

Gandhi's Editor: K. Swaminathan*

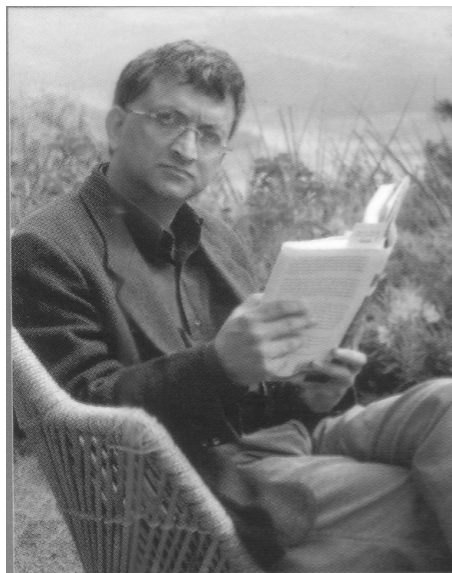
Ramachandra Guha

One of the outstanding achievements of Independent India is the publication of the *Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi* in 90 volumes. Thanks to very hard and meticulous work by its Editor, the Tamilian and scholar Krishnaswami Swaminathan. One of the well-known senior journalists, who was also Press Adviser to the Prime Minister, Shri H.Y. Sharada Prasad, has called K. Swaminathan as *the most eminent book editor of our times*. We may refrain from describing more about the achievements of 'Gandhi's Editor' as the article below tells everything in a more interesting and impressive manner.

We in *Ishani*, however, are very happy to reproduce this article from the book, '*An Anthropologists among the Marxists and Other Essays*' by Shri Ramachandra Guha. We thank him for his permission to *Ishani* to reproduce this article on "Gandhi's Editor: K. Swaminathan".

Shri Guha both by virtue of his innate scholarship, and by virtue of his long and close association with Shri Swaminathan, who happened to be his blood relation too, presents before us the man and the scholar and his monumental creation. We say 'creation' because to authoritatively place all Gandhiji's words before the world 'after deciphering and authenticating scripts and scraps written in a hand untidy in three languages' was no less than an act of the finest creation.

N.Th. & A.A.



Author

Behind every great thinker lies a lesser being who shall translate, collate, annotate or otherwise facilitate his work. James Boswell accompanied Dr Johnson around the pubs of London, committing to memory, and thereafter to print, every word uttered in the cups. It fell to two later Englishmen, Ernest Jones and James Strachey, to make - as biographer and translator respectively - the work of Sigmund Freud accessible to a wider public. Friedrich Engels, being German, took his duties most seriously - subsidising the writing of Karl Marx's books, reviewing them when they appeared, even assuming the paternity of an illegitimate child to save his friend's marriage.

It is a happy accident that the men who thus served Mahatma Gandhi came from the four corners of the land. Mahadev Desai, who joined Gandhi first, was, as a fellow Gujarati, well placed to accompany him on his village tours, to handle his correspondence, to translate his autobiography and other works of truth. When Mahadev died in prison in 1942, his almost automatic successor was the lean and energetic Punjabi, Pyarelal, secretary to the Mahatma in the last, tormented decade of his life. In 1946-47 his place was briefly taken by the Calcutta anthropologist, Nirmal Kumar Bose, who worked with Gandhi when he walked through the riot-torn villages of eastern Bengal.

Mahadev Desai translated Gandhi's works, and himself wrote narrative accounts of the Bardoli and Ahmedabad satyagrahas. Bose, for his part, wrote the autobiographical *My Days with Gandhi*, whereas Pyarelal contributed weighty studies of Gandhi's *Early Phase* and *His Last Phase*. These works are read and remembered, but it was the lot of a man who hardly knew Gandhi in the flesh to finally and authoritatively place all his words before the world. This was the Tamilian and scholar Krishnaswami Swaminathan.

II

Born in 1896, a son of the man who first translated Valmiki's *Ramayana* into Tamil, Swaminathan was educated at P.S. High School, Mylapore, Presidency College, and the University of Oxford. He then commenced a successful career as a teacher of English, first at a small college in Chidambaram and thereafter at his old college in Madras. Like other intellectuals of his generation, he moved easily between his native tongue and the foreign one. A lover of Tamil literature, he also published a popular play, *Kattai Vandi*, written - to judge only from its title - in the fashionable mode of social realism.

Swaminathan was the first of three brothers of distinction. Next to him in age was K. Venkataraman, a world authority on synthetic dyes and founder-director of the National Chemical Laboratory in Pune; younger still was K. Sanjivi, one of the Madras's best-known teachers and practitioners of medicine. In 1957 Sanjivi was offered a professorship at the newly created All India Institute of Medical Sciences in New Delhi. He wished to go, but his eldest brother had just suffered a nervous breakdown. Commanded by the family to stay back and nurse him, Sanjivi refused the job. For this act of brotherly love, his reward was to see a fully restored Swaminathan march off to Delhi to take up a position of his own, as Chief Editor of the *Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*. The capital welcomed the scholar, but Madras itself was well pleased with the exchange: not joining the AIIMS enabled Sanjivi to establish that extraordinary and still-vigorous institution, the Voluntary Health Service in Adyar.

Swaminathan was the third man appointed to oversee this most ambitious programme in Indian publishing history. First to join had been Bharatan Kumarappa, younger brother of the Tamil nationalists J.M. and J.C. Kumarappa. Bharatan died not long after and was succeeded by the veteran Congressman Jairamdas Daulatram. Daulatram left in two years, preferring the sinecure of a governorship to the business of deciphering and authenticating scripts and scraps written in a hand untidy in three languages. When Swaminathan took over, only four volumes had appeared, covering the first three comparatively insignificant decades of Gandhi's life. By the time he retired, twenty-eight years later, the story had been brought down to the 30th of January 1948.

That Swaminathan stayed in Delhi as long as he did was due not least to some sensible advice from C. Rajagopalachari. In 1960, before the professor left Madras, he called on the statesman, who urged him to be more tolerant of the *babus* and *netas* than he had been of his British superiors in the Indian Educational Service. 'Remember you are serving Gandhi, not the Delhi Government,' said Rajaji. 'Don't submit your resignation, as you used to do again and again in Madras. The Nawabs in Delhi will *accept* your resignation.' And so, as Swaminathan was to recall, 'I never yielded to the temptation to resign, and have, like Casablanca, clung to my post for a quarter century while fires raged and storms blew all around me.'

It is fair to say that none of Gandhi's secretaries, or either of the previous editors of the *Collected Works*, would have carried off the job as successfully as Swaminathan did. All five would have been careful and

conscientious, but care and conscientiousness required, in this case, to be matched by scholarship, the ability to assess and measure words, to place them in context, to identify their significance in the life of the man and his time. The professor of English had the intellectual apparatus, but also the doggedness and persistence to supervise a job which, as one of his admirers described it, turned out to be a neck-and-neck race between the editor's age (in years) and the number of volumes published by him: Swaminathan won, narrowly, by 94 to 90.

The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi will inspire many works of exegesis. I have beside me a typescript of a book by an Australian historian on Gandhi's religious thought, based wholly on the CWMG - to use the abbreviation that increasingly peppers the footnotes of scholarly articles, books and theses. The industry of Swaminathan and his colleagues has also been mined in recent studies by Judith Brown, Bhikhu Parekh, Partha Chatterjee and Rajmohan Gandhi, all but the last of which were made possible only by a near-total reliance on the CWMG.

III

A man not given to overstatement, H.Y. Sharada Prasad, has called K. Swaminathan the 'most eminent book editor of our times.' Swaminathan was also the most reticent of editors for though he, better than anyone else, knew and understood the most original thinker of the century, he never really told us what he thought of him. Swaminathan published little on Gandhi in his own name, but what he did leave behind makes one wish he had been more forthcoming. A lecture of 1984, in memory of K. Santhanam, contains a series of biting but not unfair assessments of some highly esteemed scholars of Gandhi. Thus Judith Brown 'regards Gandhi as a lover of power using politics to increase his own stature.' Raghavan Iyer 'studies Gandhi *in vacuo* and tries to relate him to the political and moral thinkers of the West with little regard to what he learnt from the poor people whom he loved and served.' Eric Erikson, 'who wrote a brilliant and wholly satisfying book on "Young Man Luther,"' analyses Gandhi into shreds and patches, all because he was totally ignorant of Gandhi's cultural background, the living creative poetry of Vaishnavism, which none can deny and none can destroy.' On the other side the editor did commend the thousand-page tome of A. Ramaswami, a 'meticulous scholar now dead and forgotten because he committed the atrocious sin of writing in Tamil instead of in English.'

Swaminathan remarks, in the same lecture, that the 'Gandhi story is inexhaustible, like the Ramayana and Mahabharata combined, and like these epics it is equally amenable to reverent study and mercenary

exploitation.’ As regards the latter he had in mind, most of all, ‘that sensation-monger and wizard of the box office’ - Richard Attenborough. For ‘Attenborough’s Ben Kingsley disguised as Gandhi is a stuffed dummy set up for floral offerings, which could equally serve, and has actually been used, for target practice by the opponents of non-violence who abound in America, Iran and elsewhere. There is no Rama without Sita, Lakshmana, Bharata, Hanuman and so on. [But] Attenborough’s Gandhi is a Titan among dwarfs, an eagle among sparrows, a mere caricature unrelated to reality.’

It is noteworthy that Swaminathan does not refer to Gandhi as the ‘Mahatma’: he seemed, like Ananda Coomaraswamy before him, to reserve the title for men whose quest was *wholly* spiritual, such as Sri Ramakrishna and Ramana Maharishi. In any case, he sought to make the Mahatma mortal, seeing him as but the first among equals in the struggle for truth and non-violence and against racism and imperialism. ‘Charismatic leaders,’ he writes, ‘momentary meteors like Hitler, Mussolini and Khomeini, gain followers and lead movements by making others feel weak, helpless and dependent on those towering tyrants. But as V.S. Srinivasa Sastri, Gandhi’s life-long friend and frequent opponent, used to say, “Gandhi does not want blind or timid followers; he wants clear-eyed, courageous fellow travellers. He does not want hero-worshippers; he wants fellow-worshippers of Truth with him”.’

In his Santhanam Memorial Lecture of 1984 the editor went back seventy years to relate how he briefly met his master on Gandhi’s first visit to Madras, in April 1915. Gandhi was staying at the home of the editor and publisher G.A. Natesan, and Swaminathan was one of the students called upon to attend on him. His duties included ‘mending his quill pens because he would not use nibs, then all imported, filling his ink-stand with swadeshi ink and going with him on foot or by tram to the Roman Catholic Bishop’s house in San Thome, the Anglican Bishop’s house near St George’s Cathedral, the Mahajana Sabha Hall [in] Mount Road, Ranade Hall, Mylapore,...George Town, Royapettah and various other locations.’ Five years later Swaminathan attended on Gandhi again. This time the Mahatma was on the look-out for able-bodied (if non-violent) soldiers, but after choosing some other young men he rejected Swaminathan with these words of cold comfort: ‘You may not join me now, but I shall call you when I need you and you are ready.’ When the call finally came, forty years later, the student was better prepared, for, as Swaminathan confessed, he had in 1920 been the type of youth ‘who talked sedition and planned strikes without mustering courage to declare them.’

In 1988, their main task completed, Swaminathan and his Chief Deputy Editor, C.N. Patel, were persuaded by Orient Longman to bring out *A Gandhi Reader*. This selection of seventy small passages gives a clue to what kind of opus Swaminathan might have written on Gandhi, had he been so inclined. The *Reader* includes statements on women, untouchability, non-violence and satyagraha, but more surprisingly perhaps a dozen tributes to men and women of his acquaintance. The people so honoured include several of his friends and co-workers in South Africa - Maganlal Gandhi, Haji Hossein Dawood, and the Reverend Joseph Doke (who was also Gandhi's first biographer) - as well as two Englishwomen, Emily Hobhouse and Florence Winter-bottom, who had helped mediate between browns and whites. We, find, too, commemorations of those who were Gandhi's peers and forbears in the nationalist movement - Chittaranjan Das, Annie Besant, Tilak, and Gokhale. Also remembered are exemplars of social groups who were sometimes (but in Gandhi's view wrongly) perceived as a threat by the dominant Hindu - hence the printing of tributes to the Muslim nationalist Dr M.A. Ansari, the Christian nationalist S.K. Rudra (Principal of St. Stephen's College, Delhi), and the anti-colonial Englishman C.F. Andrews. It is thus that Swaminathan gently dusts Gandhi off his pedestal, by revealing his gift of friendship and the range of associations and identifications he lived and died for.

But it was language, as much as life, which attracted the English professor to a man who had not studied English beyond his own matriculation. It is in the preface to *A Gandhi Reader* that we find why Swaminathan so cheerfully spent half-a-lifetime sorting out his words, and why we might do likewise too. 'Gandhi's literary style', he remarks,

is a natural expression of his democratic temper. There is no conscious ornamentation, no obtrusive trick of style calling attention to itself. The style is a blend of the modern manner of an individual sharing his ideas and experiences with his readers, and the impersonal manner of the Indian tradition in which the thought is more important than the person expounding it. The sense of equality with the common man is the mark of Gandhi's style and the burden of his teaching. To feel and appreciate this essence of Gandhi the man, in his writings and speeches, is the best education for true democracy.

The civil servant and scholar C.S. Venkatachar once compared *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi* to the Qutb Minar, that other monument to industry and efficiency, that marvel likewise of clarity and

longevity. But to find a suitable analogue for the editor one needs, I think, to reach further back still. Working away with his loving long pen, Swaminathan was to Gandhi what Ganapati once was to Vyasa, transcribing and setting into order a narrative of astonishing length and complexity, running out of breath only when his master ran out of words.

IV

I have written above of Swaminathan the editor and scholar. That is how the world shall remember him, but to me he was also a revered great-uncle, my mother's mother's mother's brother. The *mama* is, at least in South India, the most intimate of relations aside from one's parents, and Swaminathan was my *mama* thrice over.

As a young boy, growing up in a town near Delhi, I was obliged always to touch my great-uncle's sandal-clad feet on our visits to the city. The gesture was not motivated exclusively by respect, for one usually got a ten-rupee note in exchange. Years later, I developed an interest in Gandhi. I was now based in the capital, but Swaminathan had moved back to Madras. On a trip South I saw him in his ancestral home in Alwarpet - a home with the splendid name of Dharmalayam. We discussed the Mahatma, with he stressing the Vaishnava roots of his thought and practice and me arguing that the core of Gandhi could be separated out from his religion, that faith was not necessary to understand or to follow him. Our conversation was academic and professional and before I left I did not touch his feet. But he gave me a gift nevertheless. This was his biography of Ramana Maharishi, published and sold like hot cakes by the National Book Trust. As he handed over his present my great-aunt muttered, in Tamil, 'Don't give the boy the book - it is wasted on him.'

The study of Ramana, I am ashamed to say, still lies unread on my shelves. But soon after I returned to Delhi I began a correspondence with my nonagenarian uncle-turned-friend. Like his master, his preferred mode of communication was the postcard. His p.c.'s would instruct me to meet one or other friend of his, such as the philosopher Ramchandra Gandhi, a man he loved dearly, both for the brilliance of his mind and the wild eccentricity of his personal habits. Or they would carry a gentle admonition: 'Learn Tamil and lead a simple life.' Or they would carry a patriarch's humorous counsel. So, when my son was born and named Keshava Dhananjaya, he wrote to say that 'In olden [i.e. British] days, K.D. meant Known Depredator, professional thief. The initials may have lost their meaning *now*. But be careful. Make sure that the baby doesn't wear a bad label. Krishna [i.e. Keshava] was a butter-thief...'

As this correspondence was being carried on, Lal Krishna Advani's *rath* began moving through northern India, spreading riots and burning bodies in its wake. In October 1990 I published an attack on Hindu chauvinism in a Delhi newspaper in which I remarked that the Sangh Parivar seemed determined to borrow the worst elements of Christianity and of Islam. Their faith, I claimed, was the Hinduism of 'shakti', or power, whereas what India truly needed was the religion of 'bhakti,' or devotion.

With the easy self-confidence of youth I clipped my article, made a Xerox and mailed it to Swaminathan. Three weeks later came a four-page handwritten reply. 'The clubbing together of medieval Islam and medieval Christianity,' remarked the scholar-Gandhian, 'is wrong and misleading. Christianity ceased to be medieval and fanatic with the Protestant Reformation and all Christian Churches - British, Roman and Greek Orthodox - are now quite friendly to and cooperating with the Hinduism of Ramakrishna, Vivekananda, of Sri Aurobindo, Sri Ramana and Gandhiji, of Jyoti-Ramalinga and Narayana Guru. There is no conflict between this Neo-Hinduism and modern Christianity.' Christianity, he insisted, 'is a growing and humanistic religion', whereas Islam 'tries to freeze a mode of thinking and code of conduct appropriate to 7th century Arabia.'

The distinction between *shakti* and *bhakti* made by me, further pointed out Swaminathan,

is an outrageous perversion of the Truth, our dharma, which is not bhakti but shakti and shanti. Gandhi embodied the shakti of our religion as Ramana embodied the shanti. The Truth is like the Sun, it is Shiva, it blinds the eye that sees it. Shanti is like the moon, cool, calm, lovely, harmless. Ramachandra is Chandra, the light of Shiva. But he is also Shakti, Agni, soul-force, Narayana, the light and WARMTH in each human heart, the agni used for cooking food and misused for burning houses....Gandhi was not an exponent of bhakti, but a messiah of shakti. He taught us (as Jesus taught the Jews) that love is light and only love can overcome the dark evil, hate. God is a symbol, not a diabol...'

Swaminathan tried hard, but in the end unsuccessfully, to suppress his impatience with the illiteracy born, in my case, out of political correctness. 'From lofty ivory-towers', he commented in a devastating aside, 'our scholars look not for Light, but only dollars.' Yet he was as disturbed as I with the intolerance of the men who claimed to speak on behalf of Hinduism. 'All the "Monkey" devotees of Gandhi and Rama,' he wrote bitterly, 'are now SOLIDLY behind Advani.' In a later letter, he

remarked on how ‘since 1969 our netas have bribed, bullied and misled the voters by appealing to the *asura* also within us. Midas and Godse threaten to triumph over Jesus and Gandhi.’

As I was to find out, other and more powerful Hindus in Delhi were hearing likewise from Swaminathan. The President of India, R. Venkataraman, had been his student at Sri Meenakshi College, Chidambaram; whereas the respected diplomat-politician, G. Parthasarathi, had studied with him at Presidency College, Madras. In 1990 and 1991 Swaminathan addressed a series of letters to both men asking that they intervene in solving, peaceably and with honour to both parties, the dispute at Ayodhya. Parthasarathi commanded no influence anymore, whereas Venkataraman was unable or unwilling to exercise it. In December 1992 the monkey hordes finally succeeded in demolishing the masjid at Ayodhya. The act outraged the patriot, the Gandhian, and the Hindu, and Swaminathan, of course, was all three.

I did not see or hear from Swaminathan in his last months, which from all accounts were spent in extreme agony, mental as well as emotional. Since his death, in May 1994, I have had more reason than before to dip into the Gandhi volumes that he put together. Meanwhile, the destroyers of Ayodhya have moved into the offices of the Government of India. I recall, with especial feeling, the first line of his wonderful, admonitory letter of November 1990: ‘Gandhism *alone* can overcome Godse-ism.’

* *From the book, ‘An Anthropologists among the Marxists and Other Essays’ by Ramachandra Guha.*



GANDHI’S COLLECTED WORKS BEING REPRINTED FOR SECOND TIME

The original edition of “The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi” – a 100-volume collection – is now being reprinted at Ahmedabad for the second time ever.

The print order comes after tender notices were floated by the UPA government on May 17, a day after it was voted back to power.

In the basement of the main library in Gujarat Vidyapith, a team of about six women sit in front of the computer, displaying scanned pages from the original edition – known as the KS Edition, after its third and final editor K Swaminathan – and clean them up, painstakingly removing blemishes, ink and printing blots (sometimes even tea and coffee spills) and making sure each letter is legible.

Rajendra Khimani, the registrar of Gujarat Vidyapith said: “No library in the country possesses the complete collection of the edition.”

The Government of India published the original edition between 1960 and 1994, of which 95 volumes were printed at the Navjivan Press under the direct supervision of the editors.

It was the result of 40 years of work. In 1997, the Government of India decided to produce a multimedia edition of the collection, including photographs and a short film on Gandhi. In 2000, a compact disc was also released.

But the production and sale of the CD was stopped following protests from scholars and Gandhians across the world, contending there were a number of omissions.

The university is now working in tandem with the Centre, the government supplying the original volumes it has, with the institute providing the others. Six volumes have already been printed at the Niyati Press in Ahmedabad, and the remaining volumes will be printed after the scanned versions have been cleaned of blemishes.

Khimani said: “The significance of the collection being reprinted in Ahmedabad is that it would ensure the accuracy and quality of the production.”

How the volume was prepared and printed first

Soon after Gandhi’s assassination, then Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru had set-up the Office of the Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi. Three editors –two of who were associates of Gandhi – headed the office.

The office – through the Harijan Ashram and Gandhi Nidhi – worked to collect all of Gandhi’s correspondences, scattered all over the world and in the possession of former officials of the erstwhile British Empire, and after their deaths, by their families. The Government of India even bought some documents from auctions abroad.

Ninety volumes were initially published, and documents that were recovered after the death or retirement of K Swaminathan and deputy editor C N Patel were published in seven subsequent volumes and two indexes in 1994. The 100th volume is a collection of all the prefaces of the previous volumes.

The office was closed in 1994 after the work was completed, and the original edition went out of print.

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