

# The archivist's Gandhi

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ALTHOUGH an extraordinarily copious literature has developed around the life, thought, and work of Mohandas Gandhi, comparatively little has been done by way of exploring his presence in diverse strands of visual culture. This is all the more surprising in view of the fact that the study of visual culture – which intersects with, and draws upon, an equally broad array of fields, from film and media studies, art history, performance studies, and cultural studies to anthropology, critical theory, philosophy, and psychoanalytic theory – has come along quite far in the last three decades and has even acquired the paraphernalia that, at least in the western (and increasingly if haltingly in the Indian) academy, suggests the institutionalization of a field of study. Moreover, as those who are not inattentive to the considerations of pedagogy are aware, the present generation of students the world over is increasingly attuned to the notion of the visual. The visual is no longer encompassed solely by the idea of the image;

indeed, new technological interfaces offer various extensions of the visual experience.

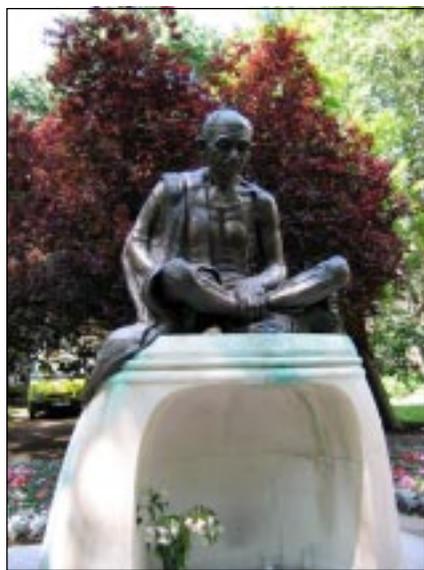
There can scarcely be any doubt that Gandhi has a singularity among the most universal icons of modern India: if in ancient times it was the circulation of the image of the Buddha, commencing with the Gandhara and Mathura schools, that rendered India proximate to Central Asia, China, and Southeast Asia, Gandhi is supreme among those Indians whose names have earned the country some measure of cultural capital. His statues, which began proliferating in India since his assassination and are now encountered in the smallest towns, are increasingly to be found in countries around the world. Gandhi's face adorns the postage stamps of over 100 countries: no other Indian comes even remotely close to claiming such fame. An enormously rich calendar art has grown up around representations of the Mahatma; there is similarly a treasure trove of nationalist prints, which originated around 1920, and had a good run until shortly after the attainment

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of independence, in which Gandhi figured pre-eminently. The work of a wide array of artists – among them Nandlal Bose, M.F. Husain, Gulammohammed Sheikh, Atul Dodiya, Nilima Sheikh, Ramkinkar Baij, and others far too numerous to mention – suggests Gandhi’s profound presence in the Indian imaginary.

To cartoonists the world over, the Gandhi of the shining bald head and the Mickey Mouse ears was nearly an irresistible attraction.<sup>1</sup> His walking stick, the pair of round spectacles, the sandals, the shawl wrapped loosely around his shoulders in the cold months, the timepiece tucked into his dhoti, the pet goat: these constitute an iconography of the Mahatma that is now part of the national imaginary. It is not too much to say that Gandhi is the only person in Indian history who is not the historical founder of a religion around whom a distinct iconography has developed. True, as Christopher Pinney’s work amply shows,<sup>2</sup> such an iconography might seem to have formed around his younger contemporaries, such as Chandrashekhar Azad – distinctly marked out by his wristwatch and his handsome moustache – but the



Vinay Lal

Brilliant Gandhi at Tavistock Square, London.



An iconic Gandhi dhoti with timepiece.

disembodied timepiece, walking stick, or sandalled feet have no parallel in the life of any Indian in the twentieth century.

Gandhi is also, it can be freely admitted, the pre-eminent Indian icon of protest: indeed no other global figure, barring perhaps Che Guevara, has been so visibly appropriated around the world for political purposes in the present phase of human history. When Indian Malaysians, some constituted into a new political entity called Hindu Rights Action Force (HINDRAF), took to the streets in December 2007 to demand political rights and entitlements, they held aloft pictures of Gandhi – not of Nehru, Mao, Che, or Marx.<sup>3</sup> Similarly, Tibetan protesters – in Delhi, Bangalore, San Francisco, London, and elsewhere – have over the years galvanized around pictures of Gandhi and the Dalai Lama as they seek to bring awareness of Beijing’s repressive policies in Tibet. Gandhi’s image turns up in unlikely places: The *Indian Express* of 27 April 2008 carried a photograph of prisoners at the

Cebu City jail near Manila holding up a huge picture of Gandhi as they danced to a song by Bonnie Tyler, ‘I Need a Hero’ (p. 5). In the aftermath of the massive demonstrations at Tehran’s Tahrir Square, where Gandhi’s name was routinely invoked by protesters gathered in opposition to a regime charged with the theft of an election, there would be much talk of Iran’s ‘Gandhian moment’.<sup>4</sup> He is, it seems, everywhere – even on the separation wall at the Kalandiya checkpoint in north Jerusalem.

What, then, are the various ways in which we might read images of Gandhi, and how would one go about assembling a visual archive of Gandhi? Cartoons, prints, oil paintings, watercolours, photographs, moving images, graffiti, murals, comic strips, and sculptures are of course different mediums by which Gandhi is made a palpable presence to the viewer, but they also differ from each other in various other respects. Sculptures of Gandhi, for example, are likely to be viewed as requiring little by way of interpretation, insofar as the thousands of statues of Gandhi that dot the country appear to be cast in a largely similar mould. The



Vinay Lal

Buddhist Gandhi at Nalanda.

spectacled Gandhi is shown with a staff in his right hand, a shawl flung loosely around his torso; his timepiece is tucked into his dhoti; and, in a variation of this pose, Gandhi appears to be taking a vigorous stride forward, an image rendered famous by Nandlal Bose when he sought to capture Gandhi's purposeful march to freedom.

The seated Gandhi is less common but not infrequently encountered, as is the case with his statue on the main road leading into the town of Pushkar: the staff here is replaced by a book, which, considering what we know of Gandhi's life and the books that were his daily companions, was most likely either the *Bhagavad Gita* or Tulsidas's *Ramacaritmanas*. Many will suppose that these statues render homage, often state sanctioned but sometimes as an expression of the common will, to the 'Father of the Nation', a Mahatma who led his people to freedom, one of the last representatives of the country's great *sant* traditions; and there may yet be those who would interpret a statue of Gandhi much like a *murti* of their *ishtadevata*, making him palpably present to them.

Far less pious and more critical even cynical readings of statues are possible and certainly desirable. Whatever the intent with which statues are

installed in public places, their signification alters over time: if the Gandhi murti is the place where the activists are asked to convene to issue forth their dissent, it is also the spot from where one hangs the next right or left. Legend has it that more than once a cobra would quietly slip away upon seeing Gandhi at Sabarmati as well as his ashram at Sevagram, but pigeons do not differentiate between statues of Gandhi, Ambedkar, Vivekananda, or Bhagat Singh when they drop their stool.

The German writer Robert Musil is there to remind us, stunningly, that 'the most striking feature of monuments is that you do not notice them. There is nothing in the world as invisible as a monument. Like a drop of water on an oilskin, attention runs down them without stopping for a moment.'<sup>5</sup> How often has one walked by statues without even registering their presence? The gigantism that drives Mayawati – my Ambedkar is bigger than your Gandhi – is animated partly by the fear of invisibility, but there is little awareness that much else might contribute to the conspicuousness of a statue. Outside Nalanda, once the seat of learning in India, stands a folksy statue where Gandhi is enveloped in a Buddhist robe. There is more than a hint here that the

sculptor was thinking perhaps of Gandhi as a worthy successor to the Buddha, as two of history's most eminent practitioners of ahimsa. Yet the image and the text may be at cross-purposes: curiously, though Gandhi wrote voluminously, he had little to say about the Buddha.

Much more could be said, of course, about the statues of Gandhi, from the barrister Gandhi of Johannesburg's Gandhi Square aptly and uniquely dressed in a lawyer's robe and the peasant look-alike in Motihari to the wonderfully serene Gandhi sculpted by Fredda Brilliant in London's Trafalgar Square. The archivist's Gandhi, however, rarely takes us beyond the immeasurably rich world of photographs, though even these have been little explored. Gandhi was, for his times, one of the most photographed men of the world, and he cannot be described as camera-shy: indeed, he was acutely aware of what is nowadays called 'the media', and some have even argued that the very success of non-violence was predicated on Gandhi's skill in working the press and arousing the conscience of the world.

Photography from the outset created regimes of classification, order, and appropriation, but it has since its inception also – perhaps pre-

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Deewaar's Vijay with framed Gandhi poster (dir. Yash Chopra, 1975).



Gandhi at Separation Wall.

eminently – been summoned as furnishing evidence: for example, to those who aver that Gandhi was hostile to science, one can point to the photograph, surely the only one of its kind in the world, of the ‘half-naked’ fakir-scientist poring through a microscope. For all of his stringent critique of railways in *Hind Swaraj* (1909), the barely probed photographic archives of Gandhi’s love affair with the railways,<sup>6</sup> poignantly celebrated by a statue of Gandhi outside the railway station in Wellington, New Zealand, offers voluminous testimony not merely of his extraordinary mobility but of his intimate familiarity with large swathes of the country, his extensive engagement with Indians from all walks of life, his articulation of new itineraries of travel, and his negotiation of many registers of temporality.

What Gandhi gave shape to was what I would like to call a *biorail politics*. But as we speak in this vein, we should not be railroaded into obscuring something much simpler: the view of the photograph as something that captures a slice of reality and speaks to the truth continues to resonate in popular conceptions of photography, even if the



Martin Luther King with framed Gandhi.

work of two generations of scholars and critics has gravitated towards a dramatically altered understanding of photography which sensitizes viewers to its politics and its manipulation of reality – photography as yet another form of simulacra. No single photograph can convey the totality of Gandhi’s life, what was evidently the ambition of nationalist biographical prints – some captioned as ‘The Evolution of Gandhi’ take the viewer on a journey from the cradle to the evening of January 30 – which circulated widely especially in the aftermath of his assassination; conversely, what is captured in a single moment, as in Margaret Bourke-White’s photograph of Gandhi at his spinning wheel, seems to carry within it the majestic plenitude of an entire life.

Gandhi had become, in his lifetime, a world historical figure: the visual archive is much deeper than we have imagined, and artists the world over were puzzled, intrigued, and mesmerized by accounts of Gandhi’s activities in India. *Cyrano* (Paris), *Le Petit Parisien*, *Kladderadatsch* (Berlin), *Der Wahre Jacob* (Hamburg), *La Prensa* (Madrid), and *De Zaterdagavond* (Haarlem, The Netherlands) are a handful among the European periodicals and newspapers that routinely commissioned their resident cartoonists and caricaturists to suggest some insights into that slight brown man, and a vegetarian to boot, who had taken on the might of the British lion.

Over the years, in assembling a digital archive comprised of over 5,000 distinct images of Gandhi, many stark contrasts have forced themselves upon me. The Mexican muralist Jose Clemente Orozco (1883-1949), who commenced his career during the Mexican revolution as a political cartoonist, accepted a commission from the New School (New York) in 1931 and painted a large mural called ‘Strug-

gle in the Orient’. Mohandas and Kasturba are individuated prominently, arrayed against the forces of militarism; in the foreground are men and women in chains. It is that eternal struggle of freedom versus servitude. However, a much less adulatory view of Gandhi is encountered in an exuberantly erotic comic, one of some 700-1000 so-called ‘Tijuana Bibles’, that was circulating clandestinely in the 1930s and 1940s. ‘Oh Peaceful Mahatma’, says a damsel to ‘Gandhi’ who ‘has them handy’, ‘I come to tell you of the arrival of two fair maidens to see you.’<sup>7</sup> A slave to his own ideas of sexual puritanism, Gandhi is now set free.

The Marxists, feminists, liberals, modernizers, Dalits, nudists, vegetarians, peaceniks, social workers, and many others each have their own Gandhi. But a visual archive suggests other arrangements as well: the seated Gandhi, the martyred Gandhi, the sartorial Gandhi, and so on. Let me turn here to the ‘framed Gandhi’ in an attempt to unravel some implications of studying visual culture. Growing up in India in the 1950s and the 1960s, one was most likely to encounter the ‘Father of the Nation’ as a framed photograph – in

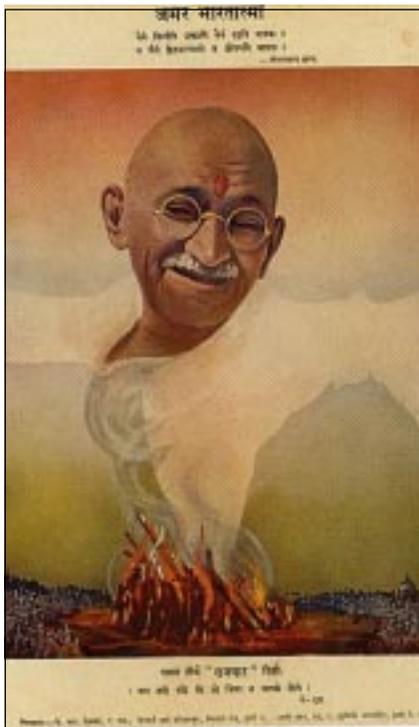


Nandlal Bose, *Ekla Chalo Re*.

government offices, police stations, Congress party offices, university buildings, and in the classrooms and corridors of tens of thousands of schools.

More often than not, the framed Gandhi was to be seen in the home of the pious teacher, the dedicated social worker, or the plain old-fashioned patriot. If, as is sometimes argued, the mainstream Hindi film has been particularly adept in capturing the pulse of popular sensibilities, we should not be surprised that the framed Gandhi should also have become nearly as essential to the Hindi film as songs, the staged fights (orchestrated by the 'fight master'), or the suffering mother. One might argue, of course, that the Hindi film was merely following the script set by the state: the protocol apparently required that Gandhi's photograph be hung visibly in the most prominent office of a government institution.

Yet, as scores of popular Hindi films amply suggest, the framed Gandhi does not hang from the wall merely in easy fulfilment of state-sanctioned homage. As the firebrand and rabble-rouser Dilip in *Dharamputra* (1961,



Nationalist print, Gandhi merged with India.

dir. Yash Chopra) belts out a patriotic song before his college classmates, Gandhi is there on the wall behind him, holding what is likely the Gita in his right hand. Dilip may well be thinking that he is following in the footsteps of Gandhi, calling on India's youth to offer selfless service to the nation, but Gandhi's Gita is a summons, which Dilip is most reluctant to embrace, to confront the demons within oneself. Little does Dilip, who is driven by the desire to expunge the Muslim from his worldview, know that he is himself born of Muslim parents.

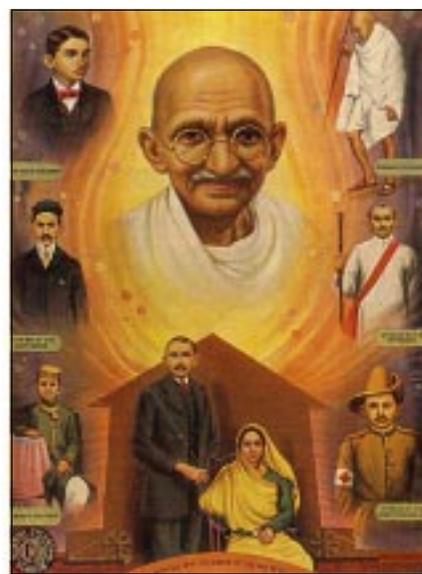
In *Purab aur Paschim* (1970, dir. Manoj Kumar), the framed portrait of Gandhi hearkens to India's accomplishments in the spiritual and scientific domains alike as Bharat reminds the crowd of deracinated resident non-Indians that those who would reduce India to zero are evidently not mindful of the power of zero. The large poster of Gandhi, seen behind the back of Vijay in Yash Chopra's *Deewaar* (1975), calls forth that Gandhi who waged war against injustice: it is at this

very instance, as Vijay sips tea, that he takes the decision to resist the extortion to which workers at the Bombay's docks are subjected.

It is tempting to think that, from his lofty position on the wall, Gandhi is there to inspire men and women to do good: and such, surely, is the impression conveyed by one of the more famous photographs of Martin Luther King, who stands at his desk over which hangs a framed photograph of Gandhi. But perhaps Gandhi is also there to cast a look, as we shall see, at all that transpires in his name and under his photograph. Though the 'Father of the Nation' did not much believe in surveillance, and was notoriously indifferent to considerations of his own security, eventually surrendering his life to an assassin who had absolutely no difficulty in penetrating the Birla House gardens where Gandhi held his evening prayer meetings, the framed Gandhi yet appears to peer down from his lofty position on mere mortals. However critical one may be of Gandhi at times, even his worst enemies would have a hard time thinking of him as a 'Big Brother'.



Gandhi in lawyer's robes, Gandhi Square, Johannesburg.



Sartorial biography of Gandhi. Nationalist print.

Even Gandhi's authoritarianism, for such is how it has been described by some of his critics, was tempered by a radical catholicity of thought. Nevertheless, perhaps the framed Gandhi is there to remind the thinker or doer that Gandhi Baba's eyes are cast at their deeds: his blessings will be showered on those who act ethically and his admonitions are there to trouble those who are set on the path of wrongdoing. One can understand why Indian embassies and consulates throughout the world prominently display the framed Gandhi: as I have suggested, whatever India's standing in any particular country, the name of Gandhi is calculated to earn India some goodwill. Similarly, the person who puts up Gandhi's photograph may be attempting to acquire cultural capital, suggesting to others that the admiration for Gandhi points to some element of nobility in his or her own personality. If we are also associated in people's minds with the friends we keep, there is reason to suppose that the photographs of venerable elders on display are meant to signify something about us to others.

The gesture of the framed Gandhi can, of course, be read in myriad other ways. It is customary for states to hang framed photographs of the highest officials – often elected, just as often self-appointed, as in the case of 'presi-



Seated Gandhi at Pushkar.

Vinay Lal

dents for life' – but Gandhi occupied an anomalous position in the immediate aftermath of independence, holding no office and yet being bestowed with the epithet of 'Father of the Nation'. But, in India, framed photographs of the gods and goddesses are even more common than the photographs of *netas*, 'leaders' of the nation.

Let us, for a moment, overlook the fact that many of those canonized or celebrated as *netas* have been scarcely deserving of that honorific, and it is no surprise that the word 'neta' is often used mockingly, not infrequently serving as a thinly veiled term of abuse and vilification for those who are out to plunder the country. Holding no

elected office in either independent India or even in the Congress party after his one-year term of presidency of the Congress in the 1920s, and having no riches or possessions to his name, Gandhi cannot be bunched together with the *netas*, small and big, who populate the Indian scene. But Gandhi was equally reluctant to being deified: he openly disowned the idea of being a Mahatma, and would have shuddered at the thought of being assimilated into Hinduism's gods and goddesses. Gandhi occupies, we may say, a position between the politicians and the gods, and yet a position that is akin to neither. Perhaps that old and tiresome question, of whether he was a politician in saint's garb or a saint who muddled his way through politics, will never go away.

One keen observer of Indian politics who has always remained aware of the framed Gandhi is the cartoonist R.K. Laxman, famous among other things for his creation of the 'common man'. In one cartoon after another, Laxman lampooned the *netas*, bureaucrats, and the sycophants who came to define 'politics' in the decades following independence; significantly, the framed photograph of Gandhi looms large in his work, as the three cartoons reproduced here amply demonstrate. Laxman was keen to underscore the hypocrisy of politicians, leaders, and party office holders, though 'hypo-



Oroczzo mural: Struggle in the Orient.

