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Walking with Gandhi in Our Times

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What lessons can we draw from Gandhi's marches into our political practice in the present?

In one of the smaller galleries at the latest edition of the Kochi Muziris Biennale is a densely curated exhibit that reconstructs Gandhi's last days. *You I could not save, walk with me* announces the irony of Gandhi's finest hour in riot-torn Noakhali in 1947 with '169': after participating and transforming the Indian national movement for more than 30 years, he could live in an independent India for just 169 days. Conceived and created by a group of four people, it is a documentary project of sorts, including images of those who participated with Gandhi in Noakhali, in Bihar, and in Delhi-Gandhi's place of death. It does not fight shy of including footage of Gopal Godse and his wife, exulting in the death of Gandhi. The verses of the Malayalam poet P.N. Gopikrishnan, recited in this exhibition, add lyricism to the text; lifts history to an affective, and therefore unforgettable plane.

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Gandhi was an indefatigable walker: he walked, but he also marched. He is said to have marched 79,000 miles throughout his life-Noakhali was his last. In *You I could not save* we are also reminded of the field of bones and skulls that Gandhi traversed, present in the first iteration (and since then obscured from view) of Ramkinker Baij's 1948 cement sculpture at Shantiniketan that captured Gandhi's determination and undisputed leadership mid-stride. Noakhali, undertaken when Gandhi was a lonely and beleaguered, even irrelevant man, was quite unlike Dandi in 1930, a march undertaken at height of his powers as Mahatma-represented in the bronze cast *Gyarah Murti* in New Delhi by Devi Prasad Roy Choudhury, officially commissioned by the Indian state to commemorate Gandhi's historic defiance of colonial rule, and public participation in the freedom struggle more generally. (*Gyarah Murti* was also imprinted on the reverse of one series of the Rs 500 note, with its demonetisation in 2016 this memory too has been erased from everyday circulation.)

I bring these examples of representations of Gandhi since over the last few years, battles over symbols-for long an Indian pre-occupation-have reached a crescendo, and show no signs of abating. This visual glut of images of Gandhi, the more passionately they are avowed, free the Indian people of any obligation to practice Gandhian ways of living, let alone political principles or economic values. Neither a passionate adherence to truth nor an ardent desire for nonviolence are the marks of our public life today.

But the reduction of the hallowed figure of the Mahatma to a social worker with a broom, from which no more than a pair of spectacles has been distilled, was an achievement like no other with the launch of the Swachh Bharat Mission in 2014. The spectacles have assumed a menacing ubiquity, looming large on bus stops and calendars, even as sewer deaths, manual scavenging, and a deep-seated aversion to public hygiene (linked no doubt to caste) continue to remind us of what really needs to be fixed for a cleaner, healthier and sustainable India.

It is the indisputable ethical-moral self-sufficiency of Gandhi's image that makes the use of symbols associated with him indispensable in contemporary political life. What is it today when we walk with Gandhi beyond these well-worn symbols that belong to another time? Was there a timeless meaning to his practice? Hypocrisies aside, what can be distilled from Gandhi, his life and his practice, more properly his politics, for our times? Let's return to the practice of walking, which he did not only because he believed it was the "prince of exercise":

> The modern generation is delicate, weak and pampered. If they will take part in national work they must take ample exercise and become hardy. And no exercise is as good and as effective as long vigourous marches. Gymnastics and the like are good and may be added to walking. They are no substitute for walking, which is justly called the prince of exercises. [1]

There were different kinds of walking that he engaged in, beginning with the South African Volksrust satyagraha of 1913, against the pass laws, when Gandhi marched with nearly 3000 others, including women, to protest the pass laws and the three pound tax (the tax

was eventually dropped in 1914). He was repeatedly arrested and bailed out, but he always rejoined the march. But I would like to briefly gesture towards Dandi and Noakhali, two very different but meaningful walks that he undertook in India. My text is in the nature of a meditation on walking, as a physical and intensely political act. More important, it is a reflection on what we can draw into our political practice in the present. Walking, therefore, may just be the metaphor.

Dandi

On 9 March 1930, Gandhi declared the salt march and satyagraha as his final test, towards true freedom. The salt tax was the most unjust of taxes, bearing down on the poor with greater impact than on the well to do. Salt was not simply taxed, it was a state monopoly. But to choose that as the basis on which to rally the nation was seen as something of an eccentricity by most Congress people (including Nehru).

> Noakhali was a personal expiation, a lonely journey of healing in a deeply fractured society. It was a redemptive act; a recognition of how Gandhi's methods were dated, and failing.

As a protest against an unjust colonial law, and indeed the injustices of colonialism itself, the Dandi march was a 'War of Love' and a test of ahimsa principles against the might of a brutal regime. Gandhi called the satyagraha a sacred pilgrimage, one that moved inwards, as part of the self-purification and constant self-examination, achieved through the maintenance of a diary. It was not a battle to be fought with money, he repeatedly said.

It was no less than a battle for India's self-respect. "At present India's self-respect, in fact her all, is symbolised as it were in a handful of salt in the satyagrahi's hand. Let the fist holding it therefore be broken, but let there be no voluntary surrender of the salt". It was, too, a fight for democracy, and for a state "which has authority to abolish a tax which does not deserve to be paid. It is one in which the people can determine when a certain thing should or should not be paid".

Seventy eight men joined him belonging to different parts of the country. But there were notable absences: women and Muslims. It reveals as much about Gandhi's understanding of the colonial regime that he disallowed women: he believed that the British would not attack women, and that would defeat the purpose of satyagraha. (As it were, the government held back, allowing him to follow through this defiant pilgrimage to the sea, and arrested him a month after Dandi.) The Muslim absence was a sign of his failure, for not being able to allay Muslim fears about the Congress plan. To complaints that he did not pass through Muslim villages, he said he did not go where not invited; but at Dandi itself, he stayed at Saifee villa on 6 April 1930, and broke the salt law from there.

India, 1930 was an extraordinary moment, when many un-Gandhian things were happening, ranging from revolutionary violence (the Chittagong Armoury Raids), peasant rebellion, the rising presence of and demands of women, and also working class strikes. Gandhi was acutely aware of these contradictory tendencies, even if not all those engaged in multiple actions were aware of him.

Supposing ten men in each of the 700,000 villages in India come forward to manufacture salt and to disobey the Salt Act, what do you think can this Government do? Even the worst autocrat you can imagine would not dare to blow regiments of peaceful civil resisters out of a cannon's mouth. If only you will bestir yourselves just a little, I assure you we should be able to tire this Government out in a very short time. I want you, therefore, to

understand the meaning of this struggle and to do your part in it. If it is only curiosity that sustain it, moves you to walk this long distance, you had better not waste your time and mine.

And the Dandi march roused the nation into action as Civil Disobedience for close to four years, though the Salt Law did not get repealed until just after independence.

Noakhali

Nothing could be further from the Civil Disobedience movement launched in 1930 than the four months Gandhi spent in Muslim-dominated Noakhali (and Tipperah) on the eve of Independence. When riots and violence broke out against the Hindus of Noakhali and Tipperah, including the forcible conversion of people, the abduction of women, the killing of entire families, and the boycott of Hindus, Gandhi decided to spend four months, between November 1946 and March 1947 at Noakhali. From January 7 he began walking from village to village, to speak of the urgent necessity of communal peace.

Noakhali represents the very opposite of the Dandi March. It was not an act of protest that galvanised the entire nation, an act of anti-colonial nationalism. It was a personal expiation, a lonely journey of healing in a deeply fractured society. It was a redemptive act; a recognition of how Gandhi's methods were dated, and failing. And it was a calculated risk, by a 77-year old man, who knew he was courting death by living among his foes, both Muslim and Hindu. Huseyn Shaheed Suhrawardy, the prime minister of Bengal, thought he should be in Bihar where many more Muslims were being killed than Hindus at Noakhali; even the Congress thought he should be there, but he did not go until March 1947.

As the Congress was readying itself to take over the mantle of the British Raj, Gandhi was a lonely and irrelevant figure. He noted how "the attendance of both Hindus and Muslims at prayer meetings was dwindling". In December 1946, he wrote:

I am groping for light. I am surrounded by darkness; but I must act or refrain as guided by truth. I find that I have not the patience and the technique needed in these tragic circumstances; suffering and evil often overwhelms me and I stew in my own juice.

The enemy was no longer the coloniser, it was within.

Make no mistake, the enemy that Gandhi identified was not the Indian Muslim. It was the prospect of violence. It was a walk aimed at overcoming the fear of Hindus and the hostility of the Muslims; it was against an enemy within each person, the source of this hatred

and hostility, and above all, to persuade the Hindus not to respond in like manner, (but of course parallel riots that occurred in Bihar and Garmuktheswar would actually be another blow to his own efforts.) He had to prevent "the Congress from turning into a Hindu communal organisation. Anyone who had made India his home should be protected".

> Rahul Gandhi's Bharat Jodo Yatra took a leaf from the Mahatma, by engaging in a 'war of love'-note: not a war against love that is currently being propagated as a Hindu virtue.

He was deeply aware of the irreconcilable gulf that had emerged between Hindus and Muslims. Everywhere, he lamented on almost a daily basis, he was surrounded by darkness. Everywhere, he was face to face with the defeat of ahimsa as a principle of life. Yet he was acutely aware of what the answers to bridging that gulf could mean, it would not come from the police and the army (imagine that oxymoron taking root: a *peace*-keeping *force*) but only from a change of heart. "The function of the police was to arrest thieves and dacoits, that of the military to guard them against foreign aggression. The police and the military could not teach them to cease fighting among themselves and live as friends". He needed just one good Muslim and one good Hindu in each village.

Gandhi's walk, with just two or three companions, across the villages of Noakhali, was barefoot, and his path was strewn with glass, and shit by the Muslims, to deter him in this lonely quest. He was opposed not just by the Muslims but by Hindus too, who asked 'why did he not fast in Noakhali?' His answer was interesting: not until he could make Muslims his friends. But he reduced his intake of food, partly as expiation for what was happening in the gruesome retaliatory killings in Bihar. He was not against a forcible repatriation of Bihari Muslims to Bengal if it meant that their lives would be saved: this action, he said "though fully violent, would have been better than that to which Bihar had lowered herself today. Violence, when cowardly, only served to degrade and did not yield the desired political result".

This was indeed, as Sumit Sarkar called it, the 'Mahatma's finest hour'. Wracked by self-doubt throughout, it was to end in marked failure, but it also showed that he refused to give up or revise those principles he had held dear throughout his life. While all events unfolding around him proved that partition was inevitable, it took Gandhi longer to recognise that there was, too, an irreconcilable division of hearts. His search for one good Muslim and one good Hindu from each village was in vain. Hindus did not always return to their villages from which they had been evacuated. Nor was his proposal, that one Congress worker immerse themselves in one village, regardless of the consequences, realised.

But he persisted in the hope of turning the tide. This quest was as much personal as overtly political. His frequent refusal of humanitarian aid from outside was, as his companion Nirmal Kumar Bose tells us, to elevate the discourse to a distinctly political plane, to put the onus on the Government of Bengal. This was, as Faisal Devji interprets it, in order to elevate the Hindus from being mere victims to being moral agents.

Gandhi in Our Times

"Why not the music of the walk, of the march, of every movement of ours and of every activity?" Gandhi once asked. There are many among Indian political leaders who have deployed the walk as a form of political mobilisation. But let us remember that this tactic has been used off and on by adherents of all political persuasions, from the Right to the Left. The farmers of Nargund and Navalgund under the Progressive Democratic Front marched 550 kilometres to the capital Bengaluru, resulting in a historic mingling of farmer and worker in February 1981.

> Gandhi showed us ways of being Indian that are not necessarily nationalist in those senses, and greatly relevant to our times. He showed the greatest respect for India as 'a nation of nations'.

Rahul Gandhi's *Bharat Jodo Yatra* took a leaf from the Mahatma, by engaging in a 'war of love'-note: not a war against love that is currently being propagated as a Hindu virtue. The yatra represented both an act of political mobilisation for a different India from the one towards which we are being propelled, but it was equally an act of expiation, providing a healing touch as it were. Truly, as U.R. Ananthamurthy had posed it in his *Hindutva athava Hind Swaraj*, the newer Gandhi was trying to desperately retrieve the affective essence of another way of being Indian from the tsunami of Hindutva hate in new India.

At the same time, more than 100 volunteers from Ladakh, including climate activist Sonam Wangchuk, began a foot march to Delhi to demand constitutional protections for the ecologically fragile Ladakh region. Their non-violent protest was threatening enough for the

current regime to physically prevent its entry into the capital. But Wangchuk has rightly recognised Gandhi's message from *Hind Swaraj*, namely, that modern civilisation has come at a very high price; it is important, if not urgent, to reduce our needs, rather than strive to meet ever increasing desires. *Hind Swaraj* showed the great prescience of Gandhi's observations and practice throughout his life of what is inter-generational responsibility, what is sustainable. If we had to identify one of the most threatening words in today's political lexicon, it is 'development' and the horrors it brings in its wake.

So our first obligation today is to *fearless speech*. In addition to the two examples cited above, let me take two examples that come from the world of art today. We do know that the lathi-as-weapon, rather than as the essential third limb of Gandhi, has attained unprecedented importance in our national life.

As *You I could not save, walk with me* shows, perhaps it will be our artists/curators who will preserve and protect the memories of our past, at a time when we urgently need to rescue our history from the suffocating travesties that masquerade as historical truth. Perhaps it will be our poets that will connect us affectively to the greatest need of our times: compassion and empathy. It is this crossover of symbols-from benign to malevolent-that artist B.V. Suresh brought to his installation at a previous edition of the Kochi-Muziris Biennale, in December 2018. In the artwork, Gandhi, the apostle of peace, dissolved into the Rudra Hanuman, a masculinist, muscular and militaristic (and angry) portrait that many cars have today made popular His installation was no less than a searing comment on how thoroughly the Indian republic as we know it has been gutted in the last few years. He has allowed his alarm-and indeed sorrow-about the new India that is taking shape to be seen and heard in the semi-darkened godown at Aspinwall. He foresaw that a diaphanous synthetic would replace the khadi tiranga under the current regime's 'Har Ghar Tiranga'.

One cannot think of more apt instances of fearless speech, since at no earlier time in our independent nation's life has one felt so acutely the bestial power of the lathi, unrestrained in its authority when wielded as a 'people's weapon', especially against the most defenceless. We must learn, urgently, the art of fearless speech. "If we will be men walking with our heads erect and not walking on all fours, let us understand and put ourselves under voluntary discipline and restraint". This is why Gandhi regarded *sedition as his duty* in his times.

Suresh's installation allowed us the glimpse of another important lesson from Gandhi for our times. Gandhi was the epitome of another masculinity, which recovered the less muscular, non-, even anti-militant, more humane and compassionate human being. We have to (re)train ourselves to be compassionate; to care for the self if only to care for others. True, there were many aspects of Gandhi's attitude to women which were troubling and perhaps even unacceptable in our times (it was in Noakhali that he engaged in the infamous test of celibacy with his niece Manu, when he publicly called himself God's Eunuch). But he also strove throughout his life to represent another ideal of what it is to be manly.

Above all, we need to relearn the *lessons of tolerance*: "Differences of religious opinion will persist to the end of time; toleration is the only thing that will enable persons belonging to different religions to live as good neighbours and friends. Religion never suffers by reason of the criticism - fair or foul- of critics; it always suffers from the laxity or indifference of its followers."

> We must develop and sustain a deep respect for regional cultures, languages and identities, and a willingness to dismantle privilege. Even if we have to do this alone.

Gandhi was someone who defied binaries both in his political and personal life: blurring the lines between religious and secular, between personal and political, between individual and collective, between defiance and accountability, between being a practising Hindu as opposed to being a leader of Hindus alone, he strove to build up a profoundly political grammar and vocabulary.

Finally, the virtues of federalism. The anti-colonial struggle had more or less ended in 1946/7, when independence, though not partition, was a certainty. Noakhali teaches us that Gandhi's quest was for *another way of being Indian*, one who must avoid majoritarian nationalism at all costs. Anti-colonial nationalism must not segue into anti-minority nationalism. Gandhi showed us ways of being Indian that are not necessarily nationalist in those senses, and greatly relevant to our times. He showed the greatest respect for India as 'a nation of nations', as Madhavan Palat has put it, in which "Nearly every State of the Indian Union is a nation and is nationalist within itself to a surprising degree, and their nationalisms date from the late nineteenth century, coeval with the pan-Indian nationalisms, civic and ethnic."

Though Gandhi never spoke much about federalism as an ideal, federalism was a necessity for India to survive. At 77, while relying on Nirmal Chandra Bose as interpreter, he set out to learn Bengali, hoping that he can become one with the Bengalis. No one can accuse him of having no love of country. "I have become a Bengali to all intents and purposes. Today Nirmal Babu is my ears and is indispensable, but when I learn enough Bengali, he will be free to go". Our new repertoire of action must emerge from this firm conviction of the importance of the regions. We must develop and sustain a deep respect for regional cultures, languages and identities, and a willingness to dismantle privilege. Even if we have to do this alone. Remember Tagore's song that became Gandhi's anthem in the darkness of Noakhali: *Jodi tor dak seneu keu na aashe tobe ekla chalo re* .

Janaki Nair retired as professor of history at the Centre for Historical Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi. This is a revised version of a talk presented at the National Gallery of Modern Art, Bengaluru on 4 October, 2024.

Footnotes:

1 All quotes of Gandhi are from the Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi, Volumes 43 and 86.