

Searching out Gandhi



There are some landmark moments all of us can identify in our lives for both good or ill. This was mine in October 2016.

Darkness was falling. The flat Gujarat landscape that had been our travelling companion for 16 hours on this train was steadily dissolving into the gloom. Only the burning fires of a vast oil refinery gave any sense of a life outside; and these gave out surreal, apocalyptic images. My wife Kate and I found ourselves strangely alone in our emptied compartment. It had been busy from where we joined it in Ahmedabad, a sign it was nearing the end of the line- Porbandar.

Few have heard of the town even in India. It was where I hoped to finish my own journey in search of a hero from my teenage-hood - Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, the 'Mahatma' or 'Great Soul' by reaching the place where his life began. In 1964, reading BR Nanda's biography of him, helped make a pacifist of me although, like the darkness engulfing our train, he had been lost in my consciousness and had to jostle with many other influences.

Porbandar is not a place on most tourists' itinerary. It was easy to see why. Gandhi's place of birth in 1869 is its only real asset and itself is a plain, small three-storied building engulfed by a large courtyard and outbuildings. It was a pale shadow of the museum complex in Ahmedabad, his ashram in in 1930s. From here he masterminded some of the greatest acts of civil disobedience in India (and history). These helped persuade Attlee's post-war government that there was no colonial future for the UK in this extraordinary country.

The place of his birth was marked by a swastika, the Hindu peace symbol, which means "living auspiciously," later hideously and devastatingly corrupted by Hitler. I was both moved by the simplicity of the place and the awareness of how just how sufficient momentum of a 'critical mass' can radically invert the social meaning of a symbol. This is something MAW faces all the time! Gandhi's genius was in accomplishing a great change with non-violent means. Hitler used terror and coercion.

Gandhi regarded peace as originating within the person and fanning out, in collaboration with others into an unstoppable movement - as the British discovered. His personal insights into an ethical being were drawn from a deep love for the divine poetry and sacred texts of Hinduism. He was a universalist and appreciated the insights from the sacred texts of other faiths, particularly prizing the spirit, teaching and activist strategies of Jesus. Gleefully he would reverse the Christian dictum "God is Truth" for the more reflective "truth is God". Doing the same for other propositions we get "peace is God". This then leads seamlessly into Gandhi's key principle of "change through non-violence" or 'ahimsa'. He reasserted the 'golden rule of ethics' - "do as you would be done by" and used it to devastating (non-violent!) effect.

Good ends could only be realised through good means. There were no short cuts. HG Wells' description of the Great War as "the war to end wars" was, for Gandhi, both delusional and contradictory, as history continues to demonstrate today in Aleppo.

There is so much more to say about this complex man with such a seemingly disarming simplicity of outlook. Historically Gandhi was one of the world's 'Great Awakeners' articulating those deep aspirations in all of us for a better world. Through MAW we seek to join part of that invisible procession. It is a big ask!

John Hills, January 2017