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CENTRE FOR  
RESEARCH IN  
SOCIAL SCIENCES  
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# THE SOCIAL SCIENCE PERSPECTIVE

NEWSLETTER FROM THE CENTRE FOR RESEARCH  
IN SOCIAL SCIENCES AND EDUCATION

VOLUME 4, ISSUE 3, JULY 2024



## BOOK REVIEWS

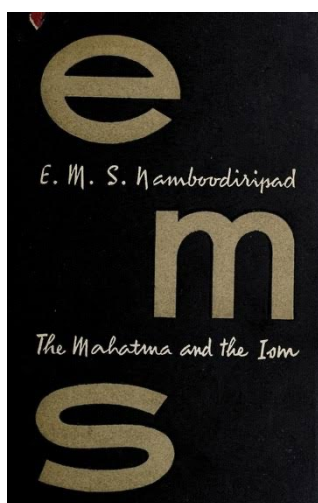


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### The Mahatma and the Ism



**The Mahatma and the Ism**  
**E.M.S. Namboodiripad**

Left Word Books  
E Book First Published in 2019

The Mahatma and the Ism (1958) by E.M.S. Namboodiripad is recognised as an attempt by a Marxist to evaluate Gandhi's role in India's freedom struggle. Being an ardent Gandhian

himself, Namboodiripad has analysed Gandhi's part in the many phases of the national movement. The Mahatma and the Ism is a work that sheds light on the key question: "How did Gandhi become the undisputed leader of the anti-colonial national liberation movement?" In the task of answering this question, Namboodiripad positions Gandhi in the unique contribution that he (Gandhi) made as an individual to developing the national movement. The writer also takes into account the social and historical forces that shaped Gandhi and his worldview.

Namboodiripad's discourse borrows anecdotes and excerpts from the eighth-volume biography of Gandhi titled Mahatma: Life of Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, written by D.G. Tendulkar. The primary aim of the work, although is to direct us to an understanding of Gandhi's role in the epochal struggle of Indian Independence, it also orients itself to yield an understanding of similarities and differences between Gandhism and Marxism-Leninism. A reading of Namboodiripad's work in the 21st century is necessary for it offers a dialogue with that national leader without stamping his thoughts and philosophy as either cryptic or crass, instead as a comprehensive and unapologetically contemporary.

It is imperative to learn about the writer and his sentiments towards Gandhi before absorbing his analytical notes on Gandhi. In the 1959 edition of the text, Prakash Karat, the Indian communist politician, writes in "EMS on Gandhi" that Namboodiripad's evaluation of Gandhi differs from that of Prof. Habib (Irfan Habib), the Indian historian; where Prof. Habib had a different analysis, and Namboodiripad held firm to his views on:

First, Gandhi, as the undisputed leader of the national movement, represented the broad interests of the national bourgeoisie, which led the freedom struggle. Secondly, the Gandhian programme had no anti-landlord component with which to mobilize the peasantry, a feature of the programme that itself stemmed from a class viewpoint.

While both, Namboodiripad and Habib, acknowledge that it was Gandhi who could identify with the peasant masses and speak in the tongue that could garner more participants in the national movement, Namboodiripad professed a slightly different opinion. He was "consistent in holding that Gandhism hampered the development of a powerful agrarian movement against feudalism and landlordism".

It is with this preamble that The Mahatma and the Ism is strategically structured – beginning with Gandhi's early years to 'Gandhism' as an ideology and concluding in 'Gandhism after Gandhi'. Building on biographical notes borrowed from Tendulkar's work, Namboodiripad critically examines Gandhi's take and approach to social and political reforms. Commencing with Gandhi's attraction towards vegetarianism while he was in London, the writer elaborates on the deep-seated psychology of 'change from within'. Soon, vegetarianism was going to become the characteristic of the future Mahatma:

In one of his wanderings in the town in search of vegetarian dishes, Gandhi came across a queer restaurant which not only served vegetarian diet but propagated it through literature. He bought here Salt's Plea for Vegetarianism which created in him an interest in dietetics. He came in contact with those who were

regarded as pillars of vegetarianism. [...] He joined London Vegetarian Society and soon found himself on its executive committee. He helped to design its badge. Full of zeal, he started a vegetarian club in his locality, Bayswater. He became its secretary. [...] He contributed nine articles on Hindu customs and diet to the magazine, *Vegetarian*.

The promotion of vegetarianism which seemed crankish at that moment was only later seen to have been the driving vehicle of a "philosophy of action which was to be decisive in the history of India" in the times that followed. Gandhi as an adherent of vegetarian diet perfected his technique of satyagraha which was tried on a nationwide scale in India in 1921, 1930, 1932 and 1942. In the anti-colonial movements that followed later enabled Gandhi to further develop and perfect the technique of satyagraha. However, it is in these first movements that Gandhi's experiments are to be seen as an outline of that philosophy and practice which is now come to be known as Gandhism.

Gandhi's practice and promotion of vegetarianism gradually led him to understand the plight of the indentured Indian labourers held in South Africa. In fighting cases for the benefit of the labourers, he procured for himself a considerable number of followers. Along with the preachings on vegetarianism, Gandhi invested himself in bringing up boys and girls, who were taken as inmates of the Settlement and the Farm, on the lines of: Vows and Truth – ahimsa, celibacy, non-stealing, non-possession and control of the palate. Having the utmost contempt for the ideological and intellectual molding of the young generation, he tried to substitute uncritical faith for independent thinking.

This also speaks of those followers who flocked towards Gandhi's preachings overlooking the obscurantist content of his methods and of his social outlook of "the idealist willingness to undergo suffering in struggle against evil". We also see how the contempt that Gandhi had for modern civilisation is articulated in his practices and teachings. His *Hind Swaraj* resonates the principal thought of the Manifesto of the Communist Party, the well-known work of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels:

This school of socialism dissected with great acuteness the contradictions in the conditions of modern production. It laid bare the hypocritical apologies of economists. It proved, incontrovertibly, the disastrous effects of machinery and division of labour; the concentration of capital and land in a few hands; over-production and crises; it pointed out the inevitable ruin of the petty bourgeois and peasant, the misery of the proletariat, the anarchy in production, the crying inequalities in the distribution of wealth, the industrial war of extermination between nations, the dissolution of old moral bonds, of the old family relations, of the old nationalities.

In the context of witnessing and understanding the plight of the workers, Gandhi had charted out for himself a thorough plan. Namboodiripad narrates and analyses Gandhi's decision of making a tour of India, travelling third class, in order that "he might acquaint himself with the wretched condition of the lower class passengers". His observational study of the conditions of the workers across India led him to argue the opposition of foreign products and justify their production as exploitative of native labourers and oriental resources. This concept gradually roused the entire country and gave rise to the movement of Swadeshi – "the first nationwide movement for the economic emancipation of the country".

The Swadeshi movement obtained its strength in the Gandhian technique, that was formed through Gandhi's approach towards learning of the conditions of the workers and masses:

Gandhi associated himself with the masses of the people, their lives, problems, sentiments and aspirations. Politics for him was not a matter of high-level debate among erudite politicians; it was a matter of selfless service in defence of people's interests and identifying oneself with everything that is of the people. This characteristic feature of Gandhism in action was already visible in the South African struggle in which, ... Gandhi drew inspiration and sustenance from the simple and devoted action of the common people.

It was this close association with the common people that allowed Gandhi to familiarise himself with the living conditions and problems of the people. This acquaintance also enabled him to evolve a unique technique of political work that was different from the extremist method and varied from the moderate approach.

Gandhi and his followers now concentrated on a "constructive programme", and it was in the pursuance of this programme that Gandhi organised the All-India Khadi Board. He toured the country extensively and at every opportunity, "he popularized the programme of Khadi, argued against the untouchability, and championed the programme of a *lingua franca*". Many question the relation of all these aspects to the larger political struggle of fighting against the British. But Gandhi's strategy was different, his speeches seldom discussed political questions – rather almost all his speeches were concerned with "social and spiritual questions".

He was rousing the people, not against the political and economic system under which they were living, but against certain social evils and for certain spiritual values. [...] He spoke of the miseries of the people, the inequality that existed in the country, the necessity of redressing the grievances of the people. There was not one section of the people whose problems he did not study, whose miserable conditions he did not bring out, for

whose comfort and solace he did not plead with his audience. It was this that enabled him to attract the various sections of the poor and downtrodden masses. [...] the khadi programme was a programme of organizing labour-capital coordination and the 'purification' of the British connection.

The strategy of the khadi was to create in people a sense of pursuing an activity, and this was a necessary method of preparation for the struggle for Swaraj. "Behind all the separate items of the constructive programme was the message of resistance to imperialism." Namboodiripad continues to elaborate on the Gandhian technique deployed in the roles that Gandhi played as a political leader or as just a leader. This encapsules the Non-Cooperation Movement, Poorna Swaraj, Quit India Movement and Salt Satyagraha Phase. In all the movements ahimsa or non-violence was given utmost importance. Peace movements were practiced and preached, and 'mob violence' was absolutely abhorred.

What then is the significance of the life and teachings of Mahatma Gandhi? How did Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi metamorphose as the "Father of the Nation"? Namboodiripad proposes a strong voice demanding scholars and common readers to make "serious attempts to assess the role and significance of Gandhi and his teachings", and that the new analysis should yield to the right and further development of the democratic movement. Namboodiripad offers the following conclusions, these points are neither over-simplified nor one-sided attributes, instead they are the resultant points derived from an empirical approach to Gandhism:

- » Gandhi was an idealist – idealist not only in the sense that the world-outlook which guided him was opposed to philosophical materialism, but also in the sense that he kept before him certain ideals to which he clung till the end of his life.
- » His idealism played a big role in rousing the hitherto slumbering millions of the rural poor.
- » Though he played a vital role in drawing the mass of the rural poor into the national movement, it would be wrong to ascribe to him personally the tremendous awakening which people showed in the years after the First World War.
- » While Gandhi thus deserves praise for his role in overcoming the major weaknesses of the national-democratic movement – making the movement really national and all-class by bringing in the large masses of the hitherto unorganised rural poor – it should not be forgotten that he had always been and continued till his death to be afraid of the rural poor acting as an independent force. While he was all for mobilising them in the struggle for freedom and democracy, he was keen that they should act under the leadership of his own class, the bourgeoisie.

- » Not only in relation to the rural poor, but also in relation to the working class and other sections of the working people, his was an approach which, in actual practice, helped the bourgeoisie.
- » Gandhi's role in history as the foremost leader of the bourgeoisie should not be taken to mean that he was always, and on every issue, at one with the bourgeoisie. On the other hand, it is characteristic of him, and the class of which he was the friend, philosopher, and guide, that, on several occasions and on several issues, his was a minority voice, if not a lone voice.

The evolution of Gandhi to the 'Father of the Nation' happened perhaps because of the idealism that he adhered to in the years of anti-imperialist struggle. It "became a practically useful political weapon in the hands of the bourgeoisie: furthermore, that he became more or less isolated from the bourgeoisie in the latter days of his life, because his idealism did in the post-independence years became a hindrance to the self-interest of the bourgeoisie."

Namboodiripad raises a critical question in the penultimate chapter, 'Gandhism after Gandhi', the question being – "Where does the Gandhian school of thought stand today?" Stating the various conflicts that are present in imbibing or rejecting the Gandhian essence, Namboodiripad writes:

[...] it is necessary to understand what is the essence of Gandhism. The answer usually given is that the essence of Gandhism consists in the application of the moral principles of truth and non-violence to the current problems of society. This would, of course, be a correct answer, but it would immediately raise another question: Is there something like absolute truth or absolute morality; are there unalterable ways of applying this absolute truth and absolute morality to the current problems of life?

The Mahatma and the Ism is Namboodiripad's careful assessment of Gandhism. The work is rich in its content and Namboodiripad has sensitively handled a great personality while subjecting the ideology and politics of that personality to incisive critical appraisal.