

MAHATMA GANDHI AND JOURNALISM

By

Snehasis Sur

Sr. Journalist in Doordarshan News

President of the Press Club Kolkata

Media Educator

Email: ssur62@gmail.com

Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, the journalist, pre-dated Mahatma Gandhi, the freedom fighter by at least two decades. Gandhiji was actively involved as a journalist and editor with at least six newspapers over four decades. However, this area of Gandhi's life and works was lesser known and discussed. Actually, Gandhiji as a journalist and editor carried the ideological moorings of Gandhiji, the social crusader and freedom fighter, which finally shaped him as the Mahatma.

Gandhiji mentioned in his autobiography that he had never read any newspaper before he went to London in September 1888 at the age of 19 to study law. However, Gandhiji became a serious reader of the Newspapers published in Britain at that time like *The Telegraph*, *Daily News* and *Pall Mall Gadget*, etc.

He became friendly with the members of the London Vegetarian Society, which had its organ, the *Vegetarian*. He started contributing regularly to this publication. The topics of his articles were mainly on food, festivals and different rituals and customs of the Indians. So, these were his earliest writings and first one was published on 7 February 1891 with a title, Indian Vegetarian.

He became so fascinated with writing to newspapers that he sent a two part article, 'On My Way Home again to India', even after returning to India. They were published in the *Vegetarian* on 9 and 16 April 1892. Gandhiji stayed in Britain for 3 years and his writing to the *Vegetarian* not only got him new experiences but also gave him confidence for writing in newspapers.

During his short stay in Mumbai after returning from the UK, he also contributed to some newspapers while pursuing his early practices in Law. The *Vegetarian* gave him exposure to write in newspapers but prevailing political situation in South Africa made him a seasoned journalist. It was this land where Gandhiji realised the importance of newspaper, especially for engineering a social movement. As he was fighting for a cause through a movement, he wanted to use local

newspapers for highlighting his views, to form public opinion and action, and also to influence Govt. Gandhiji became well known in newspaper circles of South Africa as a crusader.

By this time Gandhiji might have acquired a realization that supportive and friendly newspaper highlighting the views and actions of someone who is spearheading a social movement, is always very helpful in molding public opinion towards his movement. That is why Gandhiji continued to have direct links with newspapers throughout his life.

During his next spell of stay in India in the second half of 1896, he sought support of the Press in India for his fight against oppression of Indians in South Africa. During this period, Gandhiji travelled to many places in the country to meet several editors of different newspapers throughout the country. He was also giving background information and real situations of sufferings of the Indians by the state's oppression in South Africa. This exposure of Gandhiji to the newspapers and their editors in different parts of the country made him acquainted with the functioning of newspapers and gave him confidence with which he could step into editing and publishing newspapers.

While Gandhiji was a student in London, he came in contact with Dada Bhai Nauroji, a leader of the Indian Community in England, who started a journal called *India* in 1890. Gandhiji became its South Africa correspondent.

A famine broke out in India in 1897 and appeals went to British Colonies including South Africa for help. Gandhiji wrote several letters to newspapers in South Africa for gathering contributions from Indians living in South Africa.

The Boer War, which broke out in 1899 gave Gandhiji an opportunity to experience the war from a close corner as he went to the war field with the volunteers of the Indian Ambulance Corps. He then started sending his experience of war to *The Times of India*, Bombay. So, Gandhiji can be considered as a war correspondent. Another important personality who went to the war was Mr. Winston Churchill. The scholars, who later made a comparative analysis of the war despatches of Churchill and Gandhiji, found that Churchill's despatches were interpretative in nature with a lot of technical military information, as he was primarily a soldier deployed in the battle field. Whereas, Gandhiji wrote as a chronicler, primarily highlighting the activities of the Indian Ambulance Corps and miseries caused due to the war.

Gandhiji's experience of newspapers and his realisation of obtaining support from newspapers for a cause, prompted him to take a leading role in publishing the newspaper, *Indian Opinion*, to highlight the oppression of Indians residing in South Africa by the British Govt. ruling that country at that time. The first issue of *Indian Opinion* was dated June 4, 1903 but it was released on June 6 in the same year. The journal came out from Durban, and was shifted to a Phoenix Settlement, a year later. Phoenix Settlement was a 100 acre farmland bought for L1, 000. This was Gandhiji's first 'ashram', which came into being in November 1904. *Indian Opinion* served

as Gandhiji's practicing ground in journalism. It used to be published in Gujarati, Hindi, Tamil and English.

At Phoenix, the press workers had a share in the land, in the profits, if any. They used to grow crops for sustenance and they worked together to produce the *Indian Opinion*. The newspaper fostered the idea of one united Indian community, cutting across language, religion, caste and class. "We are not, and ought not to be, Tamils or Calcutta men, Mohammedans or Hindus, Brahmins or Banyas, but simply and solely British Indians". This was declared in its editorial. The model of collective ownership of a newspaper of a community as a whole like this was, no doubt, a unique experiment.

In 58 years of its existence *Indian Opinion* had a subscriber base of an average of 2,000 and the highest being 3,500. From 1st January 1910 issue, the journal was reduced in size.

Gandhiji was arrested on 11 November 1913 for leading a mass Satyagraha of the Indian miners in protest of oppressive decisions of South Africa Govt. compelling Indians to carry a physical identity. Kasturba was also arrested on 23 September 1913 for same kind of protest. Devidas Gandhi was only family member, who was out of jail. A. H. West, Maganlal, Deviben and Probhudas helped Devidas to continue with publishing of *Indian opinion*.

Gandhiji was released on 18 December 1913 and CF Andrewes WW Pearson went from India on 2 January 1914 to help a negotiation which resulted Indian Relief Act. Satyagraha continued till mid1914, then Gandhiji left for India.

Throughout the movement from 1906 to 1914 *Indian Opinion* functioned as its inseparable part, all information regarding Satyagraha, Boycott, intended to the resisters, were published and number of subscriber also rose. "Satyagraha would have been impossible without Indian Opinion", as told by Gandhiji. *Indian Opinion* was not a commercial undertaking, it was a journal for moral education. It is a tribute to Gandhiji's legacy. Gandhiji, after returning to India in 1915, wrote to a possible fund provider for *Indian Opinion* that "It was a powerful weapon in the armory of Passive Resistance. It is in no sense a commercial enterprise". Gandhiji wrote in his *Autobiography*: "But after all these years I feel that the journal has served the community well. It was never intended to be a commercial journal. So long as it was under my control, the changes in the journal were indicative of changes in my life. *Indian Opinion* was a mirror or part of my life. Week after week I poured out my soul in its columns, and expounded the principles and practice of Satyagraha as I understood it.

As the Rowlatt Bill tried to change certain facets of criminal law in which not only publication of so called 'seditious' document but its possession also was made a punishable offense. As a protest Gandhiji started an unregistered weekly, the Satyagraha in 7 April 1919 and became its editor. It used to be published on Mondays and priced at one paisa. However, the first issue Satyagraha was published with the spelling Satyagrahi. In the very first issue the Mahatma wrote in the notice to subscribers, "This paper has not been registered according to law. So there can be

no annual subscription. Nor can it be guaranteed that the paper will be published without interruption.”

Another newspaper in which Gandhiji was closely associated was Young India (1919-1931). It was first established as a mouthpiece of the Home Rule League of Bombay. After the commencement of the Rowlatt Satyagraha campaign in 1919, Gandhiji became its editor. The first thing Gandhiji did after becoming the editor was to stop taking advertisements in the newspaper. Gandhiji made full use of being its editor in the way that he propagated his views on swadeshi among the common people. In both the newspapers Young India and Navjaivan. (Estd 1947). Gandhiji tried to propagate his idea of truth, nonviolence and Satyagraha.

Gandhiji got heavily involved in journalism. But to him journalism was a mission, a passion, a tool to create awareness, a weapon to form public opinion. He attached a very high value to this vocation. His ideas on journalism and high regards to it can be found from his following quotations:

“In my humble opinion, it is wrong to use a newspaper as a means of earning a living. There are certain spheres of work which are of such consequence and have such bearing on public welfare that to undertake them for earning one’s livelihood will defeat the primary aim behind them. When, further, a newspaper is treated as a means of making profits, the result is likely to be serious malpractices. It is not necessary to prove to those who have some experience of journalism that such malpractices do prevail on a large scale. Newspapers are meant primarily to educate the people. They make the latter familiar with contemporary history. This is a work of no mean responsibility.”

“It is a fact, however, that readers cannot always trust newspapers. Often, facts are found to be quite the opposite of what has been reported. If newspapers realized that it is their duty of educate the people, they could not but wait to check a report before publishing it. It is true that, often, they have to work under difficult conditions. They have to sift the true from the false in but a short time and can only guess at the truth. Even then, I am of the opinion that it is better not to publish a report at all if it has not been found possible to verify it. The reporting of speeches in Indian newspaper is generally defective. There are very few who can take down a speech verbatim, so that speeches are generally found to be a mere hotchpotch. The best thing to do would be to send the proofs of the reported speech to the speaker for correction and the paper should publish its own report of the speech only if the speaker does not correct anything in the proofs sent to him”.

“It is often observed that newspapers publish any matter that they have, just to fill in space. This practice is almost universal. It is so in the West, too. The reason is that most newspapers have their eye on profits. There is no doubt that newspapers have done great service. Their defects are therefore overlooked. But, to my mind, they have done no less harm. There are newspapers in the West which are so full of trash that it will be a sin even to touch them. Many, full of prejudices, create or increase ill-will among people. At times they produce bitterness and strife even

between different families and communities. These newspapers cannot escape criticism merely because they serve the people. On the whole, it would seem that the existence of newspapers promotes good and evil in equal measure”.

Gandhiji wrote in *Young India* dated 2 July 1925, “I have taken up journalism not for its sake but merely as an aid to what I have conceived to be my mission in life. My mission is to teach by example and percept under severe restraint the use of the matchless weapon of Satyagraha which is a direct corollary of nonviolence and truth. I am anxious, indeed I am impatient, and to demonstrate that there is no remedy for the many ills of life save that of non-violence. It is a solvent strong enough to melt the stoniest heart. 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 a 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. The readers sees the pages of the *Young India* fairly well-dressed-up and sometimes, with Romain Rolland, he is inclined to say ‘what a fine old man this must be!’ Well, let the world understand that the fineness is carefully and prayerfully cultivated. And, if it has proved acceptable to some whose opinion I cherish, let the reader understand that when that fineness has become perfectly natural, i.e., when I have become incapable of evil and when nothing harsh or haughty occupies, be it momentarily, my thought-World, then and not till then, my non-violence will move all the hearts of all the world. I have placed before me and reader no impossible ideal or ordeal. It is man’s prerogative and birth-right. We have lost the paradise only to regain it”.

Some scholars analysed Gandhiji’s style or mission of journalism and described it as Gandhian Journalism, which they categorized in Public Journalism or Public Service Journalism, Peace Journalism, Development Journalism and Journalistic Ethics according to his values.

It can be found out from the writing in all of the newspapers with which Mahatma Gandhi was associated in some point of time that his main intension was do public service through journalism. The same value can be found in his address during his visit to *The Hindu*: “I have, therefore, never been tired of reiterating to journalists whom I know that journalism should never be prostituted for selfish ends or for the sake of merely earning a livelihood or, worse still, for amassing money. Journalism, to be useful and serviceable to the country, will take its definite, its best for the service of the country and, whatever happens the views of the country irrespective of consequences”.

Mahatma Gandhi wanted to propagate peace through his journalism. He is synonymous with truth, nonviolence and peace. He became an icon of these principles throughout the world, which the entire world has now recognized. The basic concept of Peace Journalism is to prevent violence and war. It is socially responsible journalism and interprets the events to resolve the

conflicts. Peace journalism is defined as “a programme or a frame of journalistic news coverage which contributes to the process of making and keeping peace respectively to the peaceful settlement of conflicts.

His ethics in journalism, though very difficult to follow in the contemporary time, definitely builds up an alternate narrative. His quotations mentioned above signify the kind of high ethical values, he attached with the profession of journalism, which actually was more of passion and less of profession. Gandhiji once said,” The press is called the fourth estate. It is definitely a power but to misuse that power is criminal. I am a journalist myself and would appeal to fellow journalists to realize their responsibility and to carry on their work with no idea other than that of upholding the truth.”

Gandhiji practiced Development Journalism much before the term was coined. Gandhiji devoted his life to remove the menace of Untouchability which created graded inequality in society and was the main impediment of development. In his own words: “Untouchability as it is practiced in Hinduism today is, in my opinion a sin against God and man and is, therefore, like a poison slowly eating into the vitals of Hinduism”. He also highlighted through his writings the socio economic problems of women and utilised his pen to protest against injustice against the women. He said: “To call woman the weaker sex is a libel. It’s man’s injustice to woman... If non-violence is the law of our being, the future is with woman”. Rural Development always was one of the key areas of Gandhiji’s writings. According to Gandhiji, the ideal Indian village would be a self-sufficient and self-contained one to have almost everything required for daily life, thus ensuring mobilization of local resources.
