

Gandhi's Media Writings

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KRISHNAVEER ABHISHEK CHALLA

Abstract

The history of free India is written with the unceasing pen of Gandhian journalism which emerged from the values and philosophy being practiced and propagated by Mahatma Gandhi in his life and through his publications viz., Indian Opinion, Harijan and Young India. With courage of conviction, Gandhiji applied his principles in his life and in journalism as well. He could bravely write his quest for truth or experiments with truth in the modern era narrating his experiences while boldly facing the poignant situations to achieve his goals. Essentially, he believed that newspapers should have values when they were launched with a view to serving the people. This article compiles the important journals and writings of Mahatma Gandhi to understand his perception and practice of Journalism.

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Author: Krishnaveer Abhishek Challa, Student, M.A.English, Adikavi Nannaya University MIG – II, 31, HNo. 2-27-15, Sector- 6, MVP Colony, Visakhapatnam- 530017 Email Id: com2mass@gmail.com

INTRODUCTION

Gandhian journalism began in India nearly a century after the first newspaper was started by a European, James Augustus Hickey in 1780. Since then, very few publications came into existence, which were launched both by the British and Indians. Prominent among them were Rajarammohan Roy's *Sambad-kaumadi* which was launched in 1822 while Fardoonji

Murzban started the vernacular newspaper in Gujarati, *Bombay Samachar* in the same year. It was interesting to note that all the English dailies had 4000 subscribers, in 1823 out of which 125 were Indian subscribers.

Mahatma Gandhiji was instrumental in launching, *Indian Opinion*, in 1903 a weekly which started publication in four languages – English, Hindi, Tamil and Gujarati with an intention to serve all Indians in South Africa. His work in journalism began when he used the weekly to educate and mobilize Indians through the weekly columns on various aspects of life. Also he supported the publication financially. In his autobiography, he noted that lack of funding to the weekly forced them to discontinue the publication in Tamil and Hindi. Gandhiji, in fact, wrote only two books, ‘*My experiments with truth*’ in Gujarati and ‘*Hind Swaraj or Home Rule*’ which was written in Gujarati and translated by him into English. In the preface to the book *Hind Swaraj*, he said:

Hind Swaraj was written in 1908 during my return voyage from London to South Africa in answer to the Indian school of violence and its prototype in South Africa. I came in contact with every known Indian anarchist in London. Their bravery impressed me, but I felt that their zeal was misguided. I felt that violence was no remedy for India's ills, and that her civilization required the use of a different and higher weapon for self protection. The Satyagraha of South Africa was still an infant hardly two years old. But it had developed sufficiently to permit me to write of it with some degree of confidence. What I wrote was so much appreciated that it was published as a booklet... In my opinion it is a book which can be put into the hands of a child. It teaches the gospel of love in place of that of hate. It places violence with self sacrifice. It pits soul force against brute force. It has gone

through several editions and I commend it to those who would care to read it. (Mahatma Gandhi, 2000)

Hind Swaraj used the technique of dialogue between the reader and the editor. The purpose of adopting this style seemed to be that Mahatma did intend to clarify the doubts that would linger in the mind of the reader. He answered many queries posed by the readers on education, civilization, culture and so on. Answering a query of the reader in *Hind Swaraj*, Gandhiji explained the objectives of newspaper. He said 'one of the objectives of the newspaper was to understand popular feeling and to give expression to it; another was to arouse among the people certain desirable sentiments, and the third was fearlessly to expose popular defects'.

Satyagraha: the Pen of Gandhian Journalism

'As for giving ideas, I have originality. But writing is a bi-product; I write to propagate my ideas. Journalism is not my profession'.

-Gandhiji in Harijan, August 18, 1946

Gandhiji believed that the basic purpose of newspapers was public service. In serving the people, newspapers were expected to transmit news that would transform the individual from wrong doing to righteous behaviour. Gandhiji's writings aimed at moral transformation of the individual while reinforcing moral conduct in him. Writing in *Hind Swaraj*, he opined that 'the tendency of the Indian civilization is to elevate the moral being, and that of the Western civilization is to propagate immorality'. With this view, Gandhiji equated civilization with good conduct in his answer to the reader in *Hind Swaraj*. Through his writings in *Young India* and *Harijan*, he emphasized on prayer as one of the means to purge himself/ her from the wrong doing and advised all readers to chant *Ram*. For instance, he advocated nature cure to keep up sound health in an article through his journal *Harijan* on May 25, 1946. He wrote:

Krishnaveer Abhishek Challa

Nature cure consists of two parts. Firstly, to cure diseases by taking the name of the God or Ramayana, and secondly, to prevent illness by the inculcation of right and hygienic living. The report from the village says that the inhabitants are cooperating with them in keeping the village, clean. I hold that where the rules of personal, domestic and public, sanitation are strictly observed and due care is taken in the matter of diet and exercise, there should be no occasion for illness or disease. Nature cure implies an ideal mode of life and that, in its turn presupposes ideal living conditions in towns and villages. (Anil Mishra, 2012)

Stephen Hay (2005: 149) observed: ‘His way of transmuting or perfecting his own conduct, and ultimately finding God, was through tightly interweaving the three strands of soul purifying prayer, self rule and selfless service of others. In 1927 he explained, I am endeavouring to see God through service of humanity, for I know that God is neither in heaven, nor down below, but in every one...’.

On number of occasions, Gandhiji wrote on moral conduct of the individual and ‘he believed a spiritually integrated person is no longer a slave of the passions, but is able to go about him or her daily affairs in the light of true self knowledge’ (Parel, 2000:16).

Indian Opinion: The Newspaper of Independence

Gandhiji started the publication of ‘Indian Opinion’ in 1903 and the first issue of Indian opinion was published on June 4, 1903 although Gandhiji, in his autobiography mentions the year of publication as 1904. The prime objective of Indian Opinion was to protect the Indian interest and it was such a challenging task considering that there was no other medium of communication. Apart from this the other challenge was the control of

press. Gandhiji wrote about this situation,

“I believe that a struggle which chiefly relies upon internal strength cannot be wholly carried on without a newspaper, it is also my experience that we could not perhaps have educated the local Indian community, nor kept Indians all over the world in touch with the course of events in South Africa in any other way, with the same case and success as through the Indian Opinion, which therefore was certainly a most useful and potent weapon in our struggle”. (J V Vilanilam, 2005)

The objectives of the Indian Opinion were:

- a) To provide news to all sections of society in their own language
- b) To advocate their cause
- c) To provide the information of the events happening in India
- d) To contain contributions from competent writers, Indians as well as Europeans
- e) To cover all the aspects on social, moral, intellectual issues

Most of the articles written by Gandhiji in Indian Opinion were unsigned. Indian Opinion was published in four languages namely English, Gujarati, Tamil and Hindi in the interest of the British Indians living in South Africa. Indian Opinion was foolscap sized three column journal and filled with discriminatory regulations involving Indians. The journal also provided space for the letters to editors of the local newspapers. Gandhiji comprehensively wrote on intellectual and aesthetic subjects and here is an example of an article on ‘Indian Art’ published in the issue of the journal of September 17, 1903 :

“The Hindu palace-architecture of Gwalior; the Indian-Muhammadan mosques and mausoleums of Agra and Delhi, with several of the older Hindu temples of Southern India, stand unrivalled for grace of outline and elaborate wealth

of ornament. The Taj Mahal at Agra justifies Heber's exclamation that its builders had designed like Titans, and finished like jewelers. The open-carved marble windows and screens at Ahmadabad furnish examples of the skilful ornamentation which beautifies every Indian building, from the cave monasteries of the Buddhist period downward. They also show with what plasticity the Hindu architects adapted their Indian ornamentation to the structural requirements of the Muhammadan mosque. English decorative art in our day has borrowed largely from Indian forms and patterns. The exquisite scrolls on the rock-temples at Karla and Ajanta, the delicate marble tracery and flat wood-carving of Western India, the harmonious blending of forms and colors in the fabrics of Kashmir, have contributed to the restoration of taste in England. Indian artwork, when faithful to native designs, still obtains the highest honors at the international exhibition of Europe".

Gandhiji consistently wrote articles on other subjects as well. It is also important to notice that along with his scholarly contribution to the journal he also contributed financially and during the first year of the journal, spent \$3000 and wrote about it in his autobiography, "I had to bear the brunt of the work, having for most of the time to be practically in charge of the journal". (Gandhi, 1970: P-228)

Gradually, Gandhiji became solely responsible for journal's management and policy but he didn't mention his name as editor. Although he faced financial burden, he did not regret this. In his letter of January 13, 1905, to his political guru and mentor, Sri Gopal Krishna Gokhale, he wrote, "*When I saw that Mr. Madanji could not carry on the paper without pecuniary assistance and as I know that he was guided by*

thoroughly patriotic motives, I placed at his service the bulk of my savings. I have already become responsible to the extent of nearly \$3,500”.

In December, 1904, the Indian Opinion entered into a new phase when Gandhiji made it clear that the workers were to look not to the present but to the future; not to their pockets but to paper first. He declared that the policy of the journal was service. It was Gandhiji's noble effort that inspired many people along with Englishmen associated with the Indian Opinion. In the issue of December 31, 1904, the Gujarati edition of the Indian Opinion, published notes on the three Englishmen who left their job and joined Indian Opinion and started assisting in printing and publication of the paper. Englishmen, West, Kitchin and Polak joined Indian Opinion as they felt that the objective of the journal was worthy.

In 1905, there was the outbreak of plague in Johannesburg and Gandhiji was consistently writing on the problems faced by the people. He was continuously fighting against the disabilities suffered by the Indians in South Africa. The major disabilities were:

- a) Restrictions on immigration and trading
- b) Traveling in trains and cabs
- c) Walking on footpaths
- d) Racial arrogance and trade policy.

The columns of Indian Opinion were full of such cases. Gandhiji tried to get news from other countries also and for this he needed reliable correspondents in other countries especially in England and the letter of January 13, 1905 to Gopal Krishna Gokhale is an example of his intention. *“I am also anxious to secure either honorary or paid correspondents who would contribute weekly notes in English, Gujarati, Hindi and Tamil”.*

The objective of Indian Opinion was also to inspire the people and Gandhiji used to write the biographies of great men and women like Tolstoy, Lincoln, Mazzini, Elizabeth Fry, Florence Nightingale, Ishwar Chandra Vidya Sagar, and Raja Ram Mohan Roy. Another example of such inspiring story is here from the Indian Opinion of March 2, 1907 under a sub heading ‘An Indian Poetess’,

“The Ladies Conference at Calcutta brought to prominence a lady orator, Mrs. Sarojini Naidu, already known as a poet of considerable distinction. Mrs. Naidu is a Bengali lady by birth and has married a Madrasi gentleman. She spoke without notes and made an impressive and most eloquent speech. It is further stated that she is not accustomed to speak in public. It is a very hopeful sign of the times that our ladies are coming to the front and are taking active part in the great work of national reform. A gifted lady like Mrs. Sarojini Naidu, with her persuasive and attractive eloquence, should be able to render important service to the women of India”.

Gradually the Indian Opinion became the mouthpiece of South African Indian on the issue of Registration policy by South African Government where Indians and other Asians had to mention important physical identity marks and thumb impression on the certificates, failing which they were to forfeit their right of residence and liable to be fined or imprisoned. Struggle against registration started all over and Indian Opinion played a key role in the struggle. The Indian Opinion translated the ordinance in Gujarati for the large number of Indians. The Indian Opinion of May 3, 1913, wrote;

“In spite of the bill being rushed forward a stage further; we imagine that it will never reach the third reading stage. But it is well for passive resisters to keep themselves in readiness. It is to be hoped that, if the struggle revived the impending third campaign, it will be the purest, the last and the most brilliant of all. We share the belief

with the theory, that one true passive resister is enough to win victory for right. Right is on our side". Further in 1913, Gandhiji wrote in Indian opinion about the passive resisters who had crossed the border and returned to their homes after the struggle got over, as, "Hitherto passive resisters have challenged arrests by crossing the Transvaal border. That is how; the present struggle too, has been commenced. We may, on this question of crossing of the border, at once say this method of resistance does not mean that we are asking for breaking of the provincial boundaries. On the contrary as soon as the struggle ceases, those who will have crossed the borders from different provinces will return to the province of their domicile".

The resistance against the injustice act continued and because of Gandhiji's effort and contact the movement gradually spread to a large part of India and England. His consistent touch with the editors of other countries especially England, also helped to spread the movement. The number of subscribers of the Indian Opinion rose from 1,200 to 3,500 but there was financial problem. The paper was restructured to meet the challenge. The size was reduced from 16 to 8 pages. Gandhiji was consistently indicating about the shape of things to come. He wrote a letter to Mr A H West, on or before December 29, 1909, when he was about to change the size of the Indian Opinion;

"The size (of the Indian Opinion) should be changed as suggested. No apology need be offered in the paper for it. The English columns should be reduced. No leading matter of opinion (be) given for the present except explanatory-notes. A. H, matter should be severely condensed. Energy should be devoted to the art of condensing. It may be divided into Passive Resistance, Natal notes, Cape notes, etc. Reports of Bombay and other meetings may be considerably

shortened. The English columns then should simply give news on the disabilities throughout South Africa and about matters we are interested in 'The Gujarati' columns ought not to be reduced; but if the Gujarati subscribers fall off, even that may be reduced almost to any extent, you there, in Mr. Polak's and my absence, being the sole judge".

Though Gandhiji had mentioned that no apology would be offered, the Indian Opinion of January 1, 1910 published the reasons for the change in the size of the newspaper also explaining the condensation of the content so that the same amount of the information can be given even after reducing the pages as he explained, *"With the present issue, this journal appears under a somewhat changed dress. The size, too, has been reduced. The Transvaal struggle has put a very severe strain on our resources. It has now become too great for us to continue the old form and size. It is within the knowledge of most of our readers that our publication is not a commercial concern, but our capacity for the service of the community to whose interests Indian Opinion is devoted is limited, and our limitation has necessitated the change the readers will notice in its appearance. Though the size has been reduced, we hope that we shall be able, by means of condensation to give the same amount of information. Our readers who are interested in the ideals we endeavour to promote can render useful service by finding subscribers for the journal which they may call their own. It is our desire to give more varied matter as our resources increase. It is, then, for the readers to say when they shall have a better service of news"*.

Although Gandhiji had reduced the size of the paper, he couldn't sort out of financial problems and shared his views with Madan Lal in the letter dated January 20, 1910, *"It is desirable not to give more than a month's*

credit for Indian Opinion. You should only take a limited risk. Let the amount be debited to your account. It will not be deducted from your current allowance. You should never take liability for more than ten subscribers. However, whatever liability you have taken upon yourself in the Cape Colony is binding on all as you did not know the new rule. The new rule is, I believe, very good at least for the present. We will have to carry many (fresh) burdens; it is, therefore, better to cut down these. This (not allowing too much credit) seems to be the prevalent practice of newspapers. As people gradually get used to it, they will follow it of their own accord. We pay the license fee in advance because of compulsion, i.e., physical force. That we shall take the subscriptions in advance will be on the strength of soul-force. The subscriptions will then come in automatically. I have no time now to dilate upon this". (Gandhi, 1963)

The Language of *Ahimsa* (Non-Violence)

Language is a tool of communication for journalists, and use of language in news reports plays a significant role in informing the public about an event. Though a journalist does not witness an event, he or she tries to construct it with the help of information given to him/her by a second party. Sometimes, a journalist may be present at the event; he or she constructs it by understanding it. In such a situation, is the journalist presenting fact to the public? News is a representation of reality that happens in the environment and the language facilitates the projection of reality. In the profession of journalism, use of value free words is to be practiced to be very objective in reporting an event without any bias. Since the use of language is not mere accidental, they carry the intentions of the writer. Often, the ideology of the writer can be understood through his/her writings. Fowler (1991:5) said 'the contents of newspapers are not facts about the

world, but in very general sense ideas'. Thus, the analysis of media discourses can assess the ideological practice of journalists and their representation through language.

On another occasion, Gandhiji advised the newspapers to give importance to the language being used in the newspapers. In order to avoid the law, language cannot be changed to suit the needs of the time. The following passage is illustrative of his mind;

The last, though not the least, question is: What is the duty of a newspaper in a country where there are laws like the "Seditious Writing Act" and the "Defence of Indian Act" to restrict its freedom?" In order to get over this limitation our newspapers have evolved a style of writing which makes it possible to interpret what they say on a particular matter, which may seem to fall within the purviews of these Acts, in two different ways. Some have perfected this art to a science. But, in my opinion, this causes harm to our country. People develop a tendency to equivocate and fail to cultivate the courage to speak the truth. It changes the form of the language which, instead of being an instrument for expressing one's thoughts, becomes a mask for concealing them. I am convinced that this is not the way to educate our people. Both people and individuals must cultivate the habit of speaking their minds. Newspapers are in a position to impart such training to them. The right course, and the one which will ultimately be found to be of the greatest advantage to us, would be that those who are afraid of the above laws and who do not want to get entangled in them should stop publishing newspapers, or that they should frankly state their true views and bear the consequences. Justice Steven has

said somewhere that there can be no hatred in the language of a man who has no hatred in his heart. And if there is any hatred one should frankly express it. In case one hasn't the courage to act thus, one should stop publishing a newspaper. In this lies the good of our people and our country. (From Selected Works of Mahatma Gandhiji, Vol VI, p312)

Ethical Journalism and Gandhian Journalism

Journalism has become an industry in modern days, and commercialisation of the press has been increasingly found in every aspect. Kuldip Nayar (1994) aptly commented as 'the press became more and more commercialised. The old concept of a newspaper representing ideas and nation's ethos had worn out and the profession became an industry'. The contents are aimed at attracting the public and thereby to increase the circulation of the paper. In the process of increasing the circulation, newspapers solicit advertisements from the potential businessmen. Gandhiji's view was that newspapers were meant for public service, they should not compromise on their role in society, and the concept of profits should be relegated to the background. When newspapers solicit advertisements from the businessmen, the newspapers tend to be influenced and they yield to the pressure of those advertisers. Often, adverse news against advertisers is suppressed in support of the advertisers. Being in the service of the people, the newspapers cannot "soil" their pages with such advertisements. For instance, Gandhiji appealed to the readers of *Young India* to support the weekly with their subscriptions, in order to avoid advertisements. Thus Gandhiji observed succinctly:

'It is now an established practice with newspapers to derive their main income from advertisements rather than from subscribers. The result is deplorable. The very newspaper

which in its editorial columns strongly denounces the evil of drinking publishes advertisements in praise of drink. We read about the ill effects of tobacco as well as where to buy good tobacco or which brand of cigarette to smoke in the same newspapers. Or, it may on the one hand, publish a severe denunciation of a certain play and, on the other, elsewhere in its columns, a long advertisement of it. The largest source of revenue is derived from medical advertisement, which is the cause of much harm to our people. They, almost wholly, nullify the other services rendered by newspapers. I have seen the harm caused by the advertisements, for many people are lured into buying the medicines – supposed to increase virility, overcome debility. Etc. Many of these medicines are those which encourage immortality. It is strange that such advertisements find a place even in religious papers. This custom has been adopted from the West. Whatever the effort, we must either put an end to this undesirable practice or, at least, reform it. It is the duty of every newspaper to exercise care in accepting advertisements for publications in its pages'. From Selected Works of Mahatma Gandhiji, Vol VI, p 311-312)

Further, on another occasion, Gandhiji expressed his displeasure at the modern newspapers. He pointed out: *'It is generally seen that newspapers publish any matter they have without regard to its need or importance just to fill in vacant space. This practice is almost universal. It is so in the West also. The reason is that most newspapers have an eye on profits. There is no doubt that newspapers have done great service to the people and these defects are therefore overlooked.*

But to my mind, they have done equally great harm. There are newspapers in the West which are so full of trash that it would be a sin to read them. At times they produce bitterness and strife even between different families and communities. Thus, newspapers cannot escape criticism merely because they also serve the interests of the people. On the whole, it would seem that the gain and loss from newspapers are almost equal'.

CONCLUSION

Gandhian journalism needs to be looked closely and it has great relevance even today. The Gandhian trait of positive journalism has radically undergone a change. For instance, Gandhiji observed that the British judges' consideration of contempt of court was praised by him. He admitted the "reprimand" given by judges was acceptable. He truthfully published it in the newspaper, and yet he defended himself. But, the modern newspapers don't even publish the Press Council of India reprimand or censure to the newspapers for violation of journalistic ethics. The foundations of Indian press as laid by Mahatma Gandhi are receding to the background in the present day owing to media's slow adoption of the western model of journalism, tabloidization which emphasises on sensationalism, sex, and surprises. News reports are biased and personal involvement of journalists is quite discernible in the newspapers. Vilanilam (2009:89) observed:

"... The old Journalism of the Gandhian era, of journalists with noble goals, motivated by the need for social change in India, has disappeared, yielding to the journalism of the pocket book, of the purse, in short – of pure greed. Journalism as service to society has been replaced by journalism aimed at profit and affluence for media promoters and media workers".

Courage of conviction and truth telling are the bedrock of the journalism profession is what we learn from Gandhian journalism.

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