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## Attenborough's Truth: The Politics of Gandhi

Akhil Gupta

*Gandhi*, directed by Richard Attenborough, with Ben Kingsley, 1982.

EVEN FOR an industry dedicated to hyperbole, the advertisements for *Gandhi* seem excessive: "The Man of the Century," the poster reads, "The Motion Picture of a Lifetime." Further down, we see Ben Kingsley looking humbly at the print below him, which says GANDHI in a big block typeface. Perhaps the trembling print is intended to convey the rough edges, the unfinished nature of a man ceaselessly in quest of self-perfection; perhaps it indicates Attenborough's trepidation at attempting a project thought to be impossible to sell. The media blitz, however, is not over yet; we read on: "His triumph changed the world forever."

It is not certain whether this will convince you to see the movie or to steer clear of it, just as it is not obvious whether Kingsley is merely trying to look saintly or whether his head is bowed apologetically. What is clear is that *Gandhi* has received enormous publicity—Columbia spent more than half as much in advertising as it did in producing this twenty-two million dollar film. *Gandhi* has probably been seen by more people in the West than any other cultural artifact from, or about, South Asia.

It is this fact that makes one stop and ask what the film is trying to achieve, and in what ways it succeeds or fails. Most reviewers, predictably enough, have concentrated on the film's dramatic structure or lack thereof; on Kingsley's wonderfully believable performance in the title role; and on Attenborough's uninspired direction. But the film itself, as a text, must be connected to its context—both the sequence of events that happened historically, in a different time and place, and the course of events relating to the production of the film.

For almost twenty years now, ever since he first read Louis Fischer's adoring and compelling *The Life of Mahatma Gandhi*, Attenborough has been pursuing the idea of filming a biography of Gandhi. There are many possible ways he could have approached the subject. Attenborough might have focused, for instance, on Gandhi's abnormal personal life: on his one-sided decision to become celibate; on his severe withdrawal of love from his own children because he claimed that all the children in the world were his own; on his eccentric theories about the values of goat's milk and the evils of passion—in short, Attenborough could have produced a psychological biohistory. Or he could have focused on Gandhi as a great moral figure: as the one person unhesitatingly assigned to the highest stage of Kohlberg's theory of moral development (the stage where the subject successfully universalizes a sense

of justice derived from a reflective and self-reflecting understanding of human rights); on his courageous, determined, sometimes foolish tests of the will; or on his innocent and disarming belief in the inherent goodness of all human beings.

As yet another alternative, we could have been given the portrait of Gandhi as a religious man: a man who read the works of many religions with curiosity and sympathy, yet remained quintessentially Hindu; who reinterpreted the violent internecine struggles of the *Gita* as a battle within each soul, good against evil; who, on the other hand, refusing the dogmatism of conservative Hindus, actively encouraged intercaste and interreligious marriage; who promoted communal living and stressed the dignity of manual labor, partly as a symbolic act in an effort at "uplifting" the Untouchables; and who aspired, if not to Godhood, at least "to see God face to face"—a private conference, nothing more. Attenborough could have told us why Gandhi was given the title "Mahatma" (literally, Great Soul) by his followers. In other words, we might have been given the portrait of a saint as a living human being. Yet he did none of these.

With good reason, Attenborough chose to tell the story of Gandhi as a political leader. Though the film touches on domestic matters that have no overt significance, it is the important political events of Gandhi's times that occupy the viewer's attention over most of the film's three hours. Some events, like the Jallianwala Bagh massacre, are only incidentally connected to Gandhi himself: they are mainly important in establishing the mood of the period—forming the canvas on which Gandhi's portrait is painted. In this respect, Attenborough has zoomed in unerringly: Gandhi's importance to history lies in his role as a politician.

It is a mistake, though, to presume that this is also where his greatness lies. He was certainly important, and he may have been great at the same time, but it was not for the same reasons. Conversely, the qualities that made him a remarkable human being didn't necessarily make him an effective leader. There is a persistent tendency to equate the two, an inclination that arises from Gandhi's own elision of the personal and the public.

As political biography, *Gandhi* is more than an individual story. It is also an interpretation of history, an interpretation that is seriously misinformed and, to its audience, misinforming. The charge of historical inaccuracy is not new, and Attenborough's defense has been that he is trying to tell the story of a man, not trying to depict history. But this is not a defensible position. Even if he had not chosen to portray Gandhi as a political figure, a certain view of history would have been implicit in the film.

IN ATTENBOROUGH'S film, Gandhi is the independence movement, unilaterally setting policy for other leaders of the Congress to follow. Surely this was not the case; Nehru, for one—a strong, stubborn man—had a very different vision from Gandhi's. He may have agreed with Gandhi for tactical reasons (perhaps realizing as well the advantages of doing so for his own ascent to power), but in the film we get none of that. Nehru emerges as something of a wimp and a sycophant, a colorless yes-man to the bright light of Gandhi. So it is with all the other leaders: all they can do is gasp and shake their heads in disbelief, full of awe in the presence of the Great Soul.

The only exception is Jinnah, and consider his fate: in this battle of good and evil, even a child could pick out the villain. Slit-eyed, pock-marked, monocled, English-sounding Jinnah obstinately opposes Gandhi's gentle ways, his path to Truth and Virtue; instead, he is communalistic and divisive, intent on splitting India into two countries and three geographical units. It would be going too far to say that the Jinnah we see in *Gandhi* is a character: his is a caricature, even less flesh-and-blood than the other caricatures. We are never shown Jinnah's point of view; in fact, we are never shown anyone's point of view but Gandhi's. It is as if Gandhi had entered Attenborough's soul and decided to film an immodest autobiography.

However, neither the effacement of the other Congress leaders nor the blacklisting of Jinnah constitutes the major weakness of *Gandhi*. That is a more fundamental error, revealed in the role of Gandhi himself. Serene, shrewd, and wise, he inevitably displays impeccable timing, always seeming to strike when the iron of history is hot. The origins of this "Great Man" view of history lie in Greek thought: the Greeks believed that history was composed of the great deeds of individual men, streaks of achievement that interrupt the cyclic rhythms of everyday life. But if this strand of history has illustrious origins, the same cannot be said of its subsequent development. Attenborough's Gandhi may be Hegel's World-Historical Figure, but what has happened to Hegelian Process?

On the one hand, this view of history seems to focus exclusively on human agency while ignoring social structure; on the other hand, it ignores the role of the real actors, the millions who in following Gandhi actually took the blows and the bullets, burnt their mill-made textiles and suffered the fate of common criminals in over-crowded prisons. Leaders lead because those whom they lead enable them to do so. Unless we view people as either idiots or automatons, we cannot assume unidirectional causality from leaders to followers. A relation of leader/follower implies dependence on both sides: that is the essential nature of all power relations, a fact that seems to have escaped Attenborough.

Let me offer a single example of the way in which the film *Gandhi* ignores such political complexities. If we are to believe Attenborough, the British fought hard to keep India, leaving only after being humiliated in a tremendous struggle with a morally superior foe. But one does not need to deny either British

brutality or the genuineness of the struggle waged against them to reject this very official interpretation of events. The British left India for several reasons, only one of them being the nationalist agitation. They must have realized that to exploit raw materials and cheap labor, it was not necessary to bear the costs of colonialism. This would be the age of the New Imperialism, and the penetration of capitalism to the far reaches of the world system would assure the continuation of economic exploitation behind the twin veils of "free and equal exchange" and "comparative advantage." Besides, weakened by the war, the British were in no position to stop the new global powers (like America) from muscling in to share the spoils. The balance of power had shifted and colonialism, always a monopoly holding, could no longer be tolerated.

Complementing these external factors were internal ones that were no less important. Popular movements were mushrooming all over the nation. Some of these were directed specifically against the British. Others, like the strike wave among urban labor groups and the numerous peasant revolts, merely seized an opportunity of state weakness to demand fundamental changes. Several of these uprisings had substantial communist involvement. There is evidence to suggest that the Congress was as disturbed by these movements as were the British. In their hastiness to assume power before things "got out of hand," the Congress proved quite willing to pay the price of partition.

If it is true that the British left India for reasons other than just the nationalist agitation—global politics on the one hand, and the pressure of popular movements on the other—it follows that they probably had more power, and the Congress less, than Attenborough has led us to believe. The British would thus have had a very important role in legitimizing the leader of the Indians. It is for this reason that Gandhi cannot be regarded as the "spontaneous" choice of the masses, or even of the small percentage of the population that actually supported him. This may also explain why his supporters perceived Gandhi as being the most likely leader to succeed in the quest for independence: they realized that the British would rather deal with him than with any truly revolutionary force.

If Attenborough has completely neglected the structural aspects of historical change, he can hardly be blamed. As the above example demonstrates, dealing with structure is not an inherently dramatic proposition. Attenborough is in any case too steeped in the manners of conventional film-making even to make the attempt. In this regard, he has been faithful to his subject: Gandhi too was oblivious to structure.

While Gandhi did not understand structure, however, he understood the role of symbolic action only too well. In *Gandhi*, Attenborough gives us the portrait of a shrewd saint, planning and executing his Historic Acts with almost transparent ease. Indeed, the Dandi Salt March is a textbook example: in its timing and conception, it is a masterly demonstration of the skillful use of symbolic power, as well as an effective means to popularize both the issue at hand (a tax on salt, basic to the diet of all Indians) and the larger



question (the extent of British domination). Gandhi showed, perhaps as no other leader in the modern world has done, that the complex processes that generate and regenerate power can be effectively countered with symbolic action. This is because domination, especially in the advanced capitalist countries of the West, is largely ideological, though it may be soundly backed by physical power.

The value of symbolic action, though, must not be overestimated. It is most effective when used as a means of protest, since it lends itself best to the kind of subversive gesture that escapes formal rules, especially the rule of law. The meaning never resides in the act itself; rather, it lies in the invocation of a set of connotations that are culturally shared and are often derived from tradition. But when it is tradition itself that needs to be changed, symbolic action becomes a two-edged sword: it

corresponds very closely to the image propagated by the government of India, the view we have been brought up with. As if to prove the point, the Indian government has put its money where its mouth is—a reported five million dollars. The Prime Minister herself read the script. Attenborough found this comforting, but it should make anyone who is wary of propaganda cringe.

The Forum for Better Cinema, a group of Indian film-makers, questioned the government's financing of *Gandhi* when money was not available for local films. In response, Attenborough promptly "requested" the appropriate ministry to issue a statement that the funds being allocated to *Gandhi* would not affect the money available to local film-makers. (The central and state governments are the biggest sponsors of non-commercial cinema in India, giving low-interest "loans" to young

White, not to mention his foreign adversaries. Perhaps Attenborough does this deliberately, assuming that it would be easier for a Western audience to gain access to Gandhi as he must have appeared to other foreigners. But one gets a very mistaken impression—that Gandhi had few close Indian friends, and that some of the most intimate moments of his life were shared with a journalist from the *New York Times*.

GIVEN THAT *Gandhi* suffers from tepid direction and a superficial and misleading interpretation of history, why has it been so successful with its audience? The night I saw it, people in the theater cheered and clapped throughout the movie.

No doubt *Gandhi* draws on our empathy for the underdog. But in showing how one man—armed with nothing but willpower—succeeds in doing the seemingly impossible, it strikes a utopian

of the screen, it certainly does not draw your attention to the directing itself. Mythmaking succeeds best when it takes on the appearance of reality; that is also when it becomes most dangerous. In fact, the simple title *Gandhi* achieves a perfect elision: the image on the screen melts into the real historical person.

Attenborough's success in "resurrecting" Gandhi is considerably aided by Ben Kingsley. In a tremendously demanding role, during which he has to appear to age about fifty-five years, Kingsley brings Gandhi to life before our eyes. While it is his uncanny resemblance to Gandhi that strikes one at first, it is in the mastery of little details that Kingsley really makes the character so believable. For instance, we watch Gandhi as a young lawyer in South Africa, and then notice his accent become almost imperceptibly more Indian when he comes back to India. We see Gandhi get older and weaker as the film progresses, but that mischievous glint in the eye remains, our only indication of the tremendous vitality that enlivens the man. Kingsley is the soul of *Gandhi*, but an actor alone cannot save a film.

*Gandhi* has been compared to that other "oriental" epic, *Lawrence of Arabia*, and Attenborough to David Lean. The films are similar in at least one respect: what actually unfolds on-screen implies a very different attitude toward the subject from the one explicitly stated. Attenborough has repeatedly stressed his efforts to portray Gandhi as he was, warts and all. Indeed, we do see Gandhi's faults, but not as we would see our own—they are transfigured into the idiosyncrasy of genius. This kind of subtle glide recurs throughout the film: an adulatory tone changes the meaning even of unflattering content.

But Attenborough is most unlike Lean in one important respect: he has little sense of drama. If we leave the film unsatisfied in our efforts to know Gandhi, it is because we never see any internal conflict in him. The director always arrives just *after* Gandhi has made some important decision, and whatever insights could have been derived from dramatizing the creative tension that led up to it are thus completely lost. In this respect, *Gandhi* is similar to *Doctor Zhivago*: both try to convey depth by turning outward. All we get are epic proportions, audio-visual feasts filled with big and hollow scenes that seem to whisper, "Please be impressed."

It is a pity that Attenborough's sense of mission regarding the production of the film was not also directed at its content. The film's opening statement reads, "No man's life can be encompassed in one telling... what can be done is to be faithful in spirit to the record and try to find one's way to the heart of the man." At least one Indian critic was not impressed. "Gandhi has been assassinated again," he commented, "...sacrificed at the altar of crass Anglo-American commercialism." While commercial considerations have no doubt contributed to the film's superficiality, it is beset with graver difficulties. Implicit in its interpretation of Gandhi's life lies a theoretically unsound conception of history. The film's success owes more to the confluence of an acceptable message, a disarming style, and a brilliant actor than to its fidelity "to the record." □



must both cling to tradition and cut away from it. More importantly, it must be complemented by substantive action that seeks to alter the material bases which underlie relations of domination.

On this score, *Gandhi* was a failure. He is responsible, for example, for having given the name Harijan (meaning "children of God") to the lowest castes, but look where it got them: they are trampled on now as they have always been, except that now they have God on their side. Similarly, one does not need to be a sociologist to see why Gandhi's "solution" to the population problem would never work: however much spiritual energy he may have derived by abstaining from sexual activity, it would have been difficult to persuade others of the value of this technique.

"DON'T DEIFY Gandhi," warned Nehru, when Attenborough first approached him with the idea for such a film. If *Gandhi* does not strike most Indians as a case of hero-worship, it will be because the image on screen

directors.) The issue, however, cannot be disposed of so easily. Here is a group of film-makers who produce at least twenty films for every million dollars, films that, though varying tremendously in quality and scope, are unprecedented in capturing the details of our various cultures and unmatched in their self-reflective quality in terms of contemporary India. Turning its back on these films, the Indian government has dug into the people's pockets to produce a paean to itself (Gandhi being very much an official idol)—rather like the aristocrats who consumed the talent of major artists by commissioning portraits of themselves.

It is not surprising, then, that the image of Gandhi one gets from watching the film is very much like a portrait: all we see is the outside, though it is a very lifelike exterior. It is curious that Attenborough has chosen to reveal Gandhi almost entirely through his interaction with foreigners: first it is Charlie (C. F. Andrews), then Walker from the *New York Times*, then Madeline Slade, and then Margaret Bourke-

chord. It seems to say, "Yes, you too can change the world." To most Americans, raised on notions of individual achievement, this is a tremendously appealing concept. Unfortunately, either as an historical fact about the Indian independence movement or as a view of social movements in general, the attribution of responsibility to one person has never had a basis in reality. On the one hand, *Gandhi* underlines the crucial role of human participation as a necessary condition of social change. On the other hand, by reinforcing the myth of individualism, it virtually guarantees that such action will be ineffective.

However much the success of *Gandhi* may owe to its message, at least part of it is due to the film's style. Even friends of mine with radical leanings (who do not view Gandhi kindly) were completely taken in by the film. Its "authenticity" may derive from the authoritative tone of a chronological, school-history-book presentation, or from the transparent directorial style: if everything happens very obviously in the middle