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Ex-Father of the Nation

By Pankaj Mishra

GANDHI'S PASSION

The Life and Legacy

of Mahatma Gandhi.

By Stanley Wolpert.

Illustrated. 308 pp. New York:

Oxford University Press. \$27.50.

In 1894, Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi arrived in South Africa as a young shiftless lawyer from India. He planned to spend a year; he ended up spending two extraordinary decades during which he moved from being the resentful victim of local racial humiliations to the initiator of a wholly new kind of political activism based upon nonviolence. When he finally left South Africa in 1914, after having organized a small and frequently trampled-upon Indian minority into a significant political force, his greatest Afrikaner adversary, Gen. Jan Smuts, was relieved enough to write to a friend, "The saint has left our shores, I hope, forever."

More than 30 years later, a few months after India's long-delayed independence in 1947, Gandhi was assassinated by a Hindu Brahmin named Nathuram Godse, who turned out to have been one of the many rationalists exasperated and bewildered by Gandhi. In a remarkably coherent statement in court, Godse explained that he had killed Gandhi in order to cleanse India of such "old superstitious beliefs" as the "power of the soul, the inner voice, the fast, the prayer and the purity of the mind." He had felt that nonviolence of the kind Gandhi advocated could only "lead the nation toward ruin." With Gandhi out of the way, Godse said, India would be "free to follow the course founded on reason which I consider to be necessary for sound nation-building"; it would "surely be practical, able to retaliate, and would be powerful with armed forces."

Far from being a lone gunman, Godse spoke for millions of educated Hindus, including some of Gandhi's closest disciples, who felt that the "father of the nation" was a burden upon a country that now had to be governed in modern, rational ways. There can be little doubt that if Godse had lived to see India's nuclear tests of 1998, he would have been among the middle-class Hindus who cheered the prime minister's announcement that "India has the capacity for a big bomb."

It was the tests, and the euphoric reaction to them, that shocked Stanley Wolpert, an emeritus professor of South Asian history at the University of California, Los Angeles, into writing "Gandhi's Passion." Wolpert had previously published biographies of Mohammed Ali Jinnah, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto and Jawaharlal Nehru. But Gandhi lived out his life more publicly than any of them -- he made no attempt to conceal even the weird experimenting of his last year, when he slept naked with young women in order to test his sexual self-control. Gandhi is also written about more widely and diversely than any other South Asian leader, and the best that can be said about Wolpert's book is that while it tells you nothing about Gandhi that hasn't been said before, it doesn't oversimplify its subject.

For Gandhi eludes easy description. Born in 1869, half a century after the British consolidation in India, he was among the first Western-educated Indians to realize how thoroughly a colonized people had been denuded of its identity and self-respect. It was his task to discover new values and ideals for himself as well as for his countrymen; and in this, he was, above all, an improviser, "neither an Arcadian nor a Utopian," as Richard Lannoy, one of the more distinguished writers on Gandhi, put it, but a "relentless explorer of immediacy -- immediate needs, immediate means, immediate ends."

This is why it is hard to describe him as an intellectual or a politician, or indeed the Hindu sage he was often taken to be in India. As an insecure small-town Indian in Victorian England, trying to be more English than the English, Gandhi awakened to his Hindu ancestry and heritage. In South Africa, confronted with a depressed Indian minority and an arrogant government, he appealed to the same liberal-humanist values of Western civilization that he had absorbed in England through personal friendships and through readings in Ruskin, Thoreau and Emerson. In India, he came into his own as a leader of the Hindus, but not before he had cast a cold expatriate eye on the corruptions of Hinduism.

Few Indians in his time denounced more strongly, or worked harder to end, the practice of untouchability, the appalling sanitary conditions in Indian villages and towns, the distrust between Hindus and Muslims. For Gandhi, liberation from British rule meant nothing if it wasn't preceded by severe self-appraisal and social reform within Indian society. Wolpert quotes him as saying early in his career that "we should learn to be men, to be a nation"; and the operative word here is "learn." He often seemed self-contradictory: he attacked untouchability, for instance, but at the same time he spoke in favor of the caste system, which, according to him, worked well in the past and could be made to do so again in the future.

Many of his more Westernized followers, like Nehru, despaired at his seemingly quixotic rejection of the Industrial Revolution, his partiality for small, self-sufficient villages, his distrust of overcentralized nation-states. But Gandhi preferred to find sanction for the radical changes he proposed in the long Indian past. For instance, he managed to reinterpret the Bhagavad-Gita, which was read by many of his contemporaries as a call to arms, as an argument for nonviolence and continuous self-awareness. Quite apart from pragmatic considerations -- Gandhi, after all, was working within a highly traditional society -- he felt it important for a conquered people to look for fresh identity and dignity in its own traditions. India, he believed, must find its own way. To attempt to beat the West at its own game, as Japan was then doing, was already to admit defeat.

Appropriately, his political method, satyagraha, attempted to change the rules of the game. As he saw it, a nonviolent movement against the British could not be, as national liberation struggles usually were, a zero-sum contest, with clearly defined winners and losers. He exhorted the Indian masses to resist demonizing the British, to make them participate in a process of self-questioning and self-purification. His aim was to bring about a moral transformation among the British, to the point where they themselves would share with their victims an awareness of the profound evil of colonialism: how the suffering created by organized exploitation touched both exploiter and victim. Only such an awareness could create the possibility of compassion and reconciliation between peoples and nations.

Wolpert mentions Martin Luther King Jr. and Nelson Mandela as having drawn inspiration from Gandhi's methods. Disappointingly, he doesn't go into the manifold ways Gandhi's distrust of modernity has found echoes among many political and environmental movements around the world. Gandhi's opposition to the railways seemed absurd in the early 20th century. But his argument that the railways encouraged grain owners to sell their wares in the dearest markets and thereby undermine local small-scale economies would make sense to the anti-globalization protesters of today.

In retrospect, Gandhi appears to have possessed a peculiarly instinctive grasp of historical realities. The idealists spoke of the syncretic civilization of India, of the essential unity between Hindus and Muslims. But more than most, Gandhi understood how intense the animosity and distrust between Hindus and Muslims had become under British rule -- an insight sadly played out first in the partition of India and then in the relations between India and Pakistan.

Goodness and sincerity of the kind Gandhi embodied go only so far in politics; and there is cruel irony in the fact that his attempt at bringing Hindus and Muslims together on the platform offered by the Hindu-dominated Congress Party nourished Muslim insecurities and fears, leading to the demand for Pakistan. There is even greater irony in the fact that during the last lonely months of Gandhi's life, as the savagery that accompanied the partition of India intensified, the Muslims continued to think of him as a promoter of Hindu interests, while the Hindus accused him of being partial to Muslims.

Gandhi was tormented by his failure, and half longed for death, but still he persevered. The abandoned leader fasting in a derelict house and bringing about, through his moral power, an end to the sectarian violence in Calcutta; the frail man in his late 70's walking barefoot through riot-torn villages in East Bengal, where hostile locals strewed shattered glass on his path; the anguished witness of an independent India planning to travel to Pakistan and work for Hindu-Muslim accord -- Gandhi in his last days was truly magnificent. A sense of the glory and the tragedy of the man can be gained even from Wolpert's somewhat perfunctory biography.

Drawing (Boris Kulikov)