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Gandhi: A Player of Infinite Games

By: Vinay Lal

Even radical dissenters have experimented within some boundaries. Gandhi played with boundaries themselves in nearly every domain of life — politics, sexuality, culture, knowledge. He was uniquely a player of infinite games with a vision of life as play.

The African American activist, Bayard Rustin, is acknowledged by scholars as one of the principal figures in the Civil Rights Movement of the United States and the chief architect of the famous March on Washington in 1963 where Martin Luther King, Jr. mesmerised the large gathering with his “I Have a Dream” speech, an oracular demonstration of his rhetorical gifts.

Lesser known, at least to the general public, is the fact that Rustin was a lifelong student of the life and work of Gandhi who had a large hand in shaping King’s understanding of satyagraha and bringing nearly the entire arsenal of Gandhian ideas of mass nonviolent resistance to the fore in the struggle for civil and political rights. His most prominent biographer, John D’Emilio, says unhesitatingly that “more than anyone else, Rustin brought the message and methods of Gandhi to the United States.”

Rustin’s eyes were turned upon the anti-colonial struggle in India and he was firmly of the view that “no situation in America has created so much interest among negroes as the Gandhian proposals for India’s freedom.” King was but a schoolboy when Rustin had already established a reputation as a “one-man nonviolent army” working on behalf of the Fellowship of Reconciliation (FOR), an international religious organisation that advocated radical pacifism and that in the US sought a distinctive and revolutionary approach to the race problem. He single-handedly sought to desegregate lunch counters in the Deep South and on a bus ride from Louisville to Nashville in 1942 moved to the section reserved, by both law and custom, for whites: when he refused to vacate his seat, the police were summoned and he was verbally abused and pummelled with blows.

Rustin also assumed an avuncular role as chief advisor to the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), an organization founded in 1942 with the intention of bringing Gandhi’s ideas to the struggle against racism. “Consciously dressing themselves in the garb of Gandhian philosophy,” writes D’Emilio, CORE’s young activists “made nonviolence a spiritual road to follow.”

Rustin embraced an outlook that most of Gandhi’s own associates in the Indian National Congress rejected, viewing nonviolence not “just a policy” but as “a way of life”, a way of being in the world. Yet, it is striking that Rustin, besides being a Quaker and a pacifist, was also a conscientious objector (though in popular parlance that amounted to being a draft-dodger), an avowed homosexual who was sexually prolific, and a communist until he came to repudiate the Communist Party relatively late in life. None of this was calculated to earn him goodwill in good old America, considering that, as the rap artist H. Rap Brown once put it, “violence is as American as cherry pie.”

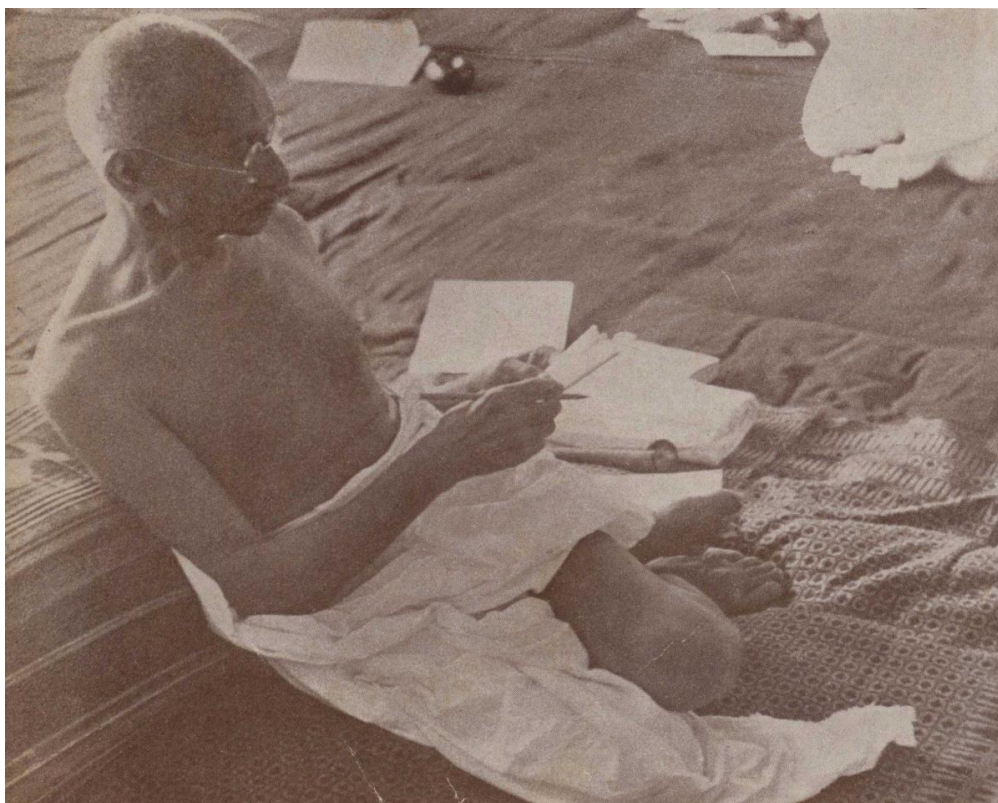
We may say of Rustin that he was also, in all these respects, and in many others, everything that Gandhi emphatically was not. Indeed, Rustin’s sexual escapades brought him such notoriety that, in the interest of protecting his friends and associates in the Civil Rights Movement, and to ensure that his own moral laxity would not be used by white supremacists to discredit the movement, he worked from behind the scenes. In a curious way, he sought to will his fall into relative obscurity.

What is indubitably true is that Rustin, as everyone who worked with him over the decades admitted, had a masterful understanding of Gandhi and appeared to have imbibed his spirit at least in his capacity as a non-violent political activist. The sceptic might be inclined to say that Rustin did what many others did, namely instrumentalise non-violence as an efficacious mode of instigating and organising African American resistance to racism and its brutally oppressive outcomes, and remain indifferent, if not hostile, to everything else in Gandhi. Such an argument is ignorant of Rustin’s deep and unwavering commitment to non-violence—and, rather more importantly, to his more capacious understanding of Gandhi.

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The case of Rustin points to a puzzle that after decades of Gandhi scholarship is from being resolved. Just how is it that Gandhi gathered around him, whether in person or far afield, an extraordinarily large and disparate crowd of followers, disciples, and admirers? And what a motley crowd it was, including the daughter of an English admiral who gave up a life of privilege to come and clean latrines in Gandhi's ashrams; a Kashmiri Brahmin and his father, thoroughly Anglicised in their fashion and habituated to an aristocratic lifestyle; a lumbering giant of a Pathan whom Gandhi would describe as the perfect exponent of satyagraha; a Tamil Christian economist who would go on to furnish the framework for Gandhian economics; a Gujarati Patidar lawyer who, as Sardar or the Iron Man, was honoured to be called Gandhi's right-hand man; and countless others from nearly every walk of life, speaking in myriad tongues, sometimes engaging in conduct that was anything but unimpeachable, often embracing worldviews wholly at odds with the subject of their affection and often reverence.

The sociologists of previous generations had a word for this phenomenon: charisma. That theory has, for a variety of reasons, run its course, but in any case few who knew Gandhi thought that he was possessed of charisma. He was much more likely to be described as ugly, though, unlikely as it is, a man may be ugly and yet charismatic. Another school of thought holds that it was Gandhi's sincerity that was gripping to others, and this in turn took many forms. He never subjected anyone to a task that he did not first set for himself; he demanded nothing of others that he did not first demand of himself. Gandhi made the Kantian ethical formula his own: "So act as to treat humanity, whether in your own person or in another, always as an end, and never as only a means." Yet I suspect that the founders of religion would have agreed with all this, but Gandhi was no founder of a religion.



Studying a draft resolution at AICC meeting, Bombay, 15 September 1940

(Courtesy: [Sabarmati Ashram Preservation and Memorial Trust](#) and [Gandhi Heritage Portal](#))

Perhaps it is Gandhi's inclusiveness, some have suggested, that endeared him to so many. The Christian missionaries and preachers who came into contact with him might have thought at first of seeking to convert him but soon recognised that he was a better Christian than they had ever encountered. It is doubtless true that he never lacked English friends, and indeed the most distinctive aspect of the anti-colonial struggle that he waged was that he sought to liberate not only India from British rule but also the British from their own worst tendencies. Before the English colonised Indians, they colonised the Irish, the Scots, and the Welsh; and, acting on the notion that colonial violence is homologous to sexual violence, Gandhi never doubted that the English colonised their own womenfolk. A man who had the gumption to address Hitler, "The Fuhrer", as "Dear Friend" was nothing if not inclusive. But something in this argument, too, rankles: talk of "inclusiveness", much like talk of "diversity", is self-consciously modern and reeks of the stench emitted by those who have embraced the anodyne ways of corporate culture and the managerial elite. The Roman historian Tacitus said they make war

and call it peace: today they call it diversity.

Not everyone is, furthermore, sold on the idea of Gandhi’s “inclusiveness”. Indeed, there is these days a minor industry committed to establishing that a great many people did not fall within his moral orbit. Gandhi’s South African years are taken as the most glaring exhibit of his bigotry and narrow-mindedness: not only did he refer to black people in derogatory terms, as some critics have argued, but he pointedly refused to invite them to join the struggle on the supposition that they would not have had any comprehension of the purpose, technique, or utility of nonviolence. The Indian communist parties, which have rarely shown any ability to think for themselves, content to take their marching orders from the communist parties in countries that have had what they call “real” revolutions, were resolutely of the view that there was no room for the working-class in Gandhi’s thinking. His “inclusiveness” only extended to the capitalists, whom he sought to save and legitimize, on this view, with his foggy theory of trusteeship. The Dalit grievances against Gandhi are extensive and would fill a catalogue, and the view persists among them that Gandhi was never able to accept them within his fold except on the most patronising terms.

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Despite all this, we must persist with the questions: what made Gandhi so singularly attractive to so many people? The ideas of *satya* (truth), *ahimsa* (nonviolence), *dharma* (conduct), *aparigraha* (non-possession), *asteya* (non-stealing), *brahmacharya* (celibacy), and *sadhana* (discipline) were the bedrock of Gandhi’s being. While his grounding in these fundamental ideas is clear enough, they remain crucially open to interpretation—often in the most unexpected ways. Climate change activists, environmentalists, and others to whom ethical thinking is not foreign are rightly agitated that the world is being depleted of natural resources by crushing levels of consumption, and they have called attention to how future generations are being robbed of clean air, soil, water, indeed of the very possibility of life itself. But Gandhi, by the standards of most mortals of what it means to be human, appeared to have taken the idea of theft to absurd levels. Inability to control one’s palate signified more than indiscipline; if one ate, indeed used anything at all, strictly beyond one’s bare needs, one was likewise committing theft. Gandhi’s friends and fellow ashram dwellers have left behind a mound of stories testifying to his (as it first seemed to others) punishing outlook on consumption and his obsessive insistence on maximising the use of every object. There is a story that is told of ashram dwellers searching on their hands and knees for a pencil stub that was barely two inches long, and another story of Gandhi sending his adolescent grand-niece, Manu, through a dense forest on a several-hour long journey to recover a rough stone that he used to clean his feet and which Manu had apparently forgotten at the previous stop in riot-torn Noakhali.

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If the principal ideas that informed Gandhi’s thinking lend themselves to varying interpretations, he remains elusive in other respects: just when one thinks one has begun to get a grasp on him and take the measure of the man, he startles and surprises. Gandhi was, to borrow the language of the American philosopher of religion, James Carse, a player of infinite games. Carse has written that “there are at least two kinds of games. One could be called finite, the other infinite. A finite game is played for the purpose of winning, an infinite game for the purpose of continuing the play.” The American attitude towards sports, which has been nearly universalised to all sports although the test form of cricket still shows some signs of obduracy, best exemplifies the notion of “finite games”. No American sport can be played without a decisive finish: if, at the end of regulation time, the game is drawn, it must go into overtime, and if necessary into further overtime so that an undisputed winner can emerge. Though the protocols of supposed sportsmanship require an acknowledgement of the heroic efforts of the loser, the culture of American sports demands that there be clear winners and losers. Nothing is as dreadful as ambiguity: the evil is out there, and one must be either for Osama bin Laden or for him, just as one cannot be both for and against America.

The subject matter of finite and infinite games, however, is far more than sports. The very idea of “society” is a finite game. For instance, nearly all of “education” is a finite game; there are a number of smaller finite games within its boundaries. We commence playing these games from childhood, with a graded hierarchy of schools; this continues through secondary schooling, college, higher education and professional schools: at every step, there are games: winners advance, gain accolades and titles, while losers drop out and must settle for the crumbs. Within higher education, there are tiers of schools, and within each tier further demarcations arise as title-holders—“Distinguished Professor”, Nobel Laureate, Infosys Prize winner—begin to outstrip the pack. “It is not uncommon for

families”, Carse notes, “to think of themselves as a competitive unit in a broader finite game for which they are training their members in the struggle for societally visible titles.” Yet, a finite game is far more than an exemplification of the “competitive spirit”, since finite players, which is nearly all of us, inhabit the world in a certain way. Finite players may rearrange the elements, as in a picture frame, but they still play within the boundaries; infinite players, by contrast, play with boundaries.

Nowhere in the vast corpus of Gandhi’s writings do we find any reference to “winners” and “losers”, though of course this is the least of the ways in which we may understand his thorough-going critique of political rationality ... and his complete disavowal of zero-sum politics.

In characterising Gandhi as a player of infinite games, we may turn to any domain of his life or thinking, be it politics, sexuality, or religion, or—to take only a few subjects—his ideas of history, the nation-state, rights and duties, and so on. Donald J. Trump, as we are all aware, knows no language other than that of winners and losers. He derives his manliness, his very identity, from being, or imagining himself as, a winner. But he is only the most vulgar instantiation of “normal politics”, rather than, as many liberals especially would like to believe, an exception to the world of civilised politics with its tolerable levels of compromise, deceit, and the jockeying for power. Nowhere in the vast corpus of Gandhi’s writings do we find any reference to “winners” and “losers”, though of course this is the least of the ways in which we may understand his thorough-going critique of political rationality, his instinctive dislike of the jejune language of “winning” and “losing”, and his complete disavowal of zero-sum politics. It is of signal importance that the notion of satyagraha altogether abdicates normal politics and its notions of political rationality, which is precisely why liberals, constitutionalists, communists, Ambedkarites, Hindu nationalists, and others belonging to well-known political constituencies have not merely been uncomfortable with Gandhi’s worldview but have at various times thought it fit to dismiss Gandhi as a crank and as someone whose time was long up.

The literature of the official British and European encounter with Gandhi, commencing in South Africa and concluding with the negotiations that would lead to the bifurcation of India, is rife with examples of colonial officials who simply could not comprehend the nature of Gandhi’s politics. What was one to do with a man whose notion of chivalry entailed that one was not to take advantage of the ‘enemy’ (not that this word was part of Gandhi’s lexicon), and that if the opposition was to become weak owing to some extraneous factor, the action against the opposition was to be called off? Gandhi represented a form of opposition that was inconceivable to those steeped in constitutional and conventional revolutionary politics alike. When Gandhi left South Africa, his principal adversary, General Jan Christian Smuts, remarked in a letter to a friend, “the saint has left our shores – I sincerely hope for ever.” I suspect that Smuts had had enough of Gandhi: had he been a rebel of the usual sort, wielding a gun, shouting platitudes about the evil that landlords do, or mouthing pieties about the readiness of the coloured man to assume the responsibilities of living accordance to democratic norms, Smuts would have known what to do with him.

It wasn’t only the British or Europeans who found Gandhi unfathomable. His fellow Indians had little sense of him. There is a near consensus, to which his most ardent admirers are equally a party, that on at least a few occasions he displayed poor political judgment. It is admitted that such occasions provide evidence of his deleterious influence on the course of Indian politics, even if, as his admirers insist, he may have been well intentioned. His support of the Khilafat movement, for which Gandhi stands condemned by everyone, is a case in point. It is supposed that Gandhi argued for the restoration of the Caliphate in the hope that he could extract from Indian Muslim leaders their support for a ban on cow-slaughter. This is a wholly erroneous argument, for which there isn’t the slightest shred of evidence, and one that is wholly contrary to everything that Gandhi understood as an ethical politics. He would have deplored this form of *quid pro quo* as “normal politics” and one that militated against his conception of the gift.

[F]or Gandhi the Hindu was incomplete without the Muslim just as the Muslim was incomplete without the Hindu. But none of this has ever been comprehensible to those who live and swear by “normal politics”.

In a similar vein, his advocacy of Hindu-Muslim unity cannot be reduced to a cold calculation on his part that it was bound to lead to more fruitful forms of anti-colonial resistance or traduce the British for perpetuating the lie that they were indispensable to keeping the peace between adherents of different faiths. The question of “Hindu-Muslim unity”, though this very framing is perhaps tantamount to a concession to normal politics, was for Gandhi intrinsic to the notion of selfhood in India. I would go so far as to say, at the risk of sounding like a heretic in modern-day India with its politics of xenophobia and virulent forms of majoritarianism, that for Gandhi the Hindu was incomplete without the Muslim just as the Muslim was incomplete without the Hindu. But none of this has ever been comprehensible to those who live and swear by “normal politics”.

Gandhi's general opposition to conversion, which has seldom been discussed, may be—and has been—adduced as evidence of his Hindu chauvinism and may appear to controvert my claim that he strikes a wholly anomalous figure on the Indian scene. His dislike of the very idea of conversion stemmed not even remotely from any feeling of superiority he might have harboured about his Hindu faith: his assassin, we should take pains to remember, held Gandhi responsible for betraying the Hindu community. There is nothing in common between Gandhi and the advocates of Hindutva in their mutual opposition to conversion. The opposition of Hindu nationalists arises from apprehensions about the rise of Christianity and Islam, objections to economic inducements offered to potential converts, the real or imagined threats to Hinduism, the frequently unsavoury history of proselytization, and other such considerations. Gandhi took the rather unusual position that the person who converts almost invariably does so from a poor comprehension of his or her faith, and therefore from a mistaken conception of the comparatively fecund possibilities of the other faith: every faith is endowed with the pharmacopeia for leading the ethical life, howsoever that may be conceived. But there were circumstances under which the idea of conversion could be countenanced, and never more so when the decision passed the litmus test of the conscience. Gandhi could not be opposed to conversion in toto, recognizing as he did the sovereignty of the individual as a morally autonomous being.

While Gandhi unquestionably shared with avowed secularists ... the view that the state had no business in transacting religion, he derived his secularism from his practices as a devout Hindu.

The “litmus test of conscience” is no easy phrase and itself sets a high bar. Gandhi's reverence for the *Ramacaritmanas* did not blind him to passages—most notoriously, *dhol ganwar shudra pashu naari, sakal taadana ke adhikari*—within it that he thought highly objectionable, and which, whatever their origin, had been deployed to suppress women. If one's conscience rebelled against such misogyny, then the offensive passage perforce had to be discarded. Gandhi was similarly unimpressed by arguments about the infallibility of the Quran and the hadiths and famously refused to concede the ground to Maulvis who during a debate in the 1920s insisted that stoning to death was part of the Sunnah. In this matter his views may not seem altogether distinct, having something in common with the worldview of the enlightened liberal, but the exceptionality derived from the larger position he staked on the contentious question of secularism suggests the very awkward difficulties of reading him mainly through the registers of liberalism. While Gandhi unquestionably shared with avowed secularists such as Nehru (who had no appetite for public displays of religiosity) and Jinnah (who made a show of being a Muslim in public but was as good a non-believer as any) the view that the state had no business in transacting religion, he derived his secularism from his practices as a devout Hindu. He would have fully understood how Maulana Azad, similarly, could be wedded to the creed of the secularist precisely because he was an observant Muslim. Where is the play except in being a secularist who is at the same time devoutly ‘religious’?

Turning back to Bayard Rustin, and to the motley crowd of Gandhi's followers, admirers, and devotees, I have long thought that Gandhi's attractiveness to others, some of it doubtless for reasons that I have adumbrated, arises from the recognition that he was a player of infinite games. There are elements of the common narrative that I have not touched upon, such as the whiff of saintliness that hangs around Gandhi, for instance among peaceniks and many social workers. But, for reasons that should be amply clear, there are an equally large number of people who would be outraged at any rendering of Gandhi as a saint. It was possible to be a saint in the time of Francis of Assisi and Teresa of Avila, or Jnaneshvar and Guru Nanak, but saintliness is obsolete under our regimes of scrutiny, surveillance, and savage scurrilousness. Gandhi at least passes muster as a player of infinite games, besides the fact that he would have been the first person to be relieved of the burden of being a saint. Though his followers themselves were nearly all players of finite games, they saw in Gandhi the vision of life as play and possibility.