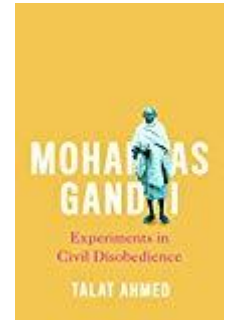


Talat Ahmed. *Mohandas Gandhi: Experiments in Civil Disobedience*. London: Pluto Press, 2019. xiii + 193 pp. \$105.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-7453-3429-5.



Reviewed by Pooja Satyogi (Ambedkar University Delhi)

Published on H-Socialisms (April, 2020)

Commissioned by Gary Roth (Rutgers University - Newark)

Gandhi and Civil Disobedience

Talat Ahmed's political biography of Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi's life is a welcome addition to the existing literature attempting to theorize his principles of nonviolence and civil disobedience. Offering a chronological account, as all biographies do, but differing from them in taking a political position on how Gandhi's individuated philosophical inclinations routinely undermined mass movements, Ahmed's book offers readers more than just an exaltation of Gandhi's life and politics. The book is divided into six chapters and ends with ruminations about why both "liberal imperialists" (p. 155) like Barack Obama and David Cameron, on the one hand, and right-wing leaders like the Indian prime minister Narendra Modi, on the other, find it appealing to invoke Gandhi in their respective brands of politics. This is important because the assumption in Ahmed's work is not that Gandhian principles are amenable to easy appropriation; rather, she hints that Gandhi's politics itself was checkered and contradictory

and leaders who invoke Gandhi, perhaps, do so with some awareness of their own mottled politics.

Early on Ahmed shows how membership in the Vegetarian Society in London in 1891 introduced Gandhi to the writings of Henry David Thoreau on civil disobedience as well as the general beliefs of the Society about contamination of the body by consumption of meat. The second only cemented his already existing cultural and caste beliefs about vegetarianism. The other group that was important for Gandhi during this early period of formation of beliefs was the Theosophical Society, which was founded in New York by Madame Helena Petrovna Blavatsky in 1875. Ahmed tells us that the Society advocated a "modernised reformed form of Hinduism fused with elements of Christianity ... a sort of scientific spirituality" (p. 27). The Society opened up a space for Gandhi to think about religion politically. Until this moment in his life, his only imagination of Hinduism was

of a religion steeped in superstitious traditions. He eventually used religion for wider political purposes, but without letting go of a philosophy of “personal salvation” that religiosity offered (p. 28). For Ahmed, this early phase allows us to gauge Gandhi’s developing capability for contemplating and critiquing the self. This is interesting because Gandhi later comes across as somewhat incapable both of self-reflection and critique, a point duly noted by Ahmed herself.

Gandhi’s political campaigns in South Africa, although not necessarily successful in their outcomes, have often been hailed as precursors to the more radical form they would eventually take in India. With respect to the Franchise Amendment Bill of 1894 that limited the number of Indians who could vote, we see Gandhi using constitutional methods of arranging petitions, organizing meetings with politicians, and writing letters to newspapers to gather support for Indians. The second campaign, in 1906 in Transvaal, was about the Boer government’s introduction of the Asiatic Law Amendment Ordinance and the Asiatic Registration Act, which intended to restrict Indian immigration and allow for deportation. In early attempts of state surveillance that required compulsory registration and fingerprinting of all Indians and Chinese above the age of eight, we see Gandhi’s first attempt, Ahmed argues, of seeking mass participation in disobeying the provisions of the laws. Ahmed further contends that Gandhi’s radical stand was inspired by the Russian Revolution of 1905. And, yet, Gandhi later routinely distanced himself from any politics of the Left, as Ahmed shows. With respect to the registration act, which later became the Transvaal Registration Act of 1907, Gandhi, along with two other colleagues, eventually agreed to a compromise that stipulated that Indians would register voluntarily, following which the government would repeal compulsory registration. The government did not repeal the act, but more importantly, Gandhi’s compromise, Ahmed argues, undermined the unity achieved by Indians who were divided by class. The undermin-

ing of unity among disparate groups is developed by Ahmed in later chapters.

In a third campaign, in 1913-14, directed against the South African Supreme Court’s ruling rendering Hindu, Muslim, and Parsi marriages invalid, Gandhi called for strikes and passive resistance against the continuing monetary tax of three pounds as part of the lapsed Transvaal Registration Act of 1907. With workers’ strikes paralyzing local economies in Natal, Durban, and Pietermaritzburg, the government negotiated with Gandhi, which culminated in the passage of the Indian Relief Bill of 1914. The more problematic aspect of this campaign, as Ahmed points out, was Gandhi’s outright rejection of interracial unity amongst Indian and black workers. Ahmed is at pains to demonstrate how the writings of Thoreau, Leo Tolstoy, and John Ruskin influenced Gandhi in his political campaigns in South Africa, yet it is not clear why Gandhi would be “mesmerized” by Thoreau but be opposed to any political association with the blacks in South Africa (p. 44). Ahmed could have developed the position that Gandhi takes, rather than rendering it as reflective of his identification with “urban professional middle classes” (p. 53). The problem with temporally linear biography is that it does not build on Gandhi’s position against organizing with black workers even though he later attempts to propel a movement against casteism. Ahmed might have also pursued these questions: Does Gandhi rethink his position on the “kaffirs” (p. 52) in his later years, did he see connections between racism and casteism, and did he write about the financial and political support he continued to get from the business community in India?

In the third chapter, which discusses Gandhi’s initial political campaigns in India—Champaran, Kheda, and Ahmedabad—Ahmed again focuses on contradictions in Gandhian methods. In Ahmedabad, for instance, which witnessed an effective political movement by urban textile workers, Gandhi took a position against “militant pick-

eting” (p. 62) and instead began his first political fast, with arbitration leading to workers being awarded a 35-percent wage increase. Ahmed explains that the “complex class dynamics of Gandhi’s social base—revealed by the strike at the textile factory in Ahmedabad—are worth examining in further detail,” but does not offer us any such examination (p. 63). Although Ahmed takes a stand on Gandhi’s paternalism and states that “Gandhism often acted as a brake on popular initiative and militancy from below,” one waits for the biography to make a much more forceful argument about the dissonance in the financial and political bases he endeavored to represent (p. 64).

A more political biography emerges with chapter 4 of the book, where Gandhi occupies center stage in the Indian nationalist movement by the end of 1920. Especially interesting are the passages covering the launch of the Non-Cooperation Movement (NCM) in June 1920, the Khilafat Movement, and the Mappila Rebellion. Ahmed tells us that the NCM achieved a noticeable level of “political unity” among Hindus and Muslims and “saw a process of politicization begin to take place among many Muslims as a result of their being part of a mass nationalist movement on a national scale” (p. 86). Gandhi’s support for the Khilafat Movement, however, is not delineated, even though it was crucial to the building of political unity. The Mapilla Rebellion of 1921, when the peasants rebelled against British authority, was met with a six-month period of state repression and resulted in a massive loss of lives. The British blamed Gandhi and the NCM for the violence. Ahmed tells us that Gandhi interpreted the rebellion through a “religious lens” that was indifferent to colonial rulers (p. 89). What is important here is that Gandhi also spoke of the Muslims of Malabar as being too mercurial “due to their Arab heritage” (p. 89). The conclusion Ahmed draws is that Gandhi, in rendering Hinduism as nonviolent, indicated that “the theory of Hinduism was inherently superior to any other creed, despite his general opposition to traditional brahmanical doc-

trines” (p. 89). One wonders why Ahmed does not say that Gandhi had his own racist inclinations. In the same chapter, Ahmed calls Gandhi parochial, elitist, paternalist, arrogant, dictatorial, benevolent, and authoritarian, but not racist. It might be worth asking what would change about our understanding of Gandhi if we considered his thoughts that invoked race as an important signifier of otherness.

The last chapters of the book are the most interesting in the material they offer about Gandhian politics. Interestingly, Ahmed says that Gandhi’s visit to fascist Italy “does illustrate how Gandhi was never anchored in political tradition, except perhaps a kind of Victorian liberalism. He did not appreciate, let alone fully understand, the politics of the twentieth-century fascist right and the Marxist left” (p. 113). The fifth chapter discusses how the period between 1929 and 1939 catapulted Gandhi into a “Global Icon” (p. 97). This is the period of high symbolism (*Dandi* march, *khadi* spinning, praying), mass civil disobedience, and anticolonial struggle that we most understand Gandhi through. Although the Gandhi-Irwin Pact did not end the salt tax, Gandhi’s mobilization of the masses, only to settle for a compromise, is interpreted by Ahmed as a continuing tactic that Gandhi excelled at. She contends, “compromise was the hallmark of Gandhi’s tactics, even though to reach such a compromise he had to both mobilise the masses and ensure that their actions did not lead to the overthrow of the authorities” (p. 107). Perhaps, in other words, Gandhi needed a successful mass movement to bring legitimacy upon his particular politics of negotiation and conciliation. This might be the reason why workers active in labor movements were routinely scolded by Gandhi for being too confrontational with employers. With respect to Gandhi’s contrary position on the candidature of Subhas Chandra Bose as the presidential candidate for the Congress, it would have been interesting to know if Gandhi wrote about Bose more extensively.

The last chapter focuses on the period of the Second World War leading up to Gandhi's assassination in 1948. Two discussions stand out. The first of these addresses the growing importance of the Muslim League by the mid-1940s. In the post-Quit India Movement period, Ahmed argues, the Muslim League was consumed by class tensions, which might have been addressed had Gandhi not taken a strong position against the articulation of class divisions within the Congress. The Congress might have built an alliance with the League, but Gandhi's constant invocation of Hindu symbols seems to have made Muhammad Ali Jinnah more amenable to a two-nations theory for Hindus and Muslims. This is an important contention, but it takes the form of speculation, whereas Ahmed's burden should have been to draw on more material to strengthen this conjecture. The second discussion in the chapter focuses on the Indian National Army (INA) trials and the Royal Indian Navy Mutiny of 1946. The mutiny, Ahmed contends, was "a tremendous and inspirational action that united Hindu and Muslim sailors" and was followed by general strikes in support of the mutiny across Bombay and Karachi (p. 142). Gandhi, Ahmed tells us, condemned the mutiny and the strikers; the leaders of the Congress and the Muslim League sent their representative to make an agreement between the mutineers and the government. Ahmed argues that Gandhi's politics of "religiosity of individuals" was completely inadequate at a juncture such as this because the need of the hour was to collaborate with and redirect the "magnificent intercommunal unity" that the mutiny had displayed (p. 144). Stretching this further, it might have been possible at this moment to avert the partition and the violence following it.

Ahmed ends by discussing Gandhi's role in transforming the elitism of the Congress party and making the nationalist struggle mass-based. At each step of the way—South Africa, Mappila, the Quit India Movement, and the Naval mutinies—Gandhi "lectured ordinary people for not having understood his *satyagraha* strategy" while absolv-

ing the colonial power of its responsibility in inflicting violence and brutality (p. 157). In the final analysis, Gandhi's "intentions were not to overthrow the system but make it kinder" (p. 158). For Ahmed, Gandhi was unable to rethink his politics of nonviolence in the face of a violent imperial order. This should not be interpreted as a call for violence, argues Ahmed, but a reason to think ahead politically in a context where an imperial power does not cede power and where movements cannot be started from scratch every single time.

A discussion on the source materials available to the author and reasons behind her selections would have made this biography less textbook-ish. The longest quote in the book is from a journalist, Webb Miller, who wrote about police violence during the Salt March. Similarly lengthy selections from Gandhi's own writings, particularly in chapters 5 and 6, would have enriched the book even further. Nonetheless, *Mohandas Gandhi* is a good addition for understanding Gandhian politics.

This review was revised on April 6, 2020. The original version misidentified the author's gender as male. We regret the error. —Ed.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-socialisms>

Citation: Pooja Satyogi. Review of Ahmed, Talat, *Mohandas Gandhi: Experiments in Civil Disobedience*. H-Socialisms, H-Net Reviews. April, 2020.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=54036>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.