



In School with Mahatma Gandhi

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My interface with Mahatma Gandhi was mediated and animated by Dr Raghubhai Nayak, principal of Sardar Patel Vidyalaya in New Delhi, which I joined when I was six or seven years old in the early 1960s. Raghubhai and his wife Jeshibehn had internalised a Gandhian ethic to an extent that seems almost difficult to believe today but also adopted it so that it was seamlessly embedded in the school's functioning in different aspects. So I encountered Mahatma Gandhi's life story almost daily in the morning assembly when one or another episode from it would be discussed. Values that I today regard as intrinsic to Mahatma Gandhi were imbibed — and I realise this now much more than I did earlier — through a set of pedagogic instruments that gave emphasis to the dignity of labour, helping the needy, respect for all faiths, empathy for peasant and rural uplift. So "shramdaan", "village visits", "Friday collection" were a constant part of the school curriculum regardless of which class you were in. This was interspersed with music and crafts, all making for a unique socialising environment that removed Mahatma Gandhi from the pedestal of icons to a living force and factor in your daily schedule. Underwriting all this was a constant reiteration of nationalism and a deep empathy with all things Indian constantly reinforced by

music, drama, etc.

I did my schooling in Sardar Patel Vidyalaya in three distinct tranches — in elementary, middle and secondary school — in all seven years between 1962 and 1973. The periods in between were spent in Bhopal and Jammu as a consequence of my father's transferable job as a civil servant. The contrasts made me understand — vaguely as a student, with greater clarity later — the unique ecosystem that Raghubhai had created in an otherwise traditional school that also never compromised even a little on usual attributes of discipline, punctuality, cleanliness and most important of all, good performance in examinations.

Over the years I have gained other perspectives on Mahatma Gandhi and Gandhian thought. These were often more critical and as a university student and thereafter, I wondered also about the Mahatma's deep conservatism on many issues and how this coexisted with his radical behaviour on others. My personal distillate of Mahatma Gandhi gradually crystallised around three or four postulates of a personal moral philosophy that are standards for judging behaviour. The first of these is some concern for the underdog and those disadvantaged

or less privileged. The second is of the value of coexistence — whether one calls it pluralism, respect for all religions or secularism — and the importance of this as an end in itself. Thirdly, austerity as a kind of personal ecosystem — consume less and waste less, reduce your needs etc. Fourthly and finally, to have an internal idea of India — its diversity, its civilisational ethos and its spiritual core and temper nationalism with this private idea of India.

Do I actually live such a life? No, but I do try to observe it and measure myself against it. These are after all standards, not goals. For instance, try as I might, I will not be able to reduce my personal carbon footprint to that of my teachers. But I do worry about it and there is always a stab of guilt at a transgression. More importantly do these constitute a Gandhian philosophy? Again, obviously not, at least not the whole but perhaps one part of it. Here again my school experience was instructive. Dr Nayak himself, and some of the teachers, had their lives profoundly influenced by Mahatma Gandhi — occasionally personally and directly; but more frequently by the unfolding Gandhi narrative they were contemporary to. This impact was very visible in some cases: a dedication to their students and to teaching that was almost obsessive; a frugality in personal lifestyles that would surprise us even though we were children of the Licence Permit Raj; and, finally, a constant measuring of themselves against some internal private standard of behaviour. How was this the impact of Mahatma Gandhi? Well, they all seemed to think it was and that they too were waging a struggle to live an ethical life and by a code of ethics that was Gandhian.

I will never forget a morning assembly lecture sometime in September-October 1969 by Raghubhai

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Nayak. It was the birth centenary of Mahatma Gandhi and the school, like the rest of the country, was deep in its observance through different events. Fifty years have passed but I will never forget the tremor in Raghubhai's voice as he spoke about the ongoing communal violence in his native Ahmedabad. Was it some personal failing on *his* part that this visitation was upon the Mahatma's own state in the centenary of his birth Raghubhai seemed to be asking? Making the national personal was, I think now, truly Gandhian.

Am I romanticising my days as a school boy? To some extent perhaps yes; but try as I might it is difficult to disentangle my understanding of Mahatma Gandhi from the lessons that Raghubhai and the teachers of Sardar Patel Vidyalaya instilled in me.

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