Who Will Listen?

RAJAN GURUKKAL

The book seeks to show as to how major issues of our times relate to what Gandhi set down in *Hind Swaraj* and his later writings, almost a century ago, and to persuade us to think seriously where we are today. Starting off with a Prologue, it unfurls itself into 14 essays putting across the author’s reflections covering a rather wide swath of topics, almost all on which Gandhi had strong views and ends up with an epilogue. The effort in the book is to interpret Gandhi’s prophetic words and actions, against the context of a variety of issues we face today. “It is the faith of both the world’s elites and its middle classes that science is the answer, that technology is the future, that gadgetry will resolve humanity’s problems”, that has provoked the author to reread Gandhi and take up the ambitious project of resuscitating his observations out of his experiments with truth (p 2).

The Fruitful and the Frivolous

Probing what sets Gandhi apart, with a distinct approach to a variety of issues, such as terrorism, freedom, economic policy, industrialism, etc, the initial few essays try and build a relationship of reflexive interaction. What self-deceptions about terrorism are we prey to, and how can Gandhi help us resolve this endless war on ourselves, form the topic of one essay. Another essay highlights Gandhi’s warnings about the fetishism of economic well-being divorced from other considerations. In a following piece, Gandhi is postulated to have foreseen both the economic and the moral hazards of globalisation. Another depicts Gandhi as an environmentalist in his own right, not scientific but spiritual. Two essays, one juxtaposing Gandhi’s views against the challenges of multiculturalism and the other, appreciating Gandhi’s view of journalism, make for fascinating reading. One of the chapters examining Gandhi’s views on industrialism quite succinctly shows them to be prescient, a point which has already been articulated by several other people though.

Reading Gandhi in the Twenty-First Century


Bringing old philosophers to bear on any contemporary issue is not always a worthwhile exercise of intellectual depth even if their philosophical speculations are prophetic, for the dialogic imagination goes either too naive or anachronistic. Imagining Gandhi’s reactions on the Taliban or fundamentalism of any other type is bound to fall flat as tautology. Thinking Gandhi to be conversing with Solzhenitsyn is fine, and to a certain extent, a fruitful intellectual exercise, but pressuring him to react to naive expositions like the “end of history” or the “clash of civilisations”, is frivolous.

Do we need Gandhi to be recalled to expose Western economic models premised on human greed, wedded rather inextricably to violence? A highlight of the Gandhian sense of people’s struggle would have been more fitting than the critique of civil society’s anti-corruption agitation under the self-styled Gandhian, which the author does in an essay. The deduction, in another, that the suicides seem to follow directly from policies that have jettisoned every last item of Gandhi’s thinking is neither true of the empirically given nor compatible to the theoretically sustained. The author asks, in one essay, why with all the drumbeat of spreading democracy, has the State not withered away.

This is a question not only self-contradictory but also un-Gandhian. Did Gandhi ever visualise democracy replacing state? He was against the state, indeed, for its being a soulless machine that could never be weaned from violence to which it owed its very existence. Nevertheless, he knew that the state would never disappear and therefore, his mission was to turn the state into a decentralised social product. Likewise, another statement of the author that among others like Mark Twain and George Bernard Shaw, Karl Marx also saw material prosperity, the road to
a better morality is un-Marxian (p 27). It is not accidental that the author missed the convergence of Marx's commune and Gandhi's gram swaraj in his analysis.

**Gandhian Common Sense**

Much of what makes Gandhi relevant to the 21st century has been discussed in the epilogue which discusses the continued tenacity of technology and consumption culture, the pervasiveness of globalisation, the merging of religiosity with greed, the spread of militarism, while civil disobedience as a strategy is turning ineffective, corruption has become rampant and the environment is constantly degrading. Although it is unfair to review a book for what it excludes, one cannot ignore the conspicuous absence of references to certain prophetic insights from the scholarly world of contemporary times. Critical pedagogy, sustainability science, alternative development economics, anti-development anthropology, alternative politics, green sciences, organic farming and so on are examples which owe their knowledge base to Gandhian perspectives. Post-development theorists like James Ferguson, Wolfgang Sachs, Gustavo Esteva, Kazuya Ishii, Arturo Escobar and many others owe their critiques to the insights of Gandhi.

The book under review recognises how strongly Gandhi took to debunking the entire notion of Western civilisation, right at its height remaining resplendent, confident, and on top of the world. It does take note of Gandhi's intellectual modernisation without his being swept off by the epochal current of Western civilisation. However, the analysis hardly focuses on the way Gandhi sought to remain rooted in tradition and firmly repositioned himself face to face with every aspect of the Western, in a relationship of encounter. In fact, Gandhi had consciously avoided the European mode of thinking and organisation of thought, as evidenced by his abstinence from philosophising or theorising. He had made a total rebuttal of Western epistemology, for the claim of authority, authenticity and credibility, much of which was disguised imperialism to him. He had refused to accept the Western epistemological normative universal, for it was violence carried forward to the domain of knowledge.

Niranjan Ramakrishnan's book is neither an intellectual history narrated in the chronological order nor philosophy construed in the logical sequence of any distinct thought. It is an anthology of non-fiction popular essays of independent existence addressing the challenges of contemporary human existence analysed at through Gandhian perspectives. Niranjan's essays are based on original sources as far as Gandhi's views are concerned, but as regards any other subject, the approach is more of a journalistic kind with didactic flare, ethical commitment, and public appeal. The narrative owes its analytical content to the author's sharp common sense and contemporary consciousness, rather than to any specific methodology or theoretical framework. This results in a situation that what matters to the author is the meaning of statements he picks up but not the how and why thereof. However, this makes the book eminently readable and one of general interest attracting a wider readership.

Rajan Gurukkal (rgurukkal@gmail.com) is with the Centre for Contemporary Studies, Indian Institute of Science, Bangalore.

### Books Received


Bennoune, Karima (2013); Your Fatwa Does Not Apply Here: Untold Stories from the Fight Against Muslim Fundamentalism (New York and London: W N Norton & Company); pp x + 402, $27.95.

Das, Anirban (2012); Toward a Politics of the (Im)Possible: The Body in Third World Feminisms (Delhi: Anthem Press); pp xxii + 211, price not indicated.


Garafano, John and Andrea J Dew, ed. (2013); Deep Currents and Rising Tides: The Indian Ocean and International Relations (New Delhi: Cambridge University Press/Foundation Books); pp xvii + 332, Rs 850.

Gopalan, Pritha (2013); PPP Paradox: Promise and Perils of Public-Private Partnership in Education (New Delhi: Sage Publications); pp xx + 152, Rs 495.

Green, John (2013); Engels: A Revolutionary Life (Delhi: Aakar Books); pp 345, Rs 350.

Harford, Tim (2013); The Under Cover Economist Strikes Back: How to Run – or Ruin – An Economy (London: Little Brown); pp 307, price not indicated.


Khan, Mumtaz Ali (2013); Tall Islam and Short Muslims (New Delhi: Concept Publishing Company); pp x + 233, Rs 700.

Kumar, Sanjay (2013); Changing Electoral Politics in Delhi: From Caste to Class (New Delhi: Sage Publications); pp xx + 216, Rs 450.


Lal, Chaman (2013); Understanding Bhagat Singh (Delhi: Aakar Books); pp xii + 258, Rs 550.

Mainent, Pierre (2013); Metamorphoses of the City (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press); pp vi + 376, $39.95.

Marino, Francesca and Beniamino Natale (2013); Apocalypse: Pakistan (New Delhi: Niyogi Books); pp xxiv + 180, Rs 395.

Menon, Jisha (2013); The Performance of Nationalism: India, Pakistan, and the Memory of Partition (New Delhi: Cambridge University Press); pp xxi + 260, Rs 795.

Meszaros, Istvan (2013); Luckacs' Concept of Dialectic (Delhi: Aakar Books); pp 212, Rs 225. – (2013); The Work of Sartre: Search for Freedom and the Challenge of History (Delhi: Aakar Books); pp 386, Rs 325.

Miller, Manjari Chatterjee (2013); Wronged by Empire: Post-Imperial Ideology and Foreign Policy in India and China (Stanford, Delhi: Stanford University Press); pp 169, price not indicated.

Ninan, Sevanti and Subarno Chattarji, ed. (2013); The Hoot Reader: Media Practice in Twenty-first Century India (New Delhi: Oxford University Press); pp xx + 362, Rs 650.


Sadhak, H (2013); Pension Reform in India: The Unfinished Agenda (New Delhi: Sage Publications); pp xvi + 508, Rs 1,250.


Vaidyanathan, K (2013); Credit Risk Management for Indian Banks (New Delhi: Sage Publications); pp xxv + 260, Rs 359.