

FROM GANDHI TO MAHATMA: JOURNEY OF AN EXTRAORDINARY JOURNALIST

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Abstract: *When M. K. Gandhi landed in South Africa he was an ordinary man. In South Africa he decided to provide a helping hand to the migrant Indians who were exploited by the white administration. And his initiative was propelled by the newspaper he started off for the process. Such was the power of his communication that the British-owned papers in India like Times of India and the Statesman were forced to comment on the humiliations of the Indians in South Africa. He returned to his native land and continued to publish newspapers with the objectives of political campaigning and social awakening. His newspapers are important for understanding his persona and his goals. And they are his gateway to the significant journey from M. K. Gandhi to Mahatma (or the great soul). This greatness traversed the reporting, editing, management of the newspapers he was associated with and left an indelible mark in the minds of all.*

Key Words: *Journalism, Indian Opinion, Young India, Navjivan, Harijan, Gandhiji's journalistic writing.*

There has been a lot of discussion on the political leadership and guidance of M. K. Gandhi. His influence in the field of journalism is widespread too and is a lesson to journalism professionals like editors and reporters as well as to those who manage and control newspapers or any other media for that matter. Gandhiji's journalistic career spanned almost 45 years starting from 1903. That he was a powerful journalist need not be emphasized. It has been repeatedly proved that he was a potent mass communicator and an outstanding journalist. V. Sundaram¹ opined, "Journalism was the factor that transformed the ordinary Gandhi to Mahatma Gandhi". During

this paper I would establish the veracity of Sundaram's claim. This paper will also prove that Gandhiji's comments and observations on journalism and the press is appropriate even today.

Gandhiji's journalistic endeavours spanned an array of fields. He worked as a reporter, an editor, folded copies and set type, wrote editorials and features, proof read pages, and financed the newspapers he edited². His dedication to the vocation of journalism can be summed up in his own words "In the very first month of Indian Opinion (the first newspaper published by him during his stay in South Africa), I realized that the sole aim of journalism should be service³". These words of Gandhiji published in his Autobiography are relevant even after nearly 100 years of its first publication in weekly installments in his journal, Navjivan during 1925 to 1929. In the contemporary scenario, commercial pursuits of journalistic ideas, the urge to secure 'the sensational scoop' may be too compelling to consider journalism as an altruistic "service". Gandhiji's thoughts on journalism and his advice to journalists need to be reflected by the contemporary media professionals. His brand of journalism had no room for sensational scoops. He said, "There are occasions when a journalist serves his profession best by silence". Gandhiji strongly emphasized, "Journalism should never be prostituted for selfish ends or for the sake of carrying a livelihood. And whatever happens to the editors or the journal, it should express views of the country irrespective of consequences." He warned, "The newspaper press is a great power but just as an unchained torrent of water submerges whole countryside and devastates crops, an uncontrolled pen serves but to destroy⁴." The reporters and editors as well as proprietors should remain steadfast in their objective of pursuing this vocation as a service rather than denigrate it to the level of a mere product. It is important that news be concerned with outcomes rather than products⁵ because it is necessary for news personnel to be concerned with the outcomes of their "service" for individuals as well as the society in which they operate. The outcomes of news dissemination can be construction of views, formation of opinions, and enrichment of values. This is how media can remain relevant in the consciousness of the public and the society. Momentary scoops, unfounded speculations and unreserved observations cannot justify the relevance of mass media especially in an age when social media effortlessly do these.

Gandhiji observed that it is important for mass media to exercise control, more aptly self-control over its own endeavours to survive. He stated, "If the control is from without, it proves more poisonous than want of control"⁶. He confided in his Autobiography that the "Indian Opinion" became a training ground of self-restraint for him and helped him to understand the responsibility of a journalist⁷. Freedom when exploited leads to misuse and abuse and gives rise to skepticism which degrades the position of any public establishment more so of the media which thrives on credibility and authenticity. Gandhiji's line of reasoning was that "gate keeping" by the media over its own content and intent is desirable rather than external decree. And though the Internet has reduced the powers of gatekeepers in the conventional media, it can still serve a role in "sorting, interpreting and lending credibility to news"⁸. Gandhiji's views on responsibility of the editor are clear from his words, "An editor should not apologize if he has published something which displeases the government but rather accept responsibility for it⁹.

Gandhiji did not approve the attempt of reporters and editors to shift the responsibility to the source of the news. To fellow editors Gandhiji advised that the desire “to be beneficial must come from within and not superimposed from without.”¹⁰

Gandhiji wished to be beneficial to the public and to the society through his newspapers. Laxmi Narain¹¹ observed the Indian Opinion was started to prepare Indians in South Africa for Satyagraha or the passive resistance movement. Young India and Navjivan devoted their columns to Gandhiji’s constructive programs. Gandhiji himself stated that Harijan be read for instruction rather than amusement. “Let it be known that Harijan is a views-paper as distinguished from a newspaper. People buy it and read it not for amusement but instruction regulating their daily conduct.” Gandhiji’s journalistic writings were not only for the benefit of the community but for propagation of his ideas and views whether political or otherwise. Gandhiji opined that he need not control a newspaper to make his views known to the government,¹² but he certainly needed to own a paper and a press to disseminate his views to the public. Reviving the publication of Harijan weeklies in January 1942, Gandhiji observed that “resumption of the weeklies is needed for the dissemination of my views.”¹³ Fact is that in 1942 Harijan was published in English and eight other Indian languages purportedly to widen the reach of his views and opinions to the Indian public before and during the launch of the Quit India movement on 9th August of the same year. But there is no need to conclude that Gandhiji embarked on his journalistic ventures only for specific purposes. He took pleasure in his journalistic writings and editing job. He wrote, “Young India and Navjivan are my delight. I love to write weekly to the public through this medium.”¹⁴

There is lot to learn from Gandhiji’s journalistic writings. His letters to the Editors of South African dailies serves as a guiding light on how journalists should fight injustice in a public system where the laws are loaded against a section of the populace and that too without offending those in power¹⁵. This was a phenomenal feat considering the fact that Gandhiji demonstrated illuminating candour in print. The qualities he possessed as a journalist included courage in the face of adversity, unwavering adherence to truth, pursuit of public causes and objective presentation. A case of his objective presentation can be seen in his letter dated 25 October, 1894 to the Times of Natal. Writing about the discrimination based on skin-colour, he questioned the white administration (on the biased voting privileges), “Sir, may I venture to offer a suggestion? Will you re-read your New Testament? Will you ponder over your attitude towards the coloured population of the colony? Will you then say you can reconcile it with the Bible teachings or the best British traditions? If you have washed your hands clean of both Christ and the British tradition, I can have nothing to say.”¹⁶

His journals were read by his political opponents and by the British officials as well as the Congress leaders because Gandhi used his journals for loud thinking. He used his journals to propagate his views through persuasion, discussion and debate¹⁷. There can be no doubt that Mahatma Gandhi as a writer-journalist wanted to influence the political and social process in the relevant societies. The content of his writings in the Indian Opinion (South Africa), Satyagrahi,

Young India, Navjiban and the Harijan mirror Gandhiji's views on various issues. So much was his affinity for dispensing views that his newspapers were even referred to as "viewspaper". Laxmi Narain¹⁸ observed Harijan, founded in 1933, quickly became a views-paper. Gandhiji himself wrote in an issue of the Harijan, "Harijan is not a newspaper; it is a views paper representing the views of one man"¹⁹. The ideals that Gandhi believed in were espoused through his newspaper columns. He believed that the true function of journalism is to educate the public mind, not to stock the public mind with wanted and unwanted impressions²⁰. In the age of 24X7 news channels and online newspaper editions and the Internet, the public mind is inundated with information. Though supporters of pluralism would harp on the fact that in the present scenario the public has a better opportunity to explore different perspectives of various issues and the chances of information propagation is much wider, there will always be a doubt on how much the public can benefit from "information overload"²¹. There is always a possibility that the information disseminated by the various media channels may not be gainfully diffused among the various classes of society and so the information-rich and information-poor divide is a reality in all societies even now when there is 24hours and 365days of information flow. Gandhiji believed that a journalist must use his discretion as to what to report and when so as not to burden the public mind and educate them.

Gandhiji perpetually acknowledged the importance of newspapers in his political struggles. He wrote, "The Indian Opinion was a useful and potent weapon in our struggle (in South Africa)." It provided a necessary platform for educating the local Indian community (in South Africa) and kept Indians all over the world in touch with the course of events in South Africa²². About Young India and Navjivan, Gandhi wrote, "these are published for the sole purpose of educating the nation to win 'purna swaraj' through truthful and non-violent means." Gandhiji consistently used the power of the press to propagate his ideas and views. The newspapers that Gandhi published not only complemented his political agenda but also fulfilled his goal to awaken the people and reform the society. Shambhu Dutta²³ commented, "Gandhi's sole purpose of journalism was to write on every walk of life, to inform and educate the people and to write about moral and ethical issues." For Gandhi journalism was "a means for the study of human nature in all its shades."²⁴ It helped him in his political campaigns and according to Laxmi Narain²⁵ made his campaigns "workable, dignified and irresistible."

Let us now consider Gandhiji's thoughts on newspapers and their objectives. He defined the aims of a newspaper in his Autobiography, "One of the objects of a newspaper is to understand popular feeling and give expression to it; another is to arouse among the people certain desirable sentiments; and the third is fearlessly to expose popular defects²⁶". He believed that the task of newspapers was to "serve the community²⁷ and his actions validated this belief. The Indian Opinion was started to direct Indians in South Africa during Satyagraha or passive resistance movement. Gandhiji wrote, "I have no doubt that Indian Opinion had a vital part to play in moulding and guiding the Satyagrahis²⁸." Young India and Navjivan dedicated their columns to the constructive programs undertaken by him. Gandhiji's philosophy of adhering to the truth

permeated his weeklies. He wrote “Publication of false news is a crime against humanity²⁹.” He shunned exaggerated accounts in his newspapers. He disapproved journalists who did not stick to facts alone. He said “Journalism has become the art of intelligent anticipation of events³⁰”. He was open to criticism and had no hesitation to publish the arguments of his critics. He wrote, “The columns of Young India are open to all who have any grievance against non-cooperation³¹.” The writings of Gandhiji set forth high ethical standards for journalism and media practice. Through the quotations cited above we can conclude that Gandhiji advocated objectivity in news production and presentation, avoiding speculations and conjectures while disseminating news and espoused equal opportunity for all involved parties to reflect their stance or justify their standpoint in a story before its publication. K. Swaminathan³², stated, “The lesson we learn from Gandhiji as a journalist is that Journalism when practised with a sense of mission proves a readily available means of service to society and an excellent sadhana for self-improvement”.

About Gandhiji’s journalistic writings M. V. Kamath³³ stated, “He wrote in a manner that anybody could understand. He was writing for Everyman so that Everyman could understand him easily.” His writing was simple, direct and straightforward. He was economical and effective in his choice of words and meticulously precise in his expressions. He would put forth his ideas and arguments in simple and short sentences. At the same time his writing was characterized by deep thinking and unambiguous language. Of Gandhiji’s writings Pandit Nehru wrote, “The language was always simple and to the point and seldom was an unnecessary word used.” His writing style was completely different from that which was in practice in India during that era. Those writings were heavy in form and content, and sentences complex and long³⁴. A brilliant piece of his journalistic writing is evident in this obituary for Lokmanya Tilak in Young India on August 1, 1920. “A giant among men has fallen. The voice of the lion is hushed. His patriotism was a passion with him. He knew no religion but love of his country. His optimism was irrepressible in the battle for freedom he gave no quarter and asked for none. It is blasphemy to talk of such a man as dead. The permanent essence of him abides with us forever. Let us erect for the only Lokmanya of India an imperishable monument by weaving into our own lives his bravery, his simplicity, his wonderful industry and his love of his country.” These are the powerful words and remarkable expression of a journalist and unwavering resolve of a political leader.

Gandhiji was associated with several newspapers - the Indian Opinion (1903) in South Africa, Satyagraha (1919), Young India (1919), Navjivan (1919) and Harijan (1933) in India in the capacity of reporter, editor and proprietor. Besides, he also wrote for other newspapers. Gandhiji communicated with the masses and his compatriots about the crusade he was leading on political, social and economic issues through his newspapers. If we go through the content and language of the Indian Opinion, we can comprehend how messages conveyed in simple language can directly appeal to the masses. In the very first editorial of the Indian Opinion entitled ‘Ourselves’. Gandhiji writes, “The Indians, resident in British South Africa, loyal subjects

though they are of the King-Emperor, labour under a number of legal disabilities which, it is contended on their behalf, are undeserved and unjust. The reason of this state of affairs is to be found in the prejudice in the minds of the Colonists, arising out of misunderstanding of the actual status of the Indian as a British subject, the close relations that render him kin to Colonists, and the unhappy forgetfulness of the great services that India has always rendered to the Mother Country ever since Providence brought loyal Hind under the flag of Britannia³⁵.” He went on to elaborate that it would be the duty of the Indian Opinion to remove the misunderstanding “by placing facts in their true light before the public³⁶”. He set to fulfill his moral duty of educating the public through the newspaper. He emphasized that Indian Opinion would delve into the past history of India to make Indians in South Africa aware about the greatness of their motherland. Gandhiji wrote extensively on intellectual and aesthetic subjects in the Indian Opinion. He also wrote biographies of great men and women to inspire his readers. He consistently wrote about the discriminations that Indians suffered in South Africa. His was disdainful of the white racists. He commented³⁷, “The white barber refused to cut my black hair, extending his colour prejudice to not only non-Christian skin but non-Christian hair as well.” Gradually the Indian Opinion became the mouthpiece of South African Indians. The newspaper guided and directed the movement of passive resistance against the Registration Policy of the South African government against Indians and other coloured population. Gandhiji served as Editor of the Indian opinion for 12 years from 1903 to 1915.

When Gandhiji returned to India in January 1913, his experience as a journalist proved a useful appendage to his political goal. He realized the role of newspapers in mobilizing public opinion and influencing official decisions. In India during that time the Anglo-Indian Press was superior but it was not popular among the Indians. On the other hand, the Indian press lacked transparency. The Indian press has become the preferred medium for disseminating the opinions and ideas of freedom fighters. Gandhiji also decided to launch his political views through newspapers. Gandhiji took to journalism as his most effective weapon of satyagraha in India till Independence in 1947. On April 7, 1919 the weekly Satyagraha started under the editorship of Gandhiji. Very soon the editorship of English weekly, Young India, was also offered to him. In a few days the Gujarati weekly, Navjivan also started under his editorship. Gandhi started to write his ideas and views freely and turned Young India and Navjivan into ‘viewspaper.’ He wrote in the editorial of the first issue of Young India, “(the newspapers) enabled me freely to ventilate my views and to put heart into the people”³⁸. During the publication of the Indian Opinion, Gandhi’s views were a little soft towards the British Empire but with time as his hopes in British justice diminished, his views hardened. Gandhiji wrote on a host of issues besides political views and ideas, like Swadeshi, Hindu-Muslim unity, non-violence, moral values, responsibilities and duties of citizens, place of vernaculars in the Indian society etc.

A noted development of this time was Gandhiji’s editing of Navjivan, in Gujarati. It gave impetus to publication of language papers in different provinces. This was significant as circulation of such papers reached the remotest corners of the country and the rural audience.

The messages and views regarding the struggle for independence and the ills of British administration could now be widely disseminated and deciphered by the majority population. J. Natarajan³⁹ put it succinctly, “Many of his (Gandhi’s) followers were moved to write and publish in the Indian languages, in imitation of his own direct style. They wrote a simple prose. Regional journalism began to acquire an importance and there was hardly any area of the country which did not have its newspaper”. This helped to transform the freedom movement into a mass movement, gave it a pan-Indian outlook and prompted the common people to participate passionately in the freedom struggle. Gandhiji often stated that journalism was an effective medium of communicating with the common people and therefore wrote more in the Indian languages. The Indian Opinion was bi-lingual from the beginning (both English and Gujarati editions). At one time it also had Tamil and Hindi editions. Similarly the Gujarati edition of Young India, Navjivan was used by Gandhiji as a mouthpiece of the civil disobedience. Thus Gandhiji contributed significantly to the evolution of the Indian Press into a mass communication media.

He took on the government on several issues and championed Press freedom. For him, free speech, free association and free press were essential components of Swaraj (Young India, October 6, 1921). When Bombay Chronicle was forced to pay a fine for a defamation suit, Gandhiji took up the cudgels for a free Press. He wrote in Young India under the caption “Below the Belt”: “The Press Law is gone only to be replaced by new activities under the laws of sedition and libel. The editor of a daily newspaper when he begins writing his leading article does not weigh his words in golden scales. He may be betrayed into a hasty word. Must he pay for it even if he did it in good faith without malice and in the public interest? These libel actions are calculated to demoralize Indian journalism and make public criticism over-cautious and timid.⁴⁰” During 1921 when India was on the verge of a civil disobedience movement, Young India published a manifesto on freedom of opinion which stated “It is the inherent right of everyone to express his opinion without restraint⁴¹.” In the same issue, under the headline, “Expression of Opinion”, Gandhiji explained “When in any movement violence is religiously eschewed, it becomes a propaganda movement of the purest type – any attempt to crush it is an attempt to crush public opinion⁴².” His vociferous support to freedom of expression and the freedom of the press continued during 1930 when the country was on the verge of another civil disobedience movement as Gandhiji decided to defy the Salt Tax. The government tried to pre-empt Gandhiji’s Dandi March by reviving the Press Act of 1910. Gandhiji was scathing in his criticism of the government and urged the press to dare the government. He wrote “The (Press) Act contains additional provisions making the whole piece more deadly than before. It is a veiled form of Martial law. The pressmen if they are worthy representatives of public opinion will not be frightened by the ordinance. I urge pressmen and publishers to refuse to furnish securities and if they are called upon to do so, either to cease publication or to challenge the authorities to confiscate whatever they like⁴³.” The Young India itself did not pay the security money demanded by the Government for brazenly defying the government order and as a result the press was confiscated and printing of the journal stopped. Gandhiji held Press Freedom in high

esteem. “We must devise methods of circulating our ideas unless and until the whole press becomes fearless, defies consequences and publishes’ idea, even when it is in disagreement with them, just for the purpose of securing that freedom⁴⁴.”

I have already stated that Gandhiji wanted his newspapers to be a part of the political campaigning as well as social emancipation process he wanted to steer. While the Young India and Navjivan incessantly commented on the political scenario of the country and published Gandhiji’s opinion and views on various political proceedings in the country, Harijan’s sole purpose was to serve the society, especially the untouchables and there was a complete blackout of important political news like the activities of Congress and the Government Act of 1935. Harijan for years did not contain any article on politics. There were recurrent articles on development, nutrition and balanced diet, sanitation, waste management to enlighten the village folks on these issues. It was only during the Quit India movement that Gandhiji wrote consistently about it in the Harijan. His versatility is evident from the range of issues he addressed as journalist-editor in the newspapers he published. If we go through them we can find studious writing about the economics of Charkha as well as nature-cure. But there were no sensational topics.

Gandhiji stated “I have taken up journalism not for its sake but merely as an aid to what I have conceived to be my mission in life⁴⁵.” At another occasion he said, “I write to propagate my ideas. Journalism is not my profession⁴⁶.” It is true that journalism for most practicing journalists of the present time is a profession but journalists should not stray away from fundamental precincts that validate their existence. Prejudice, emotion or feeling should not bias a news story. Gandhiji revealed he also went through personal weaknesses but he successfully overcame them in his journalistic writings. He wrote, “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 by a fine exercise to remove these weeds⁴⁷.” This admission of weaknesses suffered by him like any other mortal and the later realization of how to overcome those weaknesses made him an extraordinary journalist and leader. Gandhiji believed in the power of words and used them very judiciously.

He was not only a prolific writer but was successful in terms of circulation and readership too. His English and Indian language newspapers in India reached a circulation of 40000 at one time. He did not depend on advertisements at all. He was more for timely subscriptions from readers and for donations. He was of the opinion that dependence on advertisements was deplorable. He commented, “It is the duty of every newspaper to exercise some restraint in the matter of advertisements⁴⁸.” He was particularly critical of the misleading promises that were part of advertisements published by newspapers. He was so averse to advertisements that though he had to contribute every month to keep his newspapers going and had to incur heavy losses in the printing and publication (of the Indian Opinion), he left out advertisements in order to devote

more space to his ideas. In India too he struck to this tradition and for 30 years Gandhiji published his journals without any advertisements. Gandhiji's views on advertisement were, "They are inserted by people who are impatient to get rich, in order that they may gain over their rivals⁴⁹."

Gandhiji's skill in journalism was not limited to excellent editorial skills or rich content but commendable managerial skills. He was in command from typesetting to printing, content to layout, from packing to posting, from collecting subscription to planning the overall budget. In the early days of the Indian Opinion Gandhiji did everything single-handedly. He personally trained his associates when he was running the Young India, Navjivan and Harijan to ensure qualitative superiority and efficient management.

On the eve of independence Gandhiji was deeply saddened to find that the majority of the main-line English and vernacular newspapers were commercial ventures, afraid of the government and not truthful in reporting⁵⁰; traits that he vehemently opposed and countered in his chequered journalistic career. In a prayer meet in New Delhi on 19 June, 1946 he said, "If I were appointed dictator for a day in the place of the Viceroy, I would stop all newspapers." Gandhiji never surrendered to any gagging order issued by the Government. Being a fearless journalist he was pained to see the degradation of newspapers. He observed, "Newspapers are fast becoming the people's Bible, Koran and Gita rolled in one. A newspaper predicts that riots are coming and all the sticks and knives in Delhi have been sold out. A journalist's duty is to teach people to be brave, not to instill fear into them." He was thoroughly disappointed by the newspapers' reporting on communal riots during the pre-independence era. He felt that most of the newspapers were irresponsible. Neither did he cut corners on the stance adopted by the Indian Government and accused it of suppressing information on the matter. Gandhiji wrote to the incumbent Prime Minister, Pandit Nehru on March 20, 1947:

"I would like you to tell me what you can about the Punjab tragedy. I know nothing about it save what is allowed to appear in the Press which I thoroughly distrust. Nor am I in sympathy of what may be termed by the old expression of 'hush hush policy'. It is amazing of how the country is adopting almost the very measures which it criticized during British administration." It is clear he totally disapproved of the reporting by the Press and condemned the cloak and dagger policy of the government where there should be open access to information and dissemination of it.

"My life is my message" said the Mahatma. His journalistic messages were reflection of his beliefs, his aspirations and his views. He stood by truth on all circumstances and his newspaper writings were not away from the Truth. He believed in certain ideals and those ideals are reflected in his writings. His incursion into journalism in South Africa was an off shoot of his struggle on behalf of immigrant Indians. But once he understood the power his writings had on the Indian community and the effect newspapers can have on any struggle he depended on them heavily. Throughout his life he breathed life into political movements with his journalistic ventures. That newspapers were integral to his purpose in life is underlined by him, "I believe

that a struggle which chiefly relies upon internal strength cannot be wholly carried on without a newspaper⁵¹.” And this belief he internalized through journalistic writings.

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