

THE GANDHI CENTENARY: MORE QUESTIONS THAN ANSWERS

MARTIN DEMING LEWIS

THIS IS THE YEAR OF THE GANDHI CENTENARY, THE ONE-HUNDREDTH anniversary of the birth of Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi in 1869. Gandhi's leadership of Indian nationalism has brought him worldwide acclaim as the architect of India's freedom, "the Father of the Indian Nation." Going beyond this, his more ardent followers have seen him as nothing less than a new Messiah, come to save the world from its ancient heritage of conflict and exploitation, hatred and violence, bloodshed and war.

Both in India and elsewhere, elaborate festivities have been planned to mark the occasion of the centenary. The anniversary celebrations actually started on October 2, 1968 (which would have been Gandhi's ninety-ninth birthday), and they have been gathering momentum ever since. They had barely begun, however, when the New Delhi correspondent of *The New York Times* reported: "Already there are those who think that Gandhi's memory and thought are being more abused than honored in the tremendous outpouring of words." In his dispatch, he cited the establishment of a special telephone service in New Delhi by which callers could listen to a brief, faint recording of Gandhi's own voice. "Unfortunately," he observed,

the recording is so old that different callers come up with different versions of what he is saying The difficulty in understanding Gandhi's message appears symbolic of the significance that many Indians are finding in the anniversary. India, they are saying, stopped understanding Gandhi's message even before he died¹

It is a commonplace to observe that India's course since independence has been markedly at variance with Gandhi's ideas and ideals.² Yet if Gandhi's meaning has been elusive, it is not for any lack of literature on the subject. The sheer bulk of Gandhiana is staggering. A bibliography published fourteen years ago listed more than three thousand books and articles on Gandhi in the English language alone. Since that time, their number has grown steadily. Even then, however, the compiler of that bibliography could boldly claim that more had been written about Gandhi than any other personality in history "except perhaps Jesus Christ."³

¹ Joseph Lelyveld, in *The New York Times*, Oct. 6, 1968.

² There are many places one may go for an exploration of this theme. As good a starting point as any is Hugh Tinker, "Magnificent Failure? . . . The Gandhian Ideal in India," in his book *Re-orientations: Essays on Asia in Transition* (New York, 1965), pp. 136-154.

³ Jagdish Saran Sharma, *Mahatma Gandhi: A Descriptive Bibliography* (Delhi, 1955), p. xv.

Gandhi's own voluminous writings have been treated virtually as scripture. They have been published and republished in innumerable collections and anthologies, some of which might best be described as devotional manuals. One intriguing example that appeared a few years ago in India bears the impressive title, *Glorious Thoughts of Gandhi, Being a Treasury of about Ten Thousand Valuable and Inspiring Thoughts of Mahatma Gandhi, Classified under Four Hundred Subjects*.⁴ At the opposite end of the publishing spectrum, a definitive edition of Gandhi's *Collected Works* is now being prepared by the Publications Division of the Government of India. It encompasses the entire body of his writings—books, articles, speeches, and letters—and it is expected to run to seventy or more volumes by the time it is complete.⁵

During the Mahatma's lifetime, his transformation into hero-symbol and myth had already begun. Now, twenty-one years after his assassination in 1948, the Gandhi myth has come of age. It is hardly surprising that there are some incongruous aspects to the centenary celebrations:

Like national heroes elsewhere, the Mahatma has given rise to a small industry producing Gandhi calendars and bookmarks, greeting cards and badges, busts and statues in all sizes, made of marble, wood, clay, metal, or papier-mache. The Information Ministry has been releasing old Gandhi texts, as if he were still touring the country making speeches and publishing sheaths of Gandhian "Thoughts for the Day," as if it meant to out-Mao the Chinese.⁶

Returning to the India he had known many years before, the English writer Malcolm Muggeridge finds the centenary little more than a massive exercise in hypocrisy, in which

millionaires may be expected to proclaim their dedication to the life of poverty Gandhi recommended, soldiers covered with decorations to echo piously his advocacy of non-violence, industrialists to exalt the hand spinning-wheel he saw as a symbol of resistance to the spread of industrialization, birth control zealots to pay their tribute to *Bramacharya*, or total abstinence, which he preached and practiced.

Muggeridge argues that in India today, Gandhi's name "is being used in the crudest possible manner to promote the electoral fortunes of the Congress Party and its candidates." In support of his contention, he cites the attitude of a respected veteran of India's independence movement, C. Rajagopalachari, an old intimate of Gandhi who subsequently broke with his

⁴ N. B. Sen (ed.), *Glorious Thoughts of Gandhi, Being a Treasury of about Ten Thousand Valuable and Inspiring Thoughts of Mahatma Gandhi, Classified under Four Hundred Subjects* (New Delhi, 1965).

⁵ *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi* (Delhi, 1958-). Volume 27 appeared late in 1968, a decade after the first volume had been published; it covers only the two months of May and June, 1925, so that presumably it will be some time before the end is reached.

⁶ Joseph Lelyveld, "India Finds Gandhi Inspiring and Irrelevant," *The New York Times Magazine*, May 25, 1969.

erstwhile Congress colleagues and became one of the founders of the conservative Swatantra Party. Rajaji, says Muggeridge, now looks upon the current anniversary celebrations "with a baleful eye." "Outside India," in his view, "it may be permissible to praise the Mahatma's dedicated life and teaching, but inside India, where his principles have been travestied and his guidance ignored, silence would be the better part."⁷

Rajaji's discomfort at the centenary observances in India is quite understandable, yet his willingness to be tolerant of similar activities elsewhere seems misplaced. Wherever they are held, such celebrations by their very nature are likely to be little more than reiterations *ad nauseam* of the kind of uncritical adulation that characterizes most of the existing literature on Gandhi. Indians, at least, may be better equipped than foreigners to detect debased coinage that passes for Gandhian gold, since it is their own national experience that is involved. It is outside of India that the Gandhi myth flourishes in its most unchecked and flagrant form.

The appropriate response to the occasion of the centenary should neither be worshipful praise nor embarrassed silence. What is needed instead of either one is a critical re-examination of Gandhi's historic role in which searching questions are asked, and easy answers avoided.

To see the dimensions of the problem, we may begin by taking note of the popular image of Gandhi, an image that has become firmly embedded in the layman's understanding of modern history. This is the notion that Gandhi's career was one of the great success stories of our times. It has been given classic expression by one of Gandhi's American admirers the Reverend John Haynes Holmes, in a book written several years after the Mahatma's death. Recalling his first meeting with Gandhi, in 1931, Dr. Holmes remarks (with obvious reference to the unprepossessing physical appearance of the little man in a loincloth):

This man a conqueror? The idea seemed completely ludicrous. Yet in the next sixteen years he had defeated England, without violence or bloodshed, and India was free. If there is any parallel in history to this amazing achievement, I do not chance to know what it is.⁸

The same note of triumph is sounded by an Englishman, Geoffrey Ashe, in his new biography entitled *Gandhi: A Study in Revolution*. Ashe opens his discussion with the observation that "everybody on earth has been affected by Gandhi. Because of him the British Empire ceased to exist as such, and when his own people threw Europe off, the rest of Asia and Africa followed."⁹

Such expansive and exaggerated tributes oversimplify history to the point of gross distortion. By doing so, they debase our understanding not

⁷ Malcolm Muggeridge, "The Mahatma Machine," *The Observer Review* (London), May 11, 1969.

⁸ John Haynes Holmes, *My Gandhi* (New York, 1953), p. 37.

⁹ Geoffrey Ashe, *Gandhi: A Study in Revolution* (London, 1968), p. vii.

only of Gandhi himself, but also of the historical process that brought India its independence. In that process, Gandhi obviously played a prominent role, yet it was by no means the role of a triumphant conqueror. Indeed, some recent Indian writers have been harshly critical of Gandhi's leadership of the nationalist movement.

One striking example is Dr. R. C. Majumdar, a distinguished scholar who is virtually the dean of Indian historians. Dr. Majumdar declares that "the rise of the Gandhi cult . . . has obscured men's vision about true history." While paying his respects to Gandhi as a saint and a man of God, he bluntly attacks the image of Gandhi as a successful politician. Gandhi, he writes, was "lacking in both political wisdom and political strategy," and "far from being infallible, [he] committed serious blunders, one after another, in pursuit of some Utopian ideals and methods which had no basis in reality." Majumdar calls it "a travesty of truth" to give Gandhi sole credit for India's freedom, and "sheer nonsense" to say that Gandhi's technique of *satyagraha* was "the unique weapon by which it was achieved."¹⁰

In his book *Indian Independence in Perspective*, Sasadhar Sinha goes further still. He not only pronounces Gandhi a "a dismal political failure," but even suggests that "India would perhaps have achieved her freedom earlier and with less heartache and dislocation in her social and economic life" if it had not been for the peculiarities of Gandhi's approach to politics. For Sinha, the most disastrous aspect of Gandhi's leadership lay in his repeated failure "to carry the logic of mass action to its ultimate conclusion, namely a constitutional settlement with the British at the point of its maximum impact." This failure, he argues, "unnecessarily delayed Indian freedom, and by delaying it, created or aggravated other problems." Furthermore, he contends that

it is a complete misreading of the history of the Indian national struggle for freedom to say that violence played no part in hastening India's liberation from foreign rule. Contemporary official history and historians are, of course, expected to be silent on this question, for they are largely concerned with proving a thesis, that India achieved her freedom through a non-violent struggle under Gandhian leadership and that everything began and ended with the Mahatma and his loyal followers.¹¹

The central complaint of both Majumdar and Sinha is that during Gandhi's two great campaigns of non-cooperation and civil disobedience, in 1920-22 and 1930-32, he deliberately refrained from pressing his advantage against the British, and chose instead to blunt the force of Indian

¹⁰ R. C. Majumdar, *Three Phases of India's Struggle for Freedom* (Bombay, 1961), p. 40; *History of the Freedom Movement in India*, vol. III (Calcutta, 1963), pp. xviii-xxiii. Extended extracts from these works, together with a wide variety of other interpretative assessments of Gandhi (both favorable and critical) are reprinted in a volume edited by the present writer, entitled *Gandhi: Maker of Modern India?* (Boston, 1965).

¹¹ Sasadhar Sinha, *Indian Independence in Perspective* (Bombay, 1964), pp. 2, 7, 54, 59, 120.

nationalism by suspending the campaigns without tangible reward. Still, both men give Gandhi full credit for his achievement in arousing mass action against the British Raj, on a far wider scale than had ever happened before.

By contrast, however, it is equally possible to interpret Gandhi's campaigns as "negative and destructive movements" which "delayed the advent of Swaraj by about fifteen years." This is the argument put forward by Kanji Dwarkadas, an ardent follower of Mrs. Annie Besant, who claims in his recently-published memoirs that "India would have been a responsible self-governing Dominion, a partner in the British Commonwealth, by 1932 or 1933" if it had listened to the advice of Mrs. Besant and played the constitutional game, rather than following Gandhi into the wilderness of non-cooperation!¹² In somewhat similar vein a British historian of India, Sir Percival Griffiths, has dismissed Gandhi's two great campaigns as "sterile" affairs that had little if any effect on the achievement of independence. Griffiths asserts that "the consistent British purpose (in India) was the gradual development of self-governing institutions." As he sees it, the only area of disagreement between the British government and the Indian nationalists was the timing of each successive constitutional advance. Since none of Gandhi's campaign can be shown to have speeded up the British time-table, he concludes that "it is doubtful if non-cooperation or its successor, civil disobedience, advanced self-government by a single day."¹³

Preposterous as this argument may seem, it is a forcible reminder that—at least in outward form—India's constitutional evolution from the First World War right down to the transfer of power in 1947 remained totally unaffected by Gandhi's activities. In 1935, it is true, a new Government of India Act emerged from the legislative mills of Westminster and was adopted by the British Parliament. It had obviously been shaped as the British answer to nationalist agitation, but it came not as a concession to nationalist demands for independence but as an ingeniously-constructed mechanism to fortify and perpetuate British control.

Gandhi's final effort at organized civil disobedience came during the Second World War, when he launched the so-called "Quit India" movement in 1942. In terms of its immediate effects, it can only be described as a fiasco. It was promptly and ruthlessly suppressed by the authorities. The Congress leadership was jailed, and for the remainder of the war, the British continued firmly in control. It was only in 1945 that negotiations began to break the stalemate, and the initiative that was taken to begin these negotiations came not from Gandhi or the Congress, but from the British Government itself.

¹² Kanji Dwarkadas, *India's Fight for Freedom, 1918-1937: An Eyewitness Story* (Bombay, 1966), p. 459.

¹³ Sir Percival Griffiths, *The British Impact on India* (London, 1963), pp. 312, 329; *Modern India* (New York, 1957), p. 76.

The eventual outcome of these negotiations, of course, was the partitioning of India in 1947 and the transfer of power to the two new states of India and Pakistan. It is tempting, perhaps, to see this as Gandhi's final triumph. Indeed, this is the basic rationale for the popular image of Gandhi's success, on the theory that all's well that ends well.

However, it is a risky proposition to give Gandhi's strategy and tactics any major share of the credit for this ultimate British decision to withdraw. Obviously, one part of the picture was the whole history of Gandhi's earlier campaigns, and the pent-up frustrations they had created. But there were numerous other factors as well. At one extreme, there had been the patient activity of the Indian Liberals, the political heirs of the pre-Gandhian "Moderate" nationalists. Throughout the Gandhian era, these men had loyally cooperated with the British authorities in working for the constitutional mechanisms of the 1919 and 1935 Government of India Acts, in the expectation that the British would thus be convinced that Indians were indeed capable of running their own affairs. At the other extreme, there had been a persistent undercurrent of militant terrorist violence. Indeed, during Gandhi's abortive "Quit India" movement in 1942, this terrorism had come closer to the surface than most Gandhians have been willing to admit.

During the Second World War there had also been the dramatic (if unpalatable) episode of the Indian National Army that Subhas Bose had organized under Japanese sponsorship. The example of these Indians who had taken guns in their hands to fight against the British Empire was not lost on other Indians who perforce had remained on the British side.

Finally, the Indian bourgeoisie had grown in maturity and assertiveness between the First and the Second World War. It was no longer willing simply to share the crumbs from Britain's table, nor was it bashful about pointing to the dangerous potential that was inherent in the incipient radicalism of Indian workers and peasants. At the same time, the British government had to face its own problems at home, and weigh carefully the political as well as the military costs that would be involved in any attempt to prolong its rule over India.

All of these influences came together in the final British decision to hand over power to the two new states of India and Pakistan. Still, the crucial thing to remember about that decision is the fact that it was a British decision. It can only be understood if it is seen as the outcome of a close calculation of comparative advantage on the part of the British government, a calculation in which the controlling factor was the drastically new situation that had been created by the Second World War.

For Gandhi himself, the form and shape of the transfer of power came not as his ultimate triumph, but as a bitter defeat. His basic purpose had never been simply a change in India's political status. Back in 1909, when he was already forty years old, he had written that "if British rule were

replaced tomorrow by Indian rule based on modern methods, India would be no better off.”¹⁴ This statement might well be taken as the key to his entire political career. His deepest purpose was nothing less than the spiritual regeneration of mankind. He sought to bring about a reformation of society and man, in India, in England, and if possible, everywhere on earth. The world that Gandhi envisioned, and the world for which he had worked, was to be a world organized in conformity with his own ideals of simplicity, harmony, truth, and love.

Now, in 1947, India had won her independence, but it was not the independence of Gandhi’s dreams. There was a profound significance to Gandhi’s refusal to take part in the independence celebrations of August 15, 1947. It revealed his own deep disillusionment at the India he had helped to make. The sharpest blow of all was the failure to preserve the unity of India. Gandhi saw the partitioning of the sub-continent along religious lines as nothing less than the vivisection of India, and the repudiation of everything he had worked for during thirty long years. As if this was not bad enough in itself, the actual transfer of power took place amidst the most ghastly scenes of violence and butchery, a frenzied explosion of mutual hatreds as Hindus, Muslims, and Sikhs turned on one another in an orgy of looting, rape, and cold-blooded murder. All told, more than half a million Indians lost their lives, not in fighting against the British but in fighting amongst themselves. Faced with this fact, it is a cruel jest to credit Gandhi’s leadership with victory. His gospel of non-violence and love may have prevented a frontal assault on the British Raj—and the possibility of Independence at an earlier date—but it failed to have any effect at the time it was needed most.

Gandhi had resisted the decision for partition almost to the very end, but events had passed out of his control. The Congress leaders who accepted partition were men who had literally grown up under his own political tutelage, but they now listened to him no longer. Ironically, however (though Gandhi himself may never have realized it), the decision for partition was taken in circumstances that were in considerable part the outgrowth of his own strategy and tactics over the years. It once was fashionable to lay the blame for partition solely on the twin “devils” of Muslim League intransigence and British willingness to “divide and rule.” Today, it is generally agreed, even by some of Gandhi’s admirers,¹⁵ that the kind of leadership Gandhi had given to the nationalist movement played a significant role in making the partition of India inevitable.

¹⁴ Quoted in D. G. Tendulkar, *Mahatma: Life of Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi*, vol. I (Delhi, 1960), p. 107.

¹⁵ See, for example, P. D. Kaushik, *The Congress Ideology and Programme, 1920-47: Ideological Foundations of Indian Nationalism During the Gandhian Era* (Bombay, 1964), pp. 321-325; Indira Rothermund, *The Philosophy of Restraint: Mahatma Gandhi’s Strategy and Indian Politics* (Bombay, 1963), pp. 98-115.

This may seem hard to understand, in view of Gandhi's persistent efforts to promote what he called "heart unity" between Hindus and Muslims. The root of the problem, however, was that he had taken the communal question at face value as a religious issue, and had failed to see how it was intertwined with issues of economics, politics, and social stratification. He had urged Hindus and Muslims to love each other, while ignoring the political and socio-economic bases of communal tension.

Some insight into the difficulties that developed in later years can be gained by recalling Gandhi's support of the Khilafat movement in 1920. That movement was begun by Muslim religious leaders in India as a protest against the treatment of the defeated Ottoman Empire in the peace settlement after the First World War. In particular, it was a protest against the way the Ottoman sultan, the Caliph of Islam, had been deprived of his sovereignty over some of his former non-Turkish territories. The Khilafat issue had the twin virtues of being anti-British, and of having a powerful emotional appeal for religiously-oriented Muslims. Its critical defect was that it was utterly irrelevant to the real issues that Indians faced in their own country. Indeed, the movement could even be considered anti-nationalist in its implications for India, since it implied an extraterritorial allegiance on the part of Indian Muslims, rather than a bond of common interest with their Hindu compatriots.

Despite all this, Gandhi chose to make the Khilafat cause one of the central issues of his non-cooperation campaign. In 1920, he stated quite crudely: "By helping the Mohammedans of India at a critical moment in their history, I want to buy their friendship."¹⁶ It was a serious miscalculation. As one Indian historian has recently pointed out, by accepting the Muslim divines who made up the Khilafat leadership as the real spokesmen for Muslim India, Gandhi "lost contact with the slowly emerging group of English-educated Muslim middle class, whose differences with the Hindus were not scriptural but concerned government jobs."¹⁷ Fatefully, one of these men was Mohammad Ali Jinnah, who a quarter of a century later would become Gandhi's nemesis as the leader of the new nation of Pakistan.

It is true that the Khilafat movement produced a temporary alliance of Muslims and Hindus, but it was an alliance on the most shaky of all possible foundations. In 1924, the caliphate itself was abolished by Turkish Muslims, under the revolutionary regime of Kemal Ataturk, and even before this happened, Gandhi himself had called off the non-cooperation campaign when it had threatened to pass beyond the limits he wished to set for it. During the years that followed, the breach between Hindus and Muslims grew steadily wider. There were many reasons for the failure of the Indian National Congress to win and hold Muslim support, but part of the re-

¹⁶ M. K. Gandhi, *Young India*, 1919-1922 (New York, 1924), p. 167.

¹⁷ A. K. Majumdar, *Advent of Independence* (Bombay, 1963), p. 94.

ponsibility, at least, must be borne by Gandhi himself. His use of Hindu religious and moral concepts to carry a nationalist message certainly strengthened the Congress appeal for the Hindu masses; at the same time, it could only weaken it for Muslims. Finally, the repeated failures of Gandhi's strategy to produce any tangible political result undoubtedly contributed to deteriorating Hindu-Muslim relations, as political frustration found an outlet in communal violence.

The ultimate tragedy of Gandhi's career was that his leadership of Indian nationalism was successful in bringing results he did not want, while it was a failure in terms of his own most cherished ideals. This can be seen in the developments that led to the partitioning of India; it can also be seen in the transformation of the Indian National Congress into an effective political machine.

Here, too, Gandhi's triumph was his defeat. Early in 1948, when India had been an independent nation for less than six months, Gandhi drafted a statement declaring that "the Congress in its present shape and form . . . has outlived its use."¹⁸ He wanted to see it dissolved as a political party, and transformed instead into an agency of social service for village uplift. Needless to say, his advice was never taken seriously. It was not for any such quixotic purpose that Congress politicians had worked so long to secure political power.

Just one day after Gandhi had prepared this statement, he was assassinated. The tragedy was an ironic climax to the manifold contradictions of Gandhi's career, since his murderer was a Hindu fanatic who felt that Gandhi's solicitude for Muslims had been a betrayal of Hinduism.

Any serious effort to evaluate Gandhi's role in the history of modern India must reckon with the issues that have just been discussed. It is not enough simply to praise Gandhi for the moral or spiritual grandeur of his ideas, as has been done so many times over by his worshipful admirers. Men who enter political waters must be judged by political results.

Yet in attempting a political judgment on Gandhi, it is far easier to pose questions than it is to provide answers. As we have seen, the popular image of Gandhi's success as a political strategist and tactician can be and has been challenged. Yet those who criticize Gandhi's leadership of Indian nationalism often build their case on certain assumptions that are dubious at best.

On the one hand, it has been argued that Gandhi led the nationalist movement into a blind alley when he turned it away from constitutionalism in 1920. Those who argue this way (like Kanji Dwarkadas, for example) are assuming that nationalist cooperation with the 1919 Government of India Act would shortly have led to the granting of further and more

¹⁸ Quoted in Tendulkar, *Mahatma*, vol. VIII, p. 283.

meaningful concessions. Such an argument would seem to rest on an overly generous estimate of British intentions.

Something far more powerful than oratory in the Council chambers was needed to shake the hold that Britain still had over India in the years between the two World Wars. Only the most myopic reading of history would permit us to agree with Sir Percival Griffiths, in his view that the 1919 Act and its sequel in 1935 were just preparatory steps leading toward an inevitable transfer of power that was supposedly inherent in long-standing British policy. Gandhi's biographer Louis Fischer sounds a far more realistic note with his pithy comment that "the British, through the years, yielded as much of the appearance of power as circumstances required and as little of its substance as conditions permitted."¹⁹

The alternative argument, of course, is that Gandhi's leadership was defective because he failed to take full advantage of the mass support he aroused with his non-cooperation and civil disobedience campaigns. Yet this asks us to make of Gandhi a different man than he actually was. Gandhi's approach to politics was laden with mysticism and religiosity, in contrast to other nationalist figures who were more conventionally oriented toward a struggle for tangible political gains. Yet it was precisely Gandhi's mysticism and religiosity that enabled him to evoke the support he did. One cannot have it both ways.

Furthermore, this line of argument assumes that India in 1920 was really ripe for revolution, since this is what would have been involved. Perhaps a more determined and politically-oriented kind of leadership could have succeeded in forcing Britain to her knees. The Irish did it; why not the Indians? Yet the hidden assumption here is that nationalism in India in 1920—or even 1930—was a sufficiently cohesive force to override the manifold divisions of religion, caste, language, and region. This is doubtful, to say the least.

The establishment of British rule in India, from its very beginnings in the eighteenth century, had only been possible because of the absence within Indian society of national consciousness and cohesion. The formation in 1885 of the Indian National Congress did not mean that India was yet a nation, in any sociological sense. It was simply the assertion of an aspiration, a hope and belief that there *should* be an Indian nation.

Initially, this aspiration was held only by a small group of Westernized, English-speaking Indian intellectuals and professional men. Over the years, however, as nationalist agitation continued, the base of "national" sentiment broadened. Surendranath Banerjee, one of the pioneer leaders of Congress, captured the sense of what was happening in the apt title of his autobio-

¹⁹ Louis Fischer, *Gandhi: His Life and Message for the World* (New York, 1954), p. 62.

graphy, *A Nation in the Making*.²⁰ Yet the Indian "nation" remained only an aspiration. This was partly because British rule provided no mechanism through which that aspiration could be realized; it was also because the divisive forces of language and caste, religion and region remained more significant than any awareness of common nationality.

Gandhi's crucial contribution to the development of nationalism was to make it a mass phenomenon. However, in the India of Gandhi's day, it was only possible for this to happen by appealing to strata of Indian society that were still emmeshed in traditional ideals and social patterns, strata that had hitherto been touched only to a limited degree by secularizing, modernizing, and "nationalizing" influences. This was where a leader like Gandhi, whose appeal was heavily weighted with traditional religious concepts and symbols, could make his greatest impact. Yet it was inevitable that this very use of tradition would dilute and distort the content of nationalism. Thus, the very characteristics of Gandhi's leadership which made him so effective were responsible as well for introducing new complications into the historical process by which an Indian "nation" was slowly taking shape.

It is possible, of course, that another kind of leadership might have succeeded in avoiding these complications. It is permissible to imagine a situation in which a sense of national unity might have been forged out of violent conflict and upheaval against foreign rule. Yet we can only imagine this, for there is no evidence that this was about to happen in the India of 1920. And if we let our imaginations run along these lines, we must also allow for the possibility that India's British rulers would have succeeded in defeating such a movement, either by brute force or by diverting it into internecine conflict. Once we venture onto the uncharted seas of the historical "if," it is impossible to know where to stop.

It may be more fruitful to content ourselves with an attempt to assess what actually happened, rather than to speculate about what might have been. In doing so, however, we must then reckon with yet another line of argument, the interpretation put forward by Gandhi's left-wing and Marxist critics as to the objective effect of Gandhi's strategy and tactics.²¹ Its essential thrust is that Gandhi's leadership served not only to arouse the Indian masses into action against the British Raj, but also to keep that mass participation safely under middle-class control, so as to avoid any possibility that it might lead into a dangerously revolutionary situation that could threaten privileged interests in India itself. As with all other summary

²⁰ Sir Surendranath Banerjee, *A Nation in the Making, Being the Reminiscences of Fifty Years in Public Life* (London, 1925).

²¹ The fullest expression is to be found in E. M. S. Namboodiripad, *The Mahatma and the Ism* (New Delhi, 1959); a somewhat more sympathetic assessment of Gandhi from a Marxist viewpoint is Hiren Mukerjee, *Gandhiji: A Study* (New Delhi, 1960).

assessments of Gandhi's role, this interpretation must be given careful scrutiny in the light of the actual pattern of events, and this is a task that goes well beyond the limits of what is possible in this brief article.

Yet it is significant that the central point of the argument has been confirmed by no less an authority than G. D. Birla, the millionaire Indian industrialist. In a letter written in 1932 to Sir Samuel Hoare, Secretary of State for India in the British cabinet, Birla insisted to Sir Samuel that "Gandhiji is the greatest force on the side of peace and order. He alone is responsible for keeping the left wing in India in check."²²

It would hardly be fair to suggest that Gandhi was consciously letting himself be used to protect the wealth and privileges of Indian capitalists. Surely, he must have felt that he was making use of their support for his own purposes, to further his own vision of social harmony and the trusteeship for the common good. Yet in 1942, when Louis Fischer asked him whether Congress policies were affected by the fact "that Congress gets its money from the moneyed interests," Gandhi conceded that "it creates a silent debt."²³ In such a situation, historians can hardly escape the responsibility of asking who succeeded in using whom.

Obviously, there are many other dimensions to Gandhi's career which would also need to be examined for a fully-rounded assessment. Even to deal thoroughly with the issues touched on here would require adding yet another book to the already mountainous body of Gandhian literature. Still, perhaps enough has been said to justify the title of this article. The focus of the Gandhi centenary should be on questions, not answers. Otherwise, it will simply become an empty exercise in hero-worship.

²² G. D. Birla, *In the Shadow of the Mahatma* (Bombay, 1953), p. 57.

²³ Louis Fischer, *A Week with Gandhi* (Bombay, 1944), pp. 41-43.