 118). He also argues that Gandhi's transition from a satyarthi to satyagrahi was benefited by his interaction with Christianity to the extent that "Christianity in many ways made him a true Hindu." Christian theological ideas also influenced his conceptual development of the ideas of satya, ahimsa,

brahmacharya, tyaag and so on. Even the important role that silence played in Gandhi's life was influenced by the practice of the Trappist monks.

Influence of the Gita

At the same time, the most important influence on Gandhi was the Gita (he carried this book always) but it is a Gita that is placed within the universe of other religious texts and practices. Gita was an important influence in his becoming a satyagrahi. His interpretation of the Gita in his book *Anasaktiyoga or The Gospel of Selfless Action* is a reading that is amenable to individual and social practice. Banerjee points out that this interpretation of the Gita had these core ideas: the text "espouses ahimsa" and not that of war, the Pandavas and Kauravas were not that different and this is related to his view that "no evil is possible without the aid of the good" (p 124) and the most important goal of this text was "self-realisation." The chapter concludes with a brief discussion on Gandhi's view on caste as well as the great influence of the Isavasya Upanisad, the first sloka of which he turned to during the Vaikom satyagraha (p 137). Gandhi goes on to note that the "Gita is a commentary on this mantra" (p 138).

The remaining part of the book focuses on some social aspects of the transition and discusses notions such as Sarvodaya, labour and crafts, swadeshi and swaraj, and includes a more detailed analysis of the *Hind Swaraj*. In this discussion, Banerjee not only draws extensively upon Gandhi but is also able to succinctly bring them together to connect to the overarching thread of the book, namely the movement from the personal to the social. This book is a fascinating contribution to the existing scholarship on Gandhi and it will hopefully catalyse new ways of interpreting and extending Gandhian ideas at a time when his views offer pointers to deal with the chaos we have created around us in our society and the world.

Book review from the 'Economic & Political Weekly' magazine.

<https://www.epw.in/journal/2020/28-29/book-reviews/seeking-truth-and-practising-satyagraha.html>