Mahatma Gandhi's Significance for Today

Some of us will have seen Richard Attenborough's film life of Gandhi since it was first screened in 1982. It was inevitably selective and inevitably it simplified and cut corners, and it was probably unfair to Jinnah, the creator of Pakistan, but nevertheless it was, I would say, taken as a whole, a faithful portrait of Gandhi. I'm going to presuppose a basic knowledge of the course of Gandhi's life, which everyone who has seen the film, and also many others, will have. In making it Attenborough relied largely on Louis Fischer's Life of Mahatma Gandhi (1950) . Fischer knew Gandhi personally, living for a while in his ashram, observing his way of life, eating with him, having long daily conversations with him, observing his followers, listening to his interviews with streams of visitors. Both before and since Fischer there have been a great number of other biographies and studies, the most recent full-length biographies being The Life and Death of Mahatma Gandhi by Robert Payne (1969), Rediscovering Gandhi by Yogesh Chadha (1997) and Gandhi's Passion by Stanley Wolpert (2001). According to one recent writer, there are about 5,000 books of what he calls 'Gandhiana'. But possibly the most comprehensive, balanced, and reliable critical biography is Gandhi: Prisoner of Hope, by Judith Brown (1989), and based on a number of years of a professional historian's research.

However a couple of books have now appeared which take a rather different view of Gandhi. These are not books primarily about Gandhi himself but about the last days of the Raj. Patrick French, in Liberty or Death: India's Journey to Independence and Division (1997), using British government documents on the transfer of power, depicts Gandhi as a charlatan. He speaks of 'The plaster Mahatma encapsulated in Richard Attenborough's 1982 film', and says that 'Far from being a wise and balanced saint, Gandhi was an emotionally troubled social activist and a ruthlessly sharp political negotiator' (17). Another writer, Lawrence James in Raj: The Making and Unmaking of British India (1997), speaks of 'the facade of the simple prophet-cum-saviour' (524). So there is a school of thought, I think a small one, which sees Gandhi as a crafty politician, a ruthless manipulator posing as a religious leader and presenting a facade of spirituality. And we are now entering the phase, which always comes at some point after the death of a great man or woman, when a new generation of writers, needing something new to say on the subject, are tempted to look for a way of attacking the accepted view by starting a debunking trend. Indeed there were always some among Gandhi's opponents who denounced him as a charlatan. For example, Winston Churchill, in his famous protest against Gandhi's presence at the independence negotiations, said: 'It is alarming and also nauseating to see Mr. Gandhi, a seditious Middle Temple lawyer, now posing as a fakir of a type well known in the East, striding half-naked up the steps of the viceregal palace, while he is still organising and conducting a defiant campaign of civil disobedience, to parley on equal terms with the representative of the King-Emperor'. On the other hand Churchill's contemporary and friend, Jan Smuts of South Africa, who at one time would have largely agreed with Churchill about this, later came to think differently. Smuts is recorded to have said to Churchill: '[Gandhi] is a man of God. You and I are mundane people' (Chadra, 382).

But there can be no doubt that the myth-making tendency of the human mind has long affected the public image of Gandhi. Some western enthusiasts have uncritically glorified his memory, filtering out his human weaknesses; and the popular picture of him among devotees in India has attained mythic proportions, so that he is regarded by many as a divine avatar or incarnation. But to enable us to see through those clouds of adoration, there have until recently been some who knew Gandhi; and over thirty years ago, when I was in India for the first time, I was able to meet a number of people who had known Gandhi, had vivid memories of him, and in most cases had been deeply influenced by him. But apart from personal testimonies, Gandhi's is probably the most minutely documented life that has ever been lived. His own writings, including letters and notes, speeches, interviews, newspaper articles, pamphlets and books fill ninety-three volumes of The Collected Works of Mahatlma Gandhi published by the Government of India. Hundreds of people who knew him have published books and articles about him. And so the available historical materials do enable us to form a reasonably accurate and rounded picture of a life that was lived so recently and so publicly and that has been recorded so fully and from so many different angles.

Speaking of the clouds of adoration, there is a little anecdote about Gandhi in Birmingham whilst he was in Britain in 1931. He stayed, as you might expect, in Woodbrooke, the Quaker Study Centre in Selly Oak. Next week a lady who was an enthusiastic admirer of Gandhi stayed overnight at Woodbrooke and was told that she would be in the guest room in which Gandhi had slept the previous week. She was delighted at the prospect of being able to say that she had slept in a bed in which the Mahatma had slept. However when she went to her room she found that there were two beds. So, resourcefully, she set her alarm clock for the middle of the night, and when it went off she moved from one bed to the other. At breakfast next morning she asked as casually as she could, 'By the way, which bed did Gandhi sleep in?', and was told, 'Oh Gandihji always slept on the floor'.

But Gandhi himself would have nothing to do with his own idealisation. He rejected the title of Mahatma (great soul). He said, 'I myself do not feel like a saint in any shape or form' (Young India, Jan.20, 1927). But the ordinary village people of India began spontaneously to see Gandhi as a mahatma, and as the title became universally used, he had to put up with it. But neither he nor his friends used it. In the earlier days his followers called him Bhai (brother), and as he grew older Bapu (father), and referred to him as Gandhiji - the ji being a common mark of respect. He was acutely, sometimes painfully, conscious of his own faults. He blamed himself for many misjudgements and mistakes, including the major one that he called his 'Himalayan blunder' - his call to the people to practice a mass non-violent revolt before they were ready for it. So Gandhi was not ashamed to change his mind - I think he would have liked the remark of John Maynard Keynes who, when charged with having made a U-turn about something, said: 'When I find that I've been mistaken I change my mind: what do you do?'

Indeed one of the things about Gandhi that I want to stress is that whilst he had basic convictions about which he never wavered, yet within this rock-like consistency of conviction his approach to life was always one of openness to new experiences and new insights, willing to admit mistakes, always ready to grow into a different and fuller understanding. To quote Judith Brown, 'He saw himself as always waiting for inner guidance, to which he tried to open himself by prayer, a disciplined life, and increasing detachment not only from possessions but also from excessive care about the results of his earthly actions. He claimed to be perpetually experimenting with satyagraha [spiritual-force or Truth-force], examining [its] possibilities as new situations arose. He was, right to the end, supremely a pilgrim spirit' (Brown, 80). And 'His profound spiritual vision of life as a pilgrimage generated in him a mental and emotional agility which responded to change as an opportunity to be welcomed rather than resisted with fear' (Ibid., 312-3). He did of course experience times of deep sorrow and despair, particularly at the partition of India in 1947, which he had tried so hard to avoid, with its terrible aftermath of violence. Nevertheless Gandhi was basically an optimist, a believer in the power of good ultimately to overcome evil, to the end of his life. Margaret Chatterjee says, 'All who were close to Gandhi have testified to his irresistible sense of fun, his bubbling spirits which seemed to well up from an inner spring in face of adversity . Those who knew him say that he was nearly always genial and friendly, often laughing, often poking gentle fun both at himself and at his friends' (Gandhi's Religious Thought (1983, p. 108).

Gandhi was indeed a living paradox, both extraordinarily attractive and yet powerfully dominating, and in admiring him we ought to be aware of both sides of his character. His moral insights were so strong and uncompromising that he imposed them upon his followers by the sheer force of conviction. This force arose above all from the fact that Gandhi lived what he taught. He never taught an insight or made a moral demand that he had not lived out in his own life. Once, when asked by a foreign visitor what his message was, he replied 'My life is my message' (Brown, 80). This is why he was so challenging a person to encounter. People were confronted not just by an idea which laid a claim upon them but by a living incarnation of that idea. Indeed such was Gandhi's overwhelming charisma that he could in effect be a dictator within his immediate circle. And beyond his inner circle he was capable of clever maneuvering to get his way within the Congress movement. For example, in 1938-9 Subhas Chandra Bose was elected, against Gandhi's wishes, as Congress President. Bose believed in achieving freedom by violence, and was later to lead the Indian National Army, composed of prisoners of war held by the Japanese, in their advance through South East Asia, aiming at the conquest of the British in India. Gandhi rejected Bose's outlook and in 1939 engineered his downfall as Congress President. It was this kind of political maneuvering that led to Gandhi's being regarded by some as sly and devious, in the words of a recent English critic, Patrick French, 'a ruthlessly sharp political negotiator'. Some, probably thinking of saintliness as inherently incompatible with politics, see Gandhi's considerable political skill as nullifying his reputation for saintliness. But why should not a saint be highly competent in practical affairs? It is clear that Gandhi was politically formidable, combining appeal to reason and evidence with an instinct for the symbolic actions that would rally the Indian masses behind him. But what to some was sly cunning was to others Gandhi's ability so often to outwit those - whether the British rulers or rival Indian leaders - who were trying to outwit him.

Indeed one reason, I would suggest, why Gandhi is so significant today is that he was the first great example of a typically modern phenomenon, the political saint. I use the word 'saint' for want of a better, but by a saint or mahatma I do not mean a perfect human being, because then there would be no saints, but someone whom we spontaneously feel to be much closer to God, or the ultimate realty, than the rest of us. Before the rise of democracy such individuals generally had no political power or, therefore, responsibility, and saintliness typically took the form either of acts of individual charity or of a life of secluded prayer and contemplation. But since Gandhi - and many of them directly influenced by him - we have seen Vinoba Bhave in India, Martin Luther King in the United States, Osca Romero in San Salvador, Thich Naht Hahn in Tailand, Nelson Mandela and Desmond Tutu in South Africa, as well as very numerous lesser figures in many places. For each one of whom we have all heard there are probably fifty who are only known locally. Dedication to needy and suffering humanity has now become the main arena in which spiritual greatness is expressed.

But returning to Gandhi, he was undoubtedly sometimes a difficult person with whom to deal. Perhaps most importantly, Gandhi's family sometimes found him hard to live with. As his demanding ideals made him hardest on himself, they made him next hardest on his sons, and the oldest of them broke down under the burden of being the Mahatma's son, becoming estranged from him and going to pieces in middle age. And Gandhi inherited the traditional Indian understanding of the wifely role: he said, 'A Hindu husband regards himself as lord and master of his wife who must ever dance attendance on him' (Selected Works, I, 275), and during the early years of their marriage his wife, Kasturbai, had a good deal to put up with. But I have already stressed that Gandhi was able to learn and change, and he later said, 'Her determined submission to my will on the one hand and her quiet submission to the suffering my stupidity involved on the other, ultimately made me ashamed of myself and cured me of my stupidity in thinking that I was born to rule over her; and in the end she became my teacher in non-violence' (qtd. Ranjit Kumar Roy, Gandhi and the Contemporary World, 225). And they became, for the greater part of their long marriage, a model of mutual devotion. There was incidentally, in the Sunday Times, 25 October 1998, an article about the personal failures of great individuals, which included a sentence about Gandhi, 'Mahatma Gandhi forced his wife to clean out latrines as a punishment for her materialism'. This is a wanton distortion to fit Gandhi into the writer's thesis. Gandhi insisted that everyone in the ashram, including himself and his wife and family, should do their share of the dirty chores of the community. But this was not in any sense a punishment; it was the practical democracy of the ashram.

Concerning Gandhi's sexuality, which always fascinates western writers, the one thing that they know about Gandhi, even if they know very little else, is the vow of sexual abstinence that he made when he devoted himself to community leadership, and his deliberate testing of this vow for a while in old age by sleeping under the same blanket with young women disciples. He believed that his power as a spiritual and political leader depended on his inner soul-power, which in turn depended on absolute faithfulness to his vows. As he prepared to confront the crisis of Hindu-Muslim strife in Bengal immediately after Independence he felt that he had to be victorious in testing this most demanding of vows. However, given the inevitability of hostile publicity, we must count it as one of his blunders, and he was persuaded to end the experiment. But - and this is the other side of the story - the inner spiritual force which Gandhi maintained in this way was real and powerful. To quote a recent historian, 'That more lives were not lost in Bengal owed much to the pervasive influence of Mahatma Gandhi, who had moved to Calcutta before Independence Day. There he had taken up residence in one of the city's many poor districts, living among the Untouchables and the dispossessed and threatening to fast to death should violence break out. Miraculously, there was no repetition of the mass murders that had disfigured Calcutta a year earlier and the whole province of Bengal remained reasonably calm' (Royle, The Last Days of the Raj, 195-6). . One of the Viceroy's staff said that 'Hardened press correspondents report that they have seen nothing comparable with this demonstration of mass influence. Mountbatten's estimate is that he has achieved by moral persuasion what four Divisions would have been hard pressed to have accomplished by force' (Brown, 379). But Gandhi's quite extraordinary moral and spiritual power and magnetism arose from an absolute inner integrity, which included faithfulness in keeping his vows. If he had failed in this his spirit would have been broken within him, and his power to influence the masses lost. This may be largely incomprehensible to the western mind; and yet it made sense at the time to Gandhi, and it enabled him to work what has been called the miracle of Calcutta.

Now a word about Gandhi as a Hindu. What is sadly lacking in the contemporary critics whom I have mentioned is that, as secular scholars, they have no sense of the religious dimension of such a person as Gandhi. They see him only as a politician. But everything that Gandhi said shows that he was primarily a seeker after God, Truth, the Ultimate, and a politician because this led him into the service of his fellows and so into conflict with any form of injustice. For him there was in practice no division between religion and politics, for true religion expresses itself politically, and the only way to achieve lasting political change is through the inner transformation of masses of individuals, beginning with oneself. He once said, 'Man's ultimate aim is the realization of God, and all his activities, social, political, religious, have to be guided by the ultimate aim of the vision of God. The immediate service of all human beings becomes a necessary part of the endeavor simply because the only way to find God is to see Him in His creation and to be one with it. This can only be done by service to all' (Harijan, August 29, 1936). And there was ultimately no distinction, for Gandhi, between one's own salvation and that of others.

It is sometimes said that Gandhi was more a Christian than a Hindu, because his moral teaching was so similar to that of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount. Some Christians have assumed that Gandhi must have received the ideal of love of enemy from the teaching of Jesus. However this is not the case. He first met Christians, and first encountered the New Testament, when he went to London as a young man to study Law. But long before that he had been brought up on such Hindu sayings as 'If a man gives you a drink of water and you give him a drink in return, that is nothing. Real beauty consists in doing good against evil' (Chatterjee, 50), and 'The truly noble know all men as one, and return with gladness good for evil done', which, as he says in his Autobiography (chap. 10), became his guiding principle. As a Hindu his great object was to attain to union with the ultimate reality which he called God or Truth. But one of Gandhi's special insights was that this quest can take the form of the service of truth in its more immediate and relative forms - truthfulness in thought and speech, truthfulness in dealing with one's opponents, truthfulness in presenting a case, truthfulness in every aspect of life. Another form of this insight was that the deluded state in which humanity normally lives, in Hindu terms maya, illusion, takes social, political, and economic forms. Moral delusion is institutionalized in the structures of society. This was brought home to Gandhi in South Africa when he was thrown off the train at Pietermaritzburg because as a non-white barister he was traveling in a first-class compartment. It dawned on him that racism was a spiritual delusion embodied in an entrenched social system. As Rex Ambler says, 'The great illusion, the social maya, as we may call it, is that human beings are fundamentally different from one another, and that some are inherently superior to others and are, thereby, entitled to dominate them. . . . His life's work was largely devoted to the exposure of that illusion and the realization of the hidden Truth of human oneness' (Hick & Hempel, eds, Gandhi’s Significance for Today, 93).

In Gandhi's ashrams the day began and ended with prayer, readings (mainly from the Bhagavad Gita), hymns (including some Christian hymns), and often a short talk by Gandhi. But worship for him also took the form of spinning, or sweeping the floor, or cleaning the latrines, or nursing the sick, or attacking some specific injustice, or planning some aspect of the campaign for independence. There was, for him, no separation between religion and daily life.

Although a devoted Hindu, Gandhi was a radical reformer, strongly opposed to many aspects of traditional Hindu culture, such as animal sacrifices in the temples, child marriages, and untouchability. 'Untouchability', he said, 'is a soul-destroying sin. Caste is a social evil' (Selected Works V, 444). For whilst he generally acknowledged the traditional caste division of labour he did not see it as religiously based, and he increasingly criticised its harmful aspects. Indeed in his ashrams he overturned them. Here people of all castes, colours, nationalities, and religions ate and worked together, everyone, including Gandhi and his family, joining equally in the manual labour traditionally allocated to the Shudras (the lowest caste), and such dirty jobs as latrine cleaning traditionally done only by the outcastes. He regarded untouchability as a 'useless and wicked superstition' (Brown, 58), and was revolted by its defence in terms of the doctrine of karma. In his eyes there was no difference between a Brahmin and an outcaste; and he defended marriages between people of different castes . He refused to wear the sacred thread of a caste Hindu because 'If the Shudras may not wear it, I argued, what right have the other varnas [castes] to do so? (Selected Works II, 586-7). And whilst he supported the traditional Hindu reverence for the cow, he said 'Cow protection, in my opinion, includes cattle-breeding, improvement of the stock, humane treatment of bullocks, formation of model dairies, etc. (Ibid., III, 636). In short, Gandhi's moral insights had far greater authority for him than established traditions, and in his maturity he had no hesitation in sweeping away long accepted ideas and practices that he regarded as harmful excrescences on the body of Hinduism.

Gandhi did however cleave to certain basic Hindu beliefs which were the source of his practical intuitions.
Two closely related Hindu beliefs are that in the depths of our being we are all one, and that in the depths of each of us there is a divine element. 'The chief value of Hinduism,' Gandhi said, 'lies in holding the actual belief that all life (not only human beings, but all sentient beings) are one, i.e. all life coming from the One universal source, call it God, or Allah, or Parameshwara' (Rhaghavn Iyer, The Moral and Political Writings of Mahatma Gandhi, III, 315). Accordingly, 'To be true to such religion one has to lose oneself in continuous and continuing service of all life' (Ibid., I, 461). The unity of life means that no one can be totally alien and irredeemably an enemy, and that 'one's true self-interest consists in the good of all'. Again 'All living creatures are of the same substance as all drops of water in the ocean are the same in substance. I believe that all of us, individual souls, living in this ocean of spirit, are the same with one another with the closest bond among ourselves. A drop that separates soon dries up and any soul that believes itself separate from others is likewise destroyed' (Indian Opinion, April 29, 1914).

This means in practice that in situations of conflict there is something in the opponent that can be appealed to - not only a common humanity but, in the famous Quaker phrase (and Gandhi felt great affinity with the Quakers), 'that of God in every person'. 'I have a glimpse of God', he said, 'even in my opponents' (Iyer, I, 438). And closely connected with this is the principle of ahimsa, non-killing, and more generally non-violence. This is an ancient Hindu, but more particularly Jain, principle. It obviously coheres with the belief that all life is ultimately one and that there is a divine element in every person. It means in practice that in the midst of injustice the right way to deal with oppressors - whether the South African government in its treatment of the 'coolies' or the British raj dominating and exploiting the people of India, - is not violent revolt but an appeal to the best within them by rational argument and by deliberate and open disobedience to unjust laws even when this involves suffering, violence and imprisonment. Willingness to suffer for the sake of justice, appealing as it does to the common humanity of both oppressor and oppressed, is the moral power for which Gandhi coined the word satyagraha, the power of Truth, Reality. He believed that a policy of non-aggression in the face of aggression, of calm reason in response to blind emotion, of appeal to basic fairness and justice, together with a readiness to suffer for this, are more productive in the long run than meeting violence with violence. He was convinced that there is always something in the other, however deeply buried, that will eventually, given enough time, respond. For 'Non-violence is the law of our species as violence is the law of the brute. The spirit lies dormant in the brute and he knows no law but that of physical might. The dignity of man requires obedience to a higher law - to the strength of the spirit' (Iyer, II, 299) . But in order for this to happen the satyagrahi must have the courage to face the oppressor without fear. Without such courage, which Gandhi was able to evoke in many of his followers, genuine non-violent action is impossible. 'Non-violence', he said, 'is a weapon of the strong. With the weak it might easily be hypocrisy' (Ibid., I, 294). A satyagrahi can be non-violent precisely because he does not fear the oppressor. 'Fear and love,' Gandhi said, 'are contradictory terms. . . . My daily experience, as of those who are working with me, is that every problem would lend itself to solution if we are determined to make the law of truth and non-violence the law of life. (Ibid).

However Gandhi was not opposed to the use of force in all circumstances. He accepted that violence was necessary in restraining violent criminals; and he said, 'I would support the formation of a militia under swaraj [self-rule]' (Ibid., II, 298). 'In life', he said, 'it is impossible to eschew violence completely. The question is, where is one to draw the line?' (Ibid.) But in general, he insisted, 'non-violence is infinitely superior to violence' (Ibid., II, 363)..

In the colonial India in which Gandhi most notably applied his principles he had to carry the masses with him. And so a great deal of his time was spent in 'consciousness raising' by public speaking, often to great crowds throughout the country, by a constant stream of newspaper and journal articles, and by interviews with individuals and groups from both India and abroad. He knew that the ideal of total non-violence, which involves loving one's enemy, was not going to be attained by the masses in any foreseeable future. He said that 'for me the law of complete Love is the law of my being. . . But I am not preaching this final law through the Congress or the Khalifat organisation. I know my own limitations only too well. I know that any such attempt is foredoomed to failure' (Young India, March 9, 1922). But although perfect non-violence was an ideal rather than a present reality, something approaching it, namely non-violent non-co-operation with the foreign ruler, was possible and would eventually bring about the nation's freedom. He said, 'I know that to 90 per cent of Indians, non-violence means [civil disobedience] and nothing else' (Lamont Hempel in Hick & Hempel, 5). Again, 'What the Congress and the Khalifat organisations have accepted is but a fragment of the implications of that law [of non-violence]. [But] Given true workers, the limited measure of its application can be realised in respect of vast masses of people within a short time' (Young India, March 9, 1922). And he was able to convince a critical mass of his fellow countrymen that a hundred thousand Englishmen could only rule three hundred million Indians so long as the Indians weakly submitted to their rule. If they had the courage to withdraw their co-operation, and deliberately disobey unjust laws - such as the salt tax, - the British raj would be helpless and the imperial rulers would see that their position was both morally and politically untenable. Although in 1930 there were 29,000 Congress activists in jail, the government could not imprison millions; and although there might be further outbursts of violence, like the terrible Amritsar massacre in 1919, the world would react against this and in the end the imperial power would be defeated and would have to depart. And in the end this is what happened. After the 1939-45 war the Labour government of Clement Attlee came to power in Britain and made the momentous decision to grant full Indian independence. It was evident that the demand and expectation for this were growing to the point at which only brute force could check it, and this in an India in which the whole administrative machinery had been gravely weakened during the war, and when the British soldiers now wanted to go home and were certainly not willing to become agents of imperialist oppression. In 1946 the then Viceroy, General Sir Archibald Wavell, reported to London that 'Our time in India is limited and our power to control events almost gone' (French, 245). And so, at this late stage, Independence had become virtually inevitable. In that immediate situation it was the work, not of Gandhi and the Congress, but of the collapse of British power. But on a longer view this end-game was only made possible by the progressive achievements of the independence movement during the previous thirty years. It was Gandhi and his colleagues who had made Indians proud of their culture and confident of their capacity for self-rule, and who had built up the finally irresistible expectation and demand for independence.

Throughout the long struggle it was Gandhi who provided the inspiration, the moral authority, and the immense unifying symbolic power. But in the detailed negotiations during the final phase it was mainly Pandit Jahwarhalal Nehru and Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel who moulded the settlement on the Congress side - Nehru the brilliant, sophisticated, charismatic disciple of Gandhi, chosen by him as Congress President at this critical juncture, and Patel the shrewd, tough, forceful political operator. And so the raj ended as Gandhi had always said it would, with the British voluntarily handing over power and leaving in friendship - despite the strong opposition at home by old-style imperialists led by Winston Churchill. Instead of going in bitterness and enmity, the British went with great pomp and ceremony, leaving an India which has continued to this day to be a member of the British Commonwealth. It seems very unlikely that history would have taken this course but for Gandhi's influence over the previous thirty years - somewhat as, more recently, it seems very unlikely that apartheid in South Africa would have ended so peacefully but for the personal influence of Nelson Mandela.

We can now try to formulate the main lessons of Gandhi's life and thought for ourselves today. Gandhi himself believed that his basic message would only have its main impact many years after his own death. It is a mistake, and one which secular historians are very prone to make, to think of him only in the context of the movement for Indian independence, inseparable though his memory is from that. He did not see political independence as such as his great aim, but rather a profound transformation of Indian society. True swaraj meant freedom from greed, ignorance, prejudice; and most of Gandhi's time was spent in trying to educate and elevate the masses, dealing with basic questions of cleanliness, sanitation, and diet, combating disease, and fostering mutual help and true community. As Judith Brown writes, 'He visualised a total renewal of society from its roots upwards, so that it would grow into a true nation, characterised by harmony and sympathy instead of strife and suspicion, in which castes, communities, and both sexes would be equal, complementary and interdependent' (Brown, 213). Thus Gandhi's vision went much further than the immediate political aims that he shared with his colleagues in the Indian National Congress. What elements of his long-term project are relevant today?

First is the Gandhian approach to conflict resolution, based on a belief in the fundamental nature of the human person. Not however of human nature as it has generally manifested itself throughout history, but of its further potentialities, which can be evoked by goodwill, self-giving love, and a sacrificial willingness to suffer for the good of all. As Lament Hempel puts it, 'Gandhi's crowning achievement may have been his ability to inspire homo humanus out of homo sapiens' (Hempel, 5). But this was only in a number of individuals, not in society as a whole. Individuals continue to be inspired by Gandhi's teaching and example. But neither India nor any other state has based its policies consistently on Gandhian principles. It is particularly tragic that his own country has failed to live up to his ideals. The rise of the Hindu supremicist movement - which was responsible for Gandhi's assassination - has intensified communal tensions, culminating in the destruction of the Ayodia mosque in 1992. All this would make Gandhi weep. Unregenerate human nature has triumphed once again over what Gandhi called Truth - as it has over the teachings of enlightened religious leaders in every century.

Nevertheless the attempt to inspire humans to rise to true humanity must never cease. It involves an unwavering commitment to fairness, truthfulness, open and honest dealing, willingness to see the other's point of view, readiness to compromise, readiness even to suffer. In the familiar but in practice disregarded words of Jesus, it requires us to love our enemies. Such a response refuses to enter the downward spiral of mutual recrimination, hatred, and violence. The lesson of history is not that this has been tried and failed, but that the failure has been in not trying it.
But ahimsa as practical politics is a long-term strategy. It took time and patience and ceaseless effort and example to evoke the limited realisation that non-violent action in India, even simply as a tactic, is more effective than violent revolt. It is thus pointless to ask how Gandhi would have fared in, for example, Nazi Germany. He would no doubt have been quickly eliminated. The more useful question is what would have happened if a Greman like him had been at work there during the previous twenty years.

Another implication of Gandhi's thought concerns ecology and the preservation of the earth and the life on it. Here Gandhi anticipated the widespread Green movement of today. To quote James Gould, 'Gandhi has emphasised opposite values to those of the consumer society: the reduction of individual wants, the return to direct production of foodstuffs and clothing, and self-sufficiency rather than growing dependency. As the limits of growth and the inherent scarcity of resources broke upon the world in the 1960's, the Gandhian idea of restraint suddenly made sense' (James Gould in Hick & Hempel, 12). E.F. Schumacher, author of the influential Small Is Beautiful, regarded Gandhi as the great pioneer in insisting that the rampant growth of capitalist industrialism is incompatible with a sustainable world ecosystem. Schumacher said, 'Gandhi had always known, and rich countries are now reluctantly beginning to realise, that their affluence was based on stripping the world. The USA with 5.6% of the world population was consuming up to 40% of the world's resources, most of them non-renewable. Such a life-style could not spread to the whole of mankind. In fact, the truth is now dawning that the world could not really afford the USA, let alone the USA plus Europe plus Japan plus other highly industrialised countries. Enough is now known about the basic facts of spaceship Earth to realise that its first class passengers were making demands which could not be sustained very much longer without destroying the spaceship' (In Copley & Paxton, ed, op. cit., 141). Gandhi saw this in terms of his native India, which was then still a developing country in which people in the hundreds of thousands of villages lived in extreme poverty. And so instead of building up modem industries with labour saving machinery in the cities, drawing the villagers into the urban slums, he urged basic employment for all. He wanted 'production by the masses rather than mass production'. Every policy should be judged by its effects on the multitude of ordinary citizens. For example, cottage industries, such as spinning, required very little capital equipment and should be encouraged and supported throughout the vast rural areas. That is what Gandhi saw as the need at that time. Had he lived a generation later he would no doubt have accepted industrialisation, but would have worked to humanise it and to undo the great gap between the rich and the poor.

In the matter of aid to impoverished countries Gandhi was at least a generation ahead of his time. In 1929 he wrote, 'The grinding poverty and starvation with which our country is afflicted is such that it drives more and more men every year into the ranks of the beggars, whose desperate struggle for bread renders them insensible to all feelings of decency and self-respect. And our philanthropists, instead of providing work for them and insisting on their working for bread, give them alms' (Selected Works, II, 647). But that aid should be given in such a way as to free the recipients to help themselves is now an accepted principle in international aid circles.

Gandhi's 'feminism' - though that is not a term that he used - is also of interest today in shifting the focus from the transformation of women to the transformation of men. In the Indian context his concern for the position of women in society was ahead of his time. He was impressed when in England by the courage and dedication of the suffragettes, although he did not approve of their occasional resort to violence. And when women responded to his call in South Africa and India, showing themselves as willing as the men to face violent police action and jail, Gandhi saw that they had an unique contribution to make. He was quick to see that women could become the 'leader in the Satyagraha which does not require the learning that books give but does require the stout heart that comes from suffering and faith (Roy, 224). Further, because for Gandhi true liberation always went much further than political independence, to the humane transformation of society, he 'believed that by taking part in the nationalist struggle, women of India could break out of their long imposed seclusion' (Hoda in Copley & Paxton, 141). His conception of the kind of gender revolution that is needed was novel in his time. For the wholehearted adoption of non-violence can be seen as making for a gentler and less aggressive masculinity. Sushila Gidwani puts the point challengingly in this way: 'Indian feminism aims at changing men to become qualitatively more feminine while modern feminism aims at changing women to become qualitatively more masculine' (Hick & Hempel, .233)

And finally, another aspect of Gandhi's thought which is relevant today. This is not novel in the East but is highly controversial within Christianity, though much less so today in many circles than in Gandhi's time. This is his understanding of the relation between the great world faiths. 'The time is now passed,' he said, 'when the followers of one religion can stand and say, ours is the only true religion and all others are false' (Indian Opinion, August 26, 1905). In his youth Gandhi lived within a very ecumenical community. He was particularly influenced by a Jain, Raychandbhai, who introduced him to the idea of the manysidedness of reality (anekantavada), so that many different views may all be valid. And this includes religious views. Gandhi shared the ancient Hindu assumption that 'Religions are different roads converging at the same point. What does it matter that we take different roads so long as we reach the same goal?' (Copley & Paxton, 239). He regarded it as pointless, because impossible, to grade the great world faiths in relation to each other. 'No one faith is perfect. All faiths

are equally dear to their respective votaries. What is wanted, therefore, is a living friendly contact among the followers of the great religions of the world and not a clash among them in the fruitless attempt on the part of each community to show the superiority of its own faith over the rest . . . Hindus, Muslims, Christians, Parsis, Jews are convenient labels. But when I tear them
down, I do not know which is which. We are all children of the same God' (Harijan, April 18, 1936). However his 'doctrine of the Equality of Religions', as it has been called, did not move towards a single global religion, but enjoins us all to become better expressions of our own faith, being enriched in the process by influences from other faiths.

These, then, are ways in which Gandhi's thinking was ahead of his own time and alive today in our time. And underlying all this, as an available source of inspiration for each new generation, is Gandhi's indomitable faith in the possibility of a radically better human future if only we will learn to trust the power of non-violent openness to others and to the deeper humanity, and indeed divinity, within us all. To most people this seems impossible. But Gandhiji's great legacy is that his life has definitively shown that, given true dedication, it is possible in the world as it is.