

MAHATMAGANDHI AS A COMMUNICATOR
GANDHI THE JOURNALIST AND THE MEDIA CRUSADER,
PRE-DATED GANDHI, THE FREEDOM FIGHTER

By

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Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi (1869-1948), bestowed with the title Mahatma¹, revered as the 'Father of the Nation of India'² is known world over as the harbinger of peace and non-violence even on the face of extreme provocation. His unique experiment of 'satyagraha'³, his non-violent crusade against the British rule, his experiment of winning the heart endeared him worldwide. However, underlying his image as a crusader against the British rule, there is another life of Gandhi. Much before he launched his political and public career in India, he has all through been

¹According to some authors Rabindranath Tagore is said to have used on March 6, 1915, this title for Gandhi. Some claim that he was called Mahatma by the residents of Gurukul Kangadi in April 1915, and he in turn called the founder Munshiram a Mahatma (who later became Swami Shraddhananda). However, Gujarat High Court on 30 November 1999 declared that it was Rabindranath Tagore who gave the title of 'Mahatma' to Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi.

² It was Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose, who first addressed Mahatma Gandhi as 'Father of the Nation'.

³Satyagraha, (Sanskrit and Hindi: "holding onto truth") concept introduced by Mahatma Gandhi to designate a determined but nonviolent resistance to evil. Gandhi's satyagraha became a major tool in the Indian struggle against British imperialism and has since been adopted by protest groups in other countries.

For more see: <https://www.britannica.com/topic/satyagraha-philosophy>

a journalist and media crusader. Since his days in South Africa, Parallel to Gandhi's political life, there has been a life of an editor and journalist until he breathed his last. In fact, Mahatma's political philosophy and the narratives he set for India's freedom struggle had taken shape through his writings and publications as a journalist and editor. His newspapers and the phases of his political struggle were complementary to each other clearly indicating his graduation from one issue to another and one philosophical sphere to another. He maintained two parallel lives as a communicator, in mass political movements he led and the newspapers he edited.

Gandhi (1956), himself wrote, "So long as it (*Indian Opinion*, the first newspaper he edited) was under my control, the changes in the journal were indicative of changes in my life. The Indian Opinion in those days, like the Young India and the Navjivan today, was a mirror of part of my life."

His communication skill, language, understanding the pulse of his audience and public at large, initiatives for community journalism, use of multilingual publications as a tool to reach out to a larger audience, commitment to uplift the quality of journalism was evident from his life as an editor-journalist. Gandhi's well-calculated strategy to reach out to the elites and the masses at the same time, writing about the public issues and getting people to rally around them to finally extract a solution to the issues from the administration or awaken the Indian population --- all can be traced in the newspapers he edited and wrote for as a journalist. His philosophy of Satyagraha and emergence as a national leader in India's freedom movement were also shaped by his experience as a journalist. Even the modern-day journalists-editors-publishers may also benefit from looking deep into Gandhi's way of running a publication.

This essay attempts to analyse how a trained barrister turned himself into a journalist-activist and later as a great freedom fighter in a span of a few decades, and how Gandhi, the journalist shaped Gandhi, the Social Activist and then Gandhi, the *Mahatma*. This is surprising when a person did not read any newspaper until the age of 19, used the very medium of the newspaper as a powerful tool in his public life. Gandhi himself mentioned that he first got hold of a newspaper when he had gone to England to study law in 1888. "In India I had never had read a newspaper," said Gandhi (Gandhi, 1956). His upbringing and association with newspapers grew with the Daily Telegraph, Daily News, Pall Mall Gazette in England (Bhattacharyya, 1965).

Community Journalism

Mahatma Gandhi had launched his first newspaper *Indian Opinion* in South Africa on 4 June 1903. This was his first attempt to edit and publish a newspaper for the Indian community. However, his initiation to a community newspaper took place when he contributed to the London Vegetarian Society's organ, *Vegetarian*. According to SN Bhattacharya (1965), Gandhi, during his three-year stay in London, contributed about nine articles on food, festivals, customs, etc. His

idea of a community newspaper perhaps also came from Dada BhaiNaroji, the leader of the Indian community in England. Naroji had launched a journal named *India* in 1890. Later Gandhi worked as its South African correspondent.

However, Gandhi's tryst with field reporting in South Africa began during the Boer War which broke out in 1899. He used to write for *The Times of India* weekly at that time. He was part of the Indian Ambulance Corps, but apart from his assignments as a volunteer, he used to send across dispatches to TOI. Those were mainly stories from the war front and in a way Gandhi could be considered as a war correspondent. Those dispatches were reflective of Gandhi's vision as a journalist. While former British Prime Minister Winston Churchill who had gone to the same war field and emphasised more on the technical details of military operation, Gandhi, in his dispatches, narrated his own experience detailing the activities of Indian Ambulance Corps. There was a touch of human interest in his stories.

When the Indian community was being subject to oppression by the South African authorities, in less than a few months' stay in South Africa in 1903 Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi realized the need to become a journalist to fight for the rights of the Indian community. Before embarking as an editor, in order to ventilate the grievances of Indians and mobilise public opinion in their favour, he started writing and giving interviews to newspapers like *Pioneer*, Allahabad, *The Madras Standard*, *The Hindu*, *The Statesman* and came in close contact with the editors of *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, *Bangabasi* in India and *Natal Advertiser* and *Natal Mercury* in South Africa. Gandhi was, in fact, sailing through the "political whirlwind". He had initially found an outlet through 'Letters to the Editor'. He would go through the newspapers and write to the respective publications if there were any discrepancies and misrepresentation of facts. He also toured in India to gather the support of the editors in favour of the South African Indians. In Times of India, he (Gandhi, 1896) wrote, "Publicity is our best and perhaps the only weapon of defence."

Soon he realised that occasional writings in newspapers were inadequate for achieving any long term impact. He needed a mouthpiece to reach out to the people. He decided to launch the *Indian Opinion*. In its inaugural issue on, he (Gandhi, 1903) wrote: "...the Indian community in South Africa is a recognised factor in the body politic, and a newspaper, voicing its feelings, and specially devoted to its cause, would hardly be considered out of place; indeed, we think, it would supply a long felt want".

With this he set the tone and tenor of the newspaper; little did he know at that time that he was about to carve out a path that hundreds of newspapers in different languages would follow in India in course of time.

According to the liberal definition of community journalism, as ascribed by Jock Lauterer (2006), papers which serve not only the “community of the place but also communities of ethnicity, faith, ideas or interest.” This was exactly what Gandhi thought of doing through the *Indian Opinion*. Gandhi felt a need to launch a newspaper exclusively for the Indian diaspora and with the issues related to them. He has confessed in an interview to *The Statesman* that though there were Indians in various parts of South Africa, but he represented 50,000 Indians residing in Natal. Even though he published the paper in English, Gujarati, Tamil and Hindi, Gandhi’s idea was to encompass the whole of the Indian diaspora, be it Hindus or Mohamedans, Tamils or Calcuttans and not just confine his publications to only for the people coming from Western or Southern India. At the same time another objective of the *Indian Opinion* was to get noticed by the British authorities, as well as the English population residing in South Africa in order to make them aware and resolve the issues pertaining to the Indian diaspora there.

Indian Opinion was a weekly bilingual newspaper- in English and Gujarati. For some time it also had Hindi and Tamil sections. English as a language was mainly chosen to address the British population residing in South Africa. It disseminated the news of the week among the Indian community. It became an important instrument of education. Through the columns of the newspaper, Gandhi tried to educate the readers about sanitation, self-discipline and good citizenship. He discovered how important the press and public opinion could be in politics. Gandhi (1950) himself confessed, “*I believe that a struggle which chiefly relies upon internal strength cannot be wholly carried on without ~ newspaper - it is also my experience that we could not perhaps have educated the local Indian community, nor kept Indians all over the world in touch with the course of events in South Africa in any other way, with the same ease and success as through the Indian Opinion, which therefore was certainly a most useful and potent weapon in our struggle.*”

Like any community journal or newspaper, *Indian Opinion* carried editorial and editorial comments mostly on Indians’ problems, discriminatory laws involving the Indians, reproduction from other journals, letters, obituary, announcements among other items.

Gandhi learnt to use the written word most effectively. He upheld the highest qualities the profession could boast of - courage in the face of adversity, unswerving adherence to truth, pursuit of public causes, and objectivity. In fact *Indian Opinion* moulded Gandhi, the journalist and also Gandhi the freedom fighter and to a large extent Gandhi, the Mahatma.

Indian Opinion lasted for 11 years. It more or less forced the South African provincial regimes to modify their repressive laws against Indians- a fact that convinced Gandhi about the power of the press. He was to wield that power for the rest of his life.

Viewspaper

After Gandhi returned to India in 1915, under the instruction of his political mentor Gopal Krishna Gokhale, he was travelling in many parts of India. He did not leave the journalist-self in South Africa. Gandhi knew how to reach out to the political elites who mattered and the masses, he needed the weapon of newspaper in his hands. One significant change that had undergone in Gandhi's approach towards the newspapers that he used them to propagate his ideas and philosophy behind different movements he led during the freedom struggle. Gandhi's aim was to evoke a sense of consciousness among the Indian population through the newspapers he edited. As SN Bhattacharya (1965) put it, the newspapers turned out to be newspapers.

At the same time it is not be forgotten that Gandhi was very much aware of the role of a journalist who should visit the spot of the incident and gather information first hand to report accurately. One day Gandhi got a call from Bihar where the indigo farmers of Champaran were subjected to the same kind of indignity and exploitation as the indentured labourers in South Africa. Due to the preoccupation with his other political activities, Gandhi initially could not find time. After much persuasion by the agriculturist and freedom fighter Rajkumar Shukla, Gandhi agreed to visit the remote village in Bihar in 1917. He not only visited the place and organised Satyagraha violating the government order, but also investigated the issues related to the indigo farmers, recorded the statement of about 8000 farmers by cross-examining the facts to understand the grievances and the causes underlying them (Shanker, 1969). He produced a report that would be the envy of the greatest investigative journalist anywhere in the world.

The first evidence of this change in his attempt to evoke mass consciousness through the newspapers came with the taking up the cajole of editing and publishing an unregistered newspaper *Satyagraha* (or *Satyagrahi*, as the first edition was brought out under this name) during the protests against the Rowlatt Bill soon after the World War ended. The first edition was published on 7 April 1919. Gandhi's idea of Satyagraha was preached through this newspaper which also carried news items of various civil disobedience movements. He believed in preaching something that he practised. One of the mottoes behind publishing *Satyagraha* was to disobey the government legislation that brought about many changes in the criminal laws and especially in sedition laws and the Indian Press Act. The newspaper discontinued after the civil disobedience movement had to be called off.

As coincidence would have it, Gandhi was persuaded to take over the editorship of *Young India*, which was published by the publishers of *Bombay Chronicle*. Gandhi's philosophy towards editing a newspaper worked behind taking up the editorship of *Young India*. He was initially offered the editorship of *Bombay Chronicle* when its editor BG Horniman was deported to England "for his bold writing on the Indian situation" (Bhattacharya, 1965). Gandhi apparently hesitated as he wanted to edit such newspaper which would completely align with his philosophy. *Young India* was launched by a group of young Gujaratis who actively participated in agitation in Bombay and Gujarat and organised the Bombay branch of Home Rule League

(Munshi, 1948). Gandhi later expressed his comfort of editing *Young India* which was under the syndicate that was composed chiefly of the Satyagrahis.

It was in 1919, simultaneously he started to edit and write in *Navjivan*, then a Gujarati monthly. The two journals *Young India* and *Navjivan* were used by him to ventilate his views and to educate the public on *Satyagraha*. Gandhi's writings in it were translated and published in all the Indian language newspapers. Later *Navjivan* was published in Hindi.

His crusade for the repeal of the Press Act of 1910 was a unique piece of journalism. He was telling the rulers that it was in the best interests of the Government to repeal the law. Issue after issue of *Young India* and *Navjivan* carried samples of Gandhi's journalistic genius which blended seemingly earnest appeals to the government to do what was "just and righteous". *Young India* and *Navjivan* folded up in January 1932 when Gandhi was imprisoned for a long spell.

He was a trained barrister but did not have any systematic training in philosophy, politics or theology. He was a self-trained man who built a close relationship between his thoughts and action. He responded to the issues he encountered and the challenges he faced by the events in his political life. He deeply thought over the connections between the core human values and the correct path for the society and the polity (Gandhi, 2008). This continuous churning in his thoughts perhaps moved Gandhi from one phase of his life to another and to resort to the new tools of disseminating his thoughts to the world.

In February 1933 Gandhi started *Harijan*, *Harijanbandhu*, *Harijansevak* in English, Gujarati and Hindi, respectively. These newspapers were the vehicles of his crusade against untouchability and poverty and acted as a carrier of his ideas for the development of the country through the development of villages. Gandhi felt the need to lead an inclusive struggle for freedom. When caste Hindus had outcast the lower strata of the society, Gandhi was concerned about how to include nearly 60 million people who were branded as 'untouchables' (Shivnarain, 1992). To arrest the conflict from growing further and going out of complete control, he took up the responsibility of bringing the Harijans into the mainstream and pave the way for their participation in the fight for independence, both from their social isolation and also from the British rule. His crusade against the cruel institution of untouchability was continuing much before he launched *Harijan*. In *Young India*, Gandhi (1921) wrote, "I have never been able to reconcile myself to untouchability, I have always regarded it as an excrescence in Hinduism, It is true that it has been handed down to us from generations, but so are many evil practices even to this day,"

His commitment to the cause of the Harijans was so strong that at one point of time Gandhi did not publish any political news in *Harijan* newspaper. The news about Congress sessions, Gandhi's retirement from politics and even the Government of India Act 1935 did not find any

mention in *Harijan*. The newspaper only reported about the Harijan movement and village industries. Gandhi considered the newspaper to be the mouthpiece of these two.

In a journalistic career spanning nearly four decades, Gandhi edited six journals. None, including *Harijan* and *Navjivan*, at first, could boast of circulation of more than a few thousand copies. But such was Gandhi's grasp of the basics of mass communication that he ensured that his daily "outpourings of heart and soul" reached all.

There was some basic commonality among all the newspapers that Gandhi was associated with. As Professor K. Swaminathan (1998) said in his talk at the Nationalist Forum of Journalists held in New Delhi in 1976, "While the topics and their treatment in the journals varied according to the historical contingency, there was nevertheless running through them all a common refrain, viz., the insistence on truth and non-violence, on fairness to all and the public good, which provided the first principles, the firm universal framework within which alone Gandhiji's thinking and acting could function... The regard for truth in the abstract issued in practice as reverence for fact."

There are many examples of how Gandhi as a journalist and editor carried the ideological moorings of Gandhi, the freedom fighter and social crusader. His writings created a mass movement; it stirred the collective consciousness of the masses- that ultimately forced the British to leave the country. Before Gandhi, BalGangadharTilak attempted this broad-basing of people's movement through newspapers like *Kesari* to considerable success. Gandhi fine-tuned it to near perfection and added an extra dimension to it.

As Nikhil Chakravartty (1998) says, "When historians and publicists talk of Gandhi having taken politics from the monopoly of the intelligentsia to the wider world of the common humanity, it was not just a question of broadening the base of the movement for freedom. This was not merely a question of quantitative increase in the number of participants in the movement but qualitatively a different type of movement emerged with its essentially distinct hallmark."

Language

Gandhi as an editor and also as a journalist emphasised on the importance of the use of language. Be it publishing multilingual newspapers or using plain and simple language -- all were part of Gandhi's communication strategy. He always wanted the language of writing to be clear, simple and effective to move the readers. TusharArun Gandhi (2018) writes that Gandhi did not use two different languages while communicating with the elites of the courtroom and talking to the common people in a mass rally. "When he spoke to the farmer of Champaran he used the same language and the farmers of Champaran understood him perfectly. They did not need to have an interpreter to explain what Gandhi spoke to them. And also all the very intelligent, very

sophisticated, very erudite western educated elite in Mumbai, when he spoke to them, easily understood the same language,” he writes.

Gandhi published *Indian Opinion* in Gujarati, Tamil, English and also in Hindi. His idea was to address the Indian communities that were in majority in numbers in South Africa at that time. This strategy was purely based on his target audience and not exactly out of any parochial or regional-conservative ideas. In fact, through the writing in the newspaper, he tried to accommodate the news from other communities which were not represented by the language he published his papers in. Gandhi believed (Gandhi, 2018) by being aware of the activities of the people of other languages like Chinese and Zulus, there will be an alignment of all the communities and pave the way for the formation of a strong force to counter the common oppressor.

In its first edition of *Indian Opinion*, it was clearly stated that by the subscribing to the newspaper, the advantage of the subscribers would be that all the sections will get their news in their own languages.

Though English was not the spoken language of the masses, Gandhi used this foreign language to target the elites and the British population living in India (or in South Africa in the case of *Indian Opinion*). He also wanted to draw the attention of the administration to the issues that affected the mass. In the first issue of *Indian Opinion*, the proprietor of the newspaper V Madanjit (1903) mentioned that through this newspaper the European Community would get to understand the aspirations and thoughts of the Indians living in South Africa and they would get to know about such issues that ordinary Europeans would not know otherwise. A.S. Iyengar (1950) also wrote, "There was not only a new thought but a new language in newspaper writing and what he wrote was the best in political thought and finest in journalistic writings. No editor could escape being influenced by Gandhiji's writings."

Gandhi's editing of Navajivan in Gujarati gave prestige to language journalism. While other journalists tried to follow Gandhi's style of writing, S. Natarajan(1962) writes that many of Gandhi's followers were inspired to write in the regional language and "regional journalism began to acquire an importance." Gandhi had a clear message for the editors and the use of language in journalism. While writing to his 23-year old son Manilal Gandhi, who was sent to South Africa to look after the Gujarati edition of *Indian Opinion*, Gandhi (1948) mentioned, "The Editor has to be patient and seek for the truth only. You should write what is the truth in the *Indian Opinion*; but do not be impolite and do not give way to anger. Be moderate in your language. If you are, do not hesitate to confess it."

Service, not vocation

Gandhi's approach to journalism was totally devoid of ambition. To him, it was not a vocation to earn his livelihood. It was a means to serve the public. He felt that running a newspaper was a service to society. It has such a bearing on public welfare that to undertake them for earning one's livelihood would defeat its primary aim. When a newspaper is treated as a means of making profits, the result is likely to lead to serious malpractices. He also said that newspapers were meant primarily to educate the people and familiarize them with contemporary history.

In order to deal with the moral issues, from the beginning of his career as an editor, Gandhi vouched for the subscription model and he was serious about the burden of carrying advertisements. He wanted the newspapers to run on the "soul-force". For all the newspapers he edited, Gandhi had floated a model where the readers would pay for the news they would get. This was purely to do away with the advertisements. "You will note", Gandhi (1933) wrote in *Harijan*, "that no advertisements are being taken for the upkeep of the paper. It has to depend solely upon the subscriptions received". The page ended with a notice to the subscribers reminding them that "subscription should be paid strictly in advance." These papers published no advertisements. Often these were very critical of the administration and British rule. His note of defiance and sacrifice gave a new stimulus to the evolution of the press as a weapon of Satyagraha.

For *Indian Opinion* as well Gandhi had fixed the subscription rates in its first edition itself. The rate of annual subscription was "12s. 6d. in the Colony, and outside the Colony 17s." It was payable in advance. Single copies were "sold at 3d. each." Initially, Gandhi had carried advertisements in his newspapers, but later he realised the moral issues of carrying advertisements. Hence he resorted to the subscription model and Gandhi, while publishing *Navajivan*, made it amply clear that with the increase in circulation, the size, pages and other facilities of the newspaper will increase.

He (Gandhi, 1921) wrote in the *Hind Swaraj*: One of the objects of a newspaper is to understand popular feeling and to give expression to it; another is to arouse among the people certain desirable sentiments, and the third is fearlessly to expose popular defects. Gandhi as a journalist-communicator served the profession with courage, objectivity, commitment to truth and to fight for the public causes. He had also gone through a lot of hardships in running the newspapers. In *Indian Opinion*, all the staff had to draw the same amount of salary and had to double up as writers-copy editors and also as the workers in the printing press. He managed to sail through a hard time. At the end of his life, Gandhi as the editor of *Harijan* was even rebuffed by his editorial colleagues and his writings were not published despite his insistence in February 1947. But he did not compromise with his principles.

Gandhi's teachings have worked as the backbone of the nation for decades. He may be known more for his political philosophy which was the driving force behind his leadership of Indian

freedom struggle, but he had words of wisdom for the journalists as well. In *Young India*, Gandhi (1925) wrote, “To be true to my faith, therefore, I may not write in anger or malice. I may not write idly. I may not write merely to excite passion. The reader can have no idea of the restraint I have to exercise from week to week in the choice of topics and my vocabulary. It is training for me. It enables me to peep into myself and to make discoveries of my weaknesses. Often my vanity dictates a smart expression or my anger a harsh adjective. It is a terrible ordeal but a fine exercise to remove these weeds.” His teachings as a journalist-communicator can truly be a lesson for present-day professionals in the field of journalism and communication.

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