

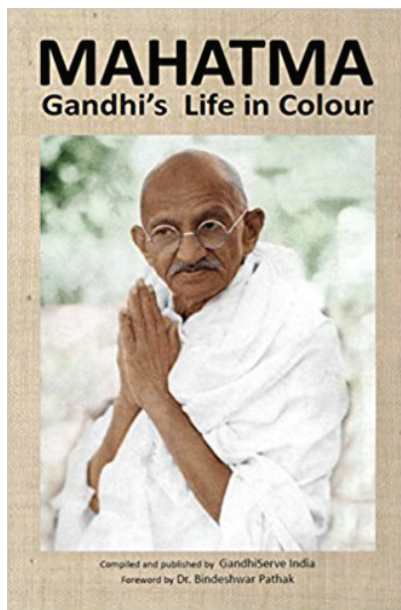
Book review

***Mahatma – Gandhi's life in colour*, compiled by GandhiServe India**

Mumbai: GandhiServe India, 2016, 692pp.

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Reviewed by Gregor Lang-Wojtasik*



What a weighty book, in many ways: in your hands, you get an idea of the heft of 6.6 kilos. A first glance then falls on almost 700 pages of the best photographic paper. A second look gives you an idea of how rich nearly 1,300 images can be, all taken in black and white, within the possibilities of their time, and re-colourized through the latest methods for this special edition. Gandhi thus becomes tangible in his historical context and as an icon of the future.

Some of the pictures have a very convincing quality. The epic Salt March, the first non-violent protest action and one that dates back almost 90 years, becomes a concrete event. The rare and hitherto relatively unknown images included may also prompt appreciation, or exhilaration – for example on seeing an argumentative (1934) or a thoughtful Gandhi (1930). Or that feeling may come from seeing Gandhi on a chair in the water at Juhu Beach, Bombay, in 1944, with his son Devadas (431). Anyone who has visited this beach knows of its many traders and walkers today: the view of the seashore documented here offers a chance to take a perspective similar to Gandhi's in those days, making it possible to be near him as an equal among equals and to enjoy the vastness of the sea and the world. This book gives readers an idea of the gestures and facial expressions of the Mahatma, who can be seen sitting lost in thought at his spinning wheel (394) at one moment and at the next expressing animated life and energy in interaction with children (193; 248; 377).

Cartoons, newspaper excerpts, letters and map material, as well as a focused selection of texts documenting key aspects of the Mahatma's life, further enrich the book, making it a jewel of Gandhi documentation in the twenty-first century. The main messages are documented in an English–Hindi illustration to explain *satyagraha* (159). Both the targeted selection of the texts and the loving systematization and chronological classification of the images reflect the passion of the book's authors, who have done meticulous and interdisciplinary work for over three decades.

In all this, some historical debates over how Gandhi ought to be received are once again brought up; for example, the question of whether Gandhi is pushing the boy in front of him at Juhu Beach in Bombay rather than the boy pulling the Mahatma behind him, as is often asserted (244), although this matter has been considered settled for at least several decades among Gandhi scholars. In addition, the book sheds light on highly topical issues that could be forgotten if left in black and white but that are very vivid in the colourized images – for example Gandhi's interest in modern medicine and the overcoming of diseases such as leprosy (338), or his cooperation with Abdul Ghaffar Khan, the great Pashtun fighter for a non-violent Islam in today's Pakistan and Afghanistan (254; 501; 586), whose work is vitally important for the peace process in South Asia and for the global project of creating a *shanti sena* ('non-violent peace army').

For scholarship, the book is also an important treasure trove concerning the historical stations of Mohandas K. Gandhi, who himself never wanted to be an icon but who through his exemplary and selfless actions became precisely this. Rabindranath Tagore gave him the honorary title of *Mahatma* ('Great Soul'), notionally on behalf of the Indian people. Gandhi struggled with this form of address because he wanted to be one among equals, one who did not bring anything new to the world, since truth and non-violence were just as old as the mountains. And this may be a key to the understanding of Gandhi's work, which still today motivates self-transformation and social change in terms of justice and sustainability. As a holistic attitude towards life, non-violence becomes a guiding post for the world in a twenty-first century which seems to have fallen out of line.

The volume is divided into 14 major biographical sections: Early Years, Apprenticeship in South Africa, Dawn of Nonviolent Resistance in India, The Great Trial, The Epic Salt March, The Nation's Representative, Call of the Villages, Individual Satyagraha against Second World War, Quit India, Regaining Strength, Hour of Destiny, Pilgrim of Peace, India Liberated, and The Light Goes Out. The work is framed by a preface and an introduction, and includes a coherent chronology and a biographical postscript by sociologist and social reformer Dr Bindeshwar Pathak, who is still heavily involved in the field of sanitation following Gandhi's principles. In his essay, Pathak tells of his concrete experiences of untouchability in Bihar after independence, of his growing commitment to Gandhi, and of activities in the cleanliness campaign – *Swachh Bharat Abhiyan* ('Clean India!') – of the current prime minister and his government, looking ahead until 2019. It was the inhumane situation of the latrine scavengers, who in many places still have to clean pit latrines with their bare hands, that ultimately contributed to the foundation of the *Sulabh* sanitation movement in the 1970s. *Sulabh* means availability and presence; it describes the commitment to the building of toilets adapted to prevailing living conditions, with implications for the global South. It implies also the promotion of biogas plants and the establishment of basic healthcare and schooling for the *Dalits* ('Untouchables'). Engaging in this area is a weighty contribution in a country where there are more mobile phones than toilets.

The book has the potential to have a substantial political impact. To be sure, it has been highly praised politically and has been presented to the public by Prime Minister Narendra Modi and by the Minister of Culture, Tourism and Civil Aviation, Dr Mahesh Sharma. Nevertheless, it is a tradition in India to use Gandhi for one's own political purposes. The long-reigning Congress Party used the portrait of the Mahatma continuously in election campaigns. This is odd because Gandhi had already left the Indian National Congress in 1934, and argued passionately with the later Prime Minister of India, Jawaharlal Nehru, about the development of the subcontinent after independence. Gandhi envisaged self-reliant village republics whereas Nehru pursued economic improvement through heavy support for industry.

As is fully documented in the book, there remains a crucial question as to whether current government policy will succeed in implementing the holistic legacy of constructive democracy, in the Gandhian sense: that is, whether policy will seriously work to promote world citizenship on the basis of sustainability and justice. To this end, a revised Constructive Programme (1941) for today would include anchoring the well-being of the individual in the well-being of all, as well as promoting the unity and harmony of religions, realizing lifelong education for all, and striving for the economic equality of all people of the subcontinent. In this sense, it is important to ask whether a focus on the theme of village cleanliness and the extensive provision of toilets is sufficient (point 6 of the Constructive Programme), so that no one has to empty in fields in 2019. But this topic can't be separated from communal unity and harmony in the sense that Gandhi set it out (point 1 of the Constructive Programme). Overcoming untouchability and other forms of social discrimination requires a simultaneous radical reorientation of the economy towards social justice and consideration of universal human rights. Environmental protection works only hand-in-hand with respect for the human dignity of all, which also includes the *adivasi* ('tribals') who live in forests constantly overtaken by increased industrialization. Gandhi's holistic understanding of grassroots democracy is a powerful signal to Indian and global politics when the survival of all people is of central importance.

Readers are invited to revisit Gandhi's multi-faceted pragmatic idealism as expressed in the notions of *sarvodaya* ('universal uplift or progress for all') and *satyagraha* ('power of truth'). This is more or less a question of constructive balance between the global North and the South. Creating a just and sustainable world requires a clear commitment to humanity within democracy. That is important in India, which claims to be the largest democracy (on its own terms) in the world, and in all parts of the globe. To find feasible ways of balancing human needs for the sake of all, different policies are required beyond existing models; especially here, one can learn a lot through sincere engagement with Gandhi.

The book makes it possible to get to know the legacy of the Mahatma through his own eyes, to remember some events and situations or even to be pushed as a connoisseur to something new. The book, despite its substantial price, claims a place in every library in the world and many public places, and as much presence as possible in every household where people want to learn from Gandhi's exemplary life through images and texts. It can be opened on a daily basis to motivate anew the implementation of a sustainable and just world.

Note on the contributor

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