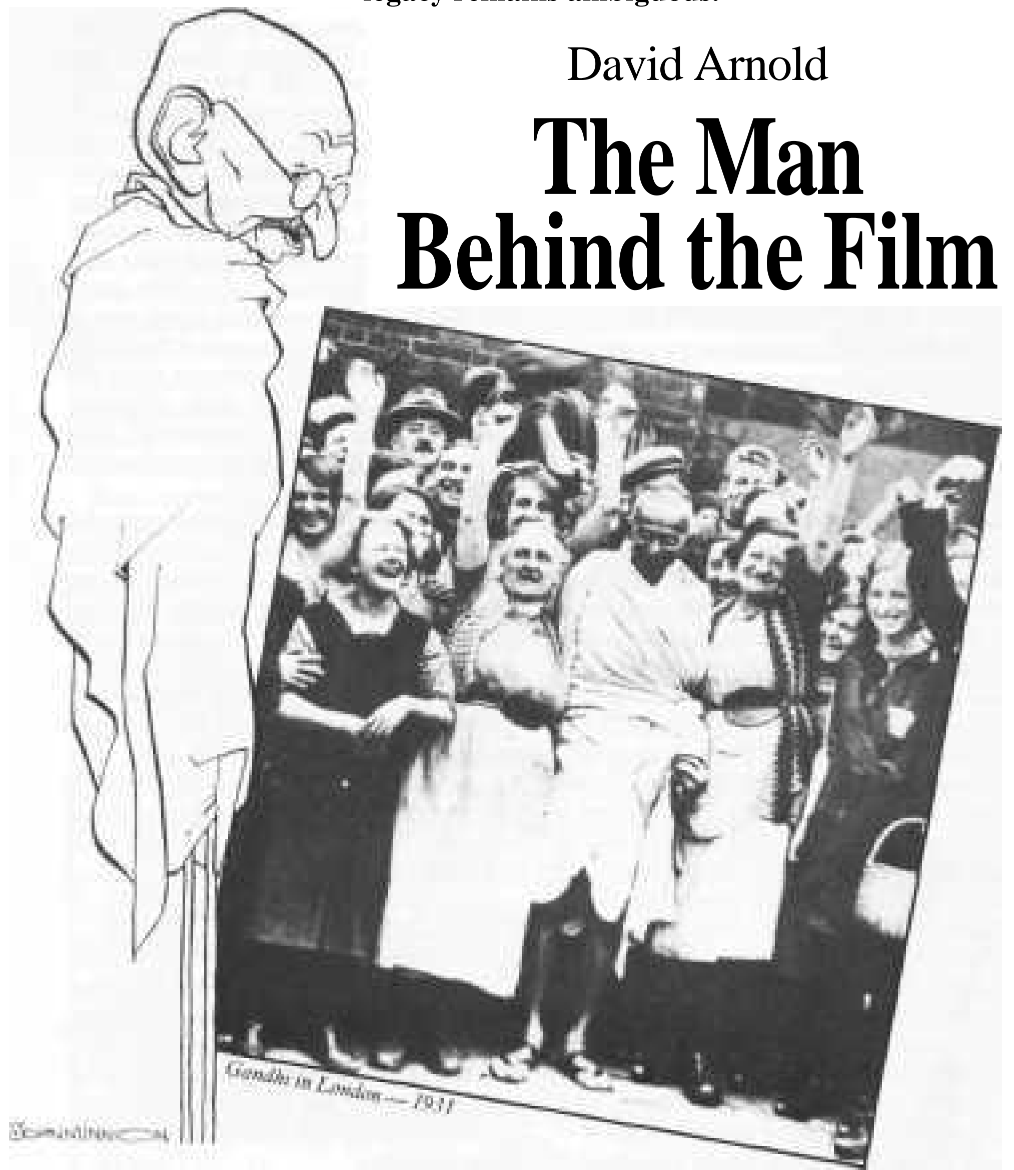
Gandhi is one of the great figures of the twentieth century, inspiring the independence of India. Nonetheless, his political legacy remains ambiguous.

David Arnold

The Man Behind the Film



Gandhi in London — 1931

Richard Attenborough's highly acclaimed film *Gandhi* makes of its subject a universal, twentieth-century hero. For all its box-office sentimentality, the film presents a persuasive picture of Gandhi as unmistakably human, even a shade cranky, but imbued with a stubborn sense of moral purpose, a tireless fighter against racism, social oppression and the tyranny of foreign rule. It offers a reassuringly middle-class view of the world: fundamental differences can be resolved through peaceful persuasion and protest without recourse to violence; the voice of the concerned individual can be heard even in an age of masses and machines; truth and justice (almost always) triumphs over evil and oppression. Mahatma Gandhi, in a familiar genre of cinematic heroism, strides again.

Gandhi was undoubtedly one of the modern world's most remarkable political leaders. Some people have rated him alongside Lenin and Mai Tse-tung as a crucial and formative influence on the politics of the twentieth century. Gandhi, unlike Lenin and Mao, has no revolution to his name. No state or ruling party, even in India, would claim to be Gandhian. But his direction of the Indian nationalist movement contributed to the British decision to quit India in 1947, thereby also loosening the hold of British imperialism over other Asian and African territories. His ideas of non-violent civil disobedience continue, as in the present-day anti-nuclear campaign in Britain, to inspire protest movements in many parts of the world. What kind of leader was Gandhi? Was he a genuine man of the masses? Was it the case, as Jawaharlal Nehru once maintained, that Gandhi 'did not descend from the top; he seemed to emerge from the millions of India, speaking their language and incessantly drawing attention to them and their appalling condition'?[1] Or is it more realistic to see Gandhi as a middle-class hero, a patron saint of middle-class causes?

Western influence

To an even greater degree than Attenborough's film suggests Gandhi was a man of two worlds. By training and profession — he qualified as a barrister in London in 1891 — Gandhi belonged to the world of India's emerging professional middle class. Mostly from high-caste families and educated in Western-style colleges and universities, men of this class modelled themselves on the middle classes of late nineteenth century Europe, adopting their twin faiths in nationalism and liberal democracy as well as an English style of speech and dress. Although acutely conscious of India's colonial subjection and of the racial discrimination they suffered at the hands of the British rulers, few middle-class politicians before Gandhi saw any practical alternative to trying to wrest piecemeal reforms from the reluctant British.

Despite his highly symbolic change from barrister's suit to labourer's loin-cloth, Gandhi never quite left this middle-class, Western-orientated world behind. He continued throughout his life to be influenced by it and to react sharply against it. Gandhi created for himself a moral philosophy which drew its language and its fundamental inspiration from an idiosyncratic interpretation of Hinduism and traditional Indian values. He at times systematically denied the validity of Western rationalism and historicism, thereby setting himself outside Western middle-class modes of thought.[2] He emphatically rejected the entire structure of political and civil society, from the legislatures to the Western-style schools and law courts, which the British had established in India. And yet his closest associates, men like Jawaharlal Nehru, Vallabhbhai Patel, Rajendra Prasad and C Rajagopalachari, were drawn from the same middle-class background as himself, even from the same legal profession. While he eschewed formal power and office for himself, he accepted as

> Gandhi... a patron saint of middle class causes?

a political necessity that they should, at the appropriate time, take up the apparatus of administration and control bequeathed by the British. Nearly 30 years of civil disobedience and extra-parliamentary activity in India ultimately merely served to bring about the old middle-class dream of India as a nation state in the European mould. Gandhi had conceived no practical or desirable alternative.

Indian masses

But Gandhi, while yet belonging to and maintaining a dialogue with middle-class India and the West, was also drawn towards another world, the world of the Indian masses, for whom the West remained a shadowy and distant presence. After mixing with Indians of all classes in South Africa, where to be Indian (and thus part of a despised racial minority) was the primary political fact, Gandhi felt uneasy among the polished middle-class politicians he found in charge of the Indian National Congress on his return to India in 1915. He saw the nationalist movement as it then existed as remote from the millions it casually claimed to represent, caught in an impasse between sterile constitutionalism and fitful (and no less elitist) terrorism. To this extent Gandhi's turning to the masses was a shrewd political move based on a realistic appraisal of the limitations of the existing movement. The tiny middle class alone could not force the British to leave India: it could not command sufficient strength and scale of organised opposition. Only a mass movement could, in his view, succeed, especially if it took up the methods of *satyagraha* (non-violent civil disobedience) he had pioneered in South Africa. But Gandhi's reorientation of the nationalist struggle stemmed from more than a narrow view of political tactics: it was also deeply expressive of his personal philosophy and middle class idealism.

Gandhi did not come from a peasant background. His family were small-town folk from the Bania trading community. His grandfather, uncle, and father had each in turn held the post of *dewan* (prime minister) in the minor princely state of Porbandar in western Gujarat. Until he began his campaigns among the peasants of Bihar and Gujarat in 1917-18 (when he was already 48 years old), Gandhi had not lived or worked among Indian peasants, except at one remove, in South Africa. His attraction to them did not, therefore, spring from any established connection or first-hand experience of peasant life. Rather it was motivated by a reaction against the* mechanised, materialistic, class-riven, urban and industrial society which Gandhi comprehensively dubbed 'modern civilisation' and which he had glimpsed in the mining areas of South Africa at the turn of the century. Gandhi was convinced that British rule as such was not the primary evil to be fought in India, but the 'disease' of competitive acquisitiveness which he believed afflicted Britain and through Britain was corrupting India.

a highly selective view of village life, owing more to Ruskin and Tolstoy . . . than to the realities of village India

New **found confidence**

Gandhi expressed his views on this matter most fully and most trenchantly in his tract *Hind Swaraj* (Indian Home Rule) written in 1908, though he stuck to them for the remaining 40 years of his life. Happiness, he wrote, was a mental not a material condition. Men were not necessarily happy because they were rich or unhappy because they were poor. Seeing that wealth and material progress were not the key to happiness, 'our ancestors', Gandhi claimed, 'dissuaded us from luxuries and pleasures.' They could have invented machines, 'but our forefathers knew that, if we set our hearts after such things, we would become slaves and lose our moral fibre.' Thus, according to Gandhi, India had wisely chosen to exist with the same kind of plough, the same kind of cottages, the same kind of indigenous education as had existed for centuries, and thus did not succumb, as had the West, to a 'system of life-corroding competition.' In a passage of particular bitterness, Gandhi went on to claim that 'our forefathers ... further reasoned that large cities were a snare and a useless incumbrance and that people would not be happy in them, that there would be gangs of thieves and robbers, prostitution and vice flourishing in them and that poor men would be robbed by rich men. They were, therefore, satisfied with small villages.'[3]

Gandhi was not concerned with the historical accuracy (or otherwise) of his assertions. He was expressing what he saw as a cardinal moral truth and one with profound implications for the future of India and India's relations with the West. Two consequences were of especial importance. By rejecting Western capitalism ('modern civilisation') as destructive of true human happiness and satisfaction, Gandhi reversed the moral relationship that had hitherto prevailed between Britain and India. The master became the pupil, the slave the liberator. Instead of seeking to emulate middle-class Europe's competitiveness and acquisitiveness, as Gandhi suspected India's middle class of doing, and thus accepting and perpetuating the moral and material superiority of the West, Gandhi was claiming that India held a higher moral truth, which the West (in its own Christianity) had lost sight of, but would do well to rediscover from India. This gave to Gandhi and those Indian nationalists he inspired a new-found sense of confidence and independence that drew upon a profound and ancient sense of racial and cultural pride. By totally rejecting one set of fundamental middle class values, by seeming to stand quite outside the world of the middle classes, Indian and European, Gandhi was in actuality helping to create the sense of independent political leadership and authority that was the prerequisite for the creation of that middle-class goal, the nation state, and of middle class hegemony within it.

Virtues of the village

The other major consequence that stemmed from Gandhi's condemnation of 'modern civilisation' was that he turned to the villages and to peasantry as the well-springs and the uncontaminated reservoirs of that other, higher moral order. Where Mao and before him Lenin saw in village society a developing battlefield between antagonistic class interests, Gandhi's vision of the village was an idealised one — basically self-sufficient and self-contained, functioning harmoniously through a mutually beneficial division of labour, free from the divisive and corrupting influences of modern industrial society. It was a highly selective and middle-class view of village life, owing more to Ruskin and Tolstoy and the late nineteenth-century reaction against a 'soul-less', machine-orientated, mass consumer society and interventionist state than to the realities of village India in the twentieth century. Gandhi was harking back to a golden age which, if it had ever existed, was fast disappearing. The economic and social

[1] Quoted in M D Lewis (ed) *Gandhi: Maker of Modern India* Boston 1965 p5.

[2] For this and much that follows, see Farther Chatterjee, 'Gandhism and the Political Appropriation of the Peasantry', in Ranajit Guha (ed) *Subaltern Studies* III forthcoming

[3] M K Gandhi *Hind Swaraj* Ahmedabad 1938pp61-2

character of India's villages was almost everywhere changing: rural and industrial capitalism were making their inroads, intensifying the conflicts between rural rich and rural poor which had surely never been entirely absent. Characteristically, Gandhi chose to make his own model villages, the *ashrams* at Sabarmati in Gujarat and later at Wardha in central India. This was not quite playing at rustics, as Marie Antoinette and her court had once done, but the gulf between the model *ashram* and the reality of faction and class-ridden village life was not an inconsiderable one.

As an outsider, as an idealist, Gandhi could not resist wanting the peasantry on his own terms. When peasant participants in the civil disobedience campaign of 1921-22 turned to violence, Gandhi was deeply perturbed. That violence was an intrinsic part of peasant life and self-expression was unacceptable to Gandhi. The sage of Sabarmati accordingly called the campaign off, at the very point, some believed, when it was beginning to become a genuine (if somewhat unruly) mass movement. Gandhi was responding to his own scruples about non-violence, but among the middle class as a whole there was alarm at the potentially revolutionary course the movement appeared to be taking.

Class conflict

It followed, too, from Gandhi's reaction against industrial capitalism that he had little interest in the conditions and aspirations of India's proportionately small but growing industrial working class. It was almost irredeemably contaminated by the evils of 'modern civilisation' and big city life. In 1918, while still serving his political apprenticeship in India, Gandhi did intervene in an industrial dispute in Ahmedabad, partly at the request of the

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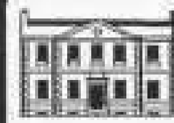

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mill-owner, in the belief that the two sides could be reconciled and harmonious relations established between labour and capital. Although his intervention gave Gandhi a favourable reputation among industrial workers elsewhere in India, it was an experiment he did not attempt to repeat and his attitude towards labour was generally unhelpful. When Gandhi addressed striking mill-hands in Madras in 1919 his principal advice was that they should give up drinking and gambling and follow his example by taking up hand-spinning. The suggestion was not well received. On more than one occasion during the 1920s when industrial workers sought Gandhi's blessing for non-violent strike action, he responded with a curt telegram that *satyagraha* was 'not lawful in this case.' From a deep antipathy to what he saw as divisive class conflict, Gandhi was content to entrust the workers to the industrialists' paternalism, urging the latter (like the landlords in the countryside) to live up to their responsibilities as 'trustees' holding their wealth on behalf of the poor.

A new identity

But it would be a mistake to underestimate Gandhi's political achievement or to cast him merely as the 'mascot of the bourgeoisie'.[4] Few political leaders in history, starting from a middle-class base, have identified themselves so completely with the masses. This was especially remarkable in India where the gulf between the Western-educated middle class and the peasantry, between the high castes and the Harijans (the term Gandhi himself coined for the 'untouchables') was so vast as to often appear unbridgable. Gandhi made of himself a living bridge between the middle classes and the peasantry. By his style of dress, by his language, by the images and symbols he invoked, by his readiness to live and work among India's poorest and most despised people, he came close to effecting a real juncture between the two. By becoming a *mahatma* ('great soul'), by taking on the established and revered persona of a holy man (albeit one dressed in a loin-cloth rather than the *sannyasin's* customary saffron robes), by adopting the role of the itinerant sage who had renounced wealth, possessions and temporal power, Gandhi created a living image with which many millions of Indians (not just peasants, not just Hindus) could identify. At the same time, speaking from inside that persona, Gandhi could project ideas — such as the removal of untouchability or civil disobedience for the attainment of national independence — that had seldom or never before been articulated by conventional Hindu holy men, and which came, in essence, from the middle-class Gandhi within.

The results were not always those that Gandhi expected or hoped for. Not even the authority of the Mahatma could do much to alter deep-seated attitudes towards Harijans: their oppression and exploitation continues in India today. Nor could Gandhi rid India of the violence that arose, and continues to rise, from communal and class antagonism. The peasants often worshipped Gandhi as a deity rather than heeding his political messages, or

Gandhi leaving the Presidency Gaol, Calcutta

Gandhi made of himself a living bridge between the middle classes and the peasantry

attributed to him a whole range of magical powers that had little or nothing to do with his political doctrines but which were an integral part of the peasant folkloric tradition.[5] As Gandhi was in search of a peasantry of his own imagining, so the peasants saw in Gandhi a *mahatma* who accorded with their own traditions and aspirations. The two never quite met.

But while differences in outlook remained, the gulf between the peasantry and the urban middle class nationalists was in one important respect narrowing. With the growth of rural capitalism, a class of rich peasants was emerging in the Indian countryside. On the one hand they feared violent and revolutionary change which might jeopardise their own privileged position, and yet their grievances, particularly over land taxation and rents, against the British and their big landlord allies, disposed them towards anti-colonialism. The Gandhian Congress provided such peasants with a political vehicle through which they could attain their limited political objectives without serious risk of a revolution from below.

Modern India

The upshot of Gandhi's intervention in India's political evolution was, therefore, not merely to put the pressure of mass agitation on the British imperialists and thereby, in the long term, contribute to their departure. He was also instrumental in establishing the Congress Party as a broad coalition of class groups, from the peasants to the capitalists, led by middle-class intellectuals like himself but able to articulate and incorporate a wide spectrum of class interests. Gandhi's principal legacy to India has been non-violence (which has had no more than a fitful and chequered career in India since his death 35 years ago) but the abiding myth of class harmony. In actuality, for many industrial workers, poor peasants, untouchables and tribals, class oppression and exploitation remain all too real. But by combining a mass base among the richer sections of the peasantry with the support of a large section of the middle classes, the Congress has very effectively maintained the rule of India's propertied classes and ensured the continued exploitation of the propertyless.

It is in the West, rather than in India, that Gandhi's legacy of non-violence is most apparent. The instrument he designed to combat racism in South Africa and colonial rule in India has found a more comfortable home among the middle classes of Europe and North America. These, after all, are societies in which state and class oppression are not so extreme as to deny protesters a voice. They are societies in which the middle classes feel both the need and the capacity to express their dissent, but without resort to violence or revolutionary change. Western societies allow to their articulate minorities a prominence in the media and in public debate the poor and the oppressed in the Third World seldom enjoy. Perhaps, without quite knowing it, Attenborough, in his portrayal of Gandhi as a middle-class hero, got it right after all. n

[4] R Palme Dutt *India Today* London 1940 p323.

[5] Shahid Amin 'Gandhi as Mahatma' in Guha (ed) *Subaltern Studies* III forthcoming.