
Looking for the Dust

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Gandhi is hard to banish. Not long ago, *Lage Raho Munnabhai* re-introduced him with a bang. More recently, Gandhi's face provided the backdrop for a fasting Anna Hazare. In between, us President Barack Obama announced that the one person, living or dead, he would like to dine with is Gandhi. But even as Gandhi remains in conversation and a growing number of universities offer "Gandhian Studies", his life, role and politics are receiving an increasing amount of critical scrutiny. This should be welcomed.

In 2008, an American writer, Arthur Herman, wrote *Gandhi & Churchill: The Epic Rivalry That Destroyed an Empire and Forged Our Age*, and in 2010 Jad Adams, a Briton, focused on Gandhi's undeniably eccentric chastity experiments in *Gandhi: Naked Ambition*. This year has seen Joseph Lelyveld's *Great Soul: Mahatma Gandhi and His Struggle with India*, which, among other things, claims that "social reform" was Gandhi's chief goal.

Critics of the Herman book, which almost won a Pulitzer award, included those who felt that it treated Churchill unfairly and others who thought that it was Gandhi whom Herman failed to understand properly.

Belittling Gandhi's Standing

In this article, however, I propose to dwell on the Lelyveld book, chiefly because most reviews of *Great Soul* have failed, it seems to me, to notice or discuss its central thrust. In my reading, Lelyveld's courteous style conceals a bid to belittle Gandhi's standing. If I see someone's influence as baleful, I am, of course, entitled to strive to weaken it. But Lelyveld is not frank. Knowing that his readers will detect or suspect it, Lelyveld disavows any wish to reduce Gandhi.

He also makes other claims:

At the risk of slighting [Gandhi's] role as a political tactician, a field marshal of non-violent resistance, or as a religious thinker

REVIEW ARTICLE

Great Soul: Mahatma Gandhi and His Struggle with India by Joseph Lelyveld (*Noida, India: HarperCollins*, 2011; pp XV + 425, Rs 699.

and exemplar, I have tried to follow him at ground level... (xiii).

I'm more fascinated by the man himself, the long arc of his strenuous life, than by anything that can be distilled as a doctrine (xiii) There's a tragic element in Gandhi's life, not because he was assassinated, nor because his noblest qualities inflamed the hatred in his killer's heart. The tragic element is that he was ultimately forced, like Lear, to see the limits of his ambition to remake his world (p 27).

My aim... is not to diminish a compelling figure now generally exalted as a spiritual pilgrim and secular saint... (xiii).

These claims and disavowals notwithstanding, the book seems designed to push Gandhi down to ground level, slight his role, and diminish his compelling figure. Disclosing no fascination with the man, it bypasses the drama of Gandhi's life. Ignoring every scene of agony, ecstasy, surprise or boldness, Lelyveld takes pains to find the commonplace in the arc of Gandhi's life. And despite the disclaimer quoted above, the book insinuates that Gandhi's assassination represented a failure and was somehow more his fault than that of his assassins.

As the book opens, Lelyveld quotes Gandhi's sentence: "For men like me, you have to measure them not by the rare moments of greatness in their lives, but by the amount of dust they collect on their feet in the course of life's journey". Where another might notice the unusual character of a self-critical remark such as this (which was made, towards the close of Gandhi's life, to his secretary and companion, the anthropologist Nirmal Kumar Bose), Lelyveld's response – a perfectly valid one – seems to have been, "I will locate and exhibit Gandhi's dust".

But why does he conceal the impulse? The much-discussed innuendo in respect

of Gandhi's relationship with Kallenbach confirms that Lelyveld is less than frank as an author. Without providing evidence, he suggests a homosexual affair while claiming he does no such thing. As M J Akbar put it in his review of the Lelyveld book, the author takes "recourse to nudge-nudge, wink-wink passages".¹

The "gay" insinuation (spread across 10 pages) should be placed against Lelyveld's claim that the "specific narrative lines I've chosen...have to do with Gandhi the social reformer..." (p xiii). Did Lelyveld think the insinuation critical to an assessment of Gandhi's success at social reform?

Breath of Disapproval

Lelyveld is not comfortable with the attention Gandhi receives. Though he does not directly confess it, his narrative breathes disapproval if not irritation at sites where Gandhi is remembered. Referring to South Africa, Lelyveld says:

Now new monuments are scattered about the land, reflecting the heroic role *attributed to him* in the country's *rewritten* history... One of the new Gandhi memorials sits on a platform on the handsome old railway station in Pietermaritzburg. The plaque says his ejection from the train "changed the course" of Gandhi's life. "He took up the fight against racial oppression", it proclaims. "His active nonviolence started from that day."

"That's... squishy as history. Gandhi *claims* in the Autobiography to have called a meeting on arrival in Pretoria to rally local Indians and inspire them to face up to their racial situation. *If he did*, little came of it (pp 7-8, emphasis added).

Lelyveld will not accept the significance of the train-and-coach journey of May-June 1893, from Durban to Pretoria via Johannesburg, which helped transform Gandhi's life within days of arriving in South Africa as a 23-year-old. On this long, complicated journey (requiring changes between train and horse-driven carriage and a stopover in Johannesburg), the newly-arrived barrister was tossed out, verbally abused, thrashed and refused

accommodation. Tempted to return to India, Gandhi stayed on to fight the discrimination. All of Gandhi's biographers, Indian and western, agree that the journey was a turning point.

But Lelyveld is unimpressed and indeed disappointed that "a handsome old railway station" (no doubt of colonial origin) has to bear the weight now of a Gandhi plaque.

As for the Pretoria meeting in June 1893 which, Lelyveld suggests, may or may not have occurred, Gandhi devoted two pages of his autobiography to it. He named the man in whose house the meeting took place, described what was discussed and the steps that followed, and referred to three young Indians present whom he taught English during subsequent weeks.

Did Gandhi invent for his autobiography a meeting that was never held? When the autobiography was first published in the mid-1920s, Gandhi was a famous figure with many followers, but also with several foes, including in South Africa – and, we can be sure, in Pretoria. Any one of his critics in Pretoria would have jumped at a chance to denounce Gandhi's account as an invention.

Lelyveld "praises" Gandhi for his alleged success, throughout his lifetime, in selling a chosen image (or a series of chosen images) of himself. Impressed, but also miffed, that in 1931 an exchange of telegrams between an imprisoned and fasting Gandhi and the American journalist, William Shirer, was published in *The Times* of London, Lelyveld writes: "Gandhi's camp, it seems, leaked the exchange to *The Times*,... a sign of how far ahead of his time he was in his aptitude for manipulating the press" (p 230).

So it is not Gandhi alone. People in his camp, too, are brilliant manipulators. From Poona, they can – in 1931, 16 years before Indian Independence – get *The Times* of London to do their bidding. That Gandhi's "camp" in the colonised part of the world would want to send any publishable comment they get from their jailed, fasting, and, but for the fast, silenced leader to the leading newspaper of the coloniser is to Lelyveld not natural but manipulative. He would have preferred the imprisoned Gandhi to have remained unheard in the imperial metropolis.

Image-control is a charge that others too have levelled against Gandhi. The argument is that throughout a succession of different environments – including his boyhood home in Rajkot, the law colleges and vegetarian restaurants of London, courtrooms in Mumbai, ships between India and South Africa, in prisons, marches and ashrams in South Africa, during campaigns, fasts, imprisonments, train journeys and walks in India – Gandhi "manipulated" the media and came across the way he wished to.

If so, Gandhi was a genius greater than what the most admiring of his admirers have suggested. Einstein's 1939 remark is known to most – "Future generations will not believe", etc, etc. Thirty years earlier, in 1909, Gopalkrishna Gokhale offered staggering praise for what he saw as the "nobility", "bravery" and "exalted spirit" of the then 40-year-old Gandhi.²

But if one without money, diamonds, guns, whips or the ability to hire-and-fire, yet with foes who often had some of these things, could "manipulate" public opinion in his favour in different parts of the world, then he was more wondrous than what Einstein or Gokhale suggested. As to how Gandhi might have "manipulated" Einstein (whom he never met), Lelyveld does not answer the question, or raise it. And as for Gokhale, the seasoned politician in whose home Gandhi stayed for several weeks in 1900-01, perhaps he was a victim of Gandhi's manipulative charm!

The truth may be simpler. Gandhi lived in the open, and he lived up to what he said. Not perfectly, of course. But to a greater degree than most, the very human Gandhi lived up to what he said. He said he would risk death, jail, poverty, isolation and humiliation, but fight for India's independence, for the unity of all Indians, for justice between Indians, and for the rights of the neediest. And he did that.

Because his life was lived in the open, the world saw Gandhi doing what he was saying. Many in the world, therefore, loved him, even when they thought him too radical in some cases, or not radical enough elsewhere, or not considerate enough to his wife and sons. Authenticity was the secret of his "manipulative" skill.

Yes, he was astute too. Anyone wanting to unite conflicting communities in India,

hold together a team of ambitious politicians who had compatibility issues, and foil the divide-and-rule strategies of an empire reluctant to let go of India had to be astute as well as open and true.

Questioning the Genuineness

Barring two of them, Lelyveld questions the genuineness of every single one of Gandhi's commitments, including to Indian rights in South Africa, dalit rights in India, and Hindu-Muslim partnership. He does not challenge Gandhi's opposition to colonialism, except that he does not dwell on that opposition. And he agrees that Gandhi genuinely sought to make India clean and sanitary at the ground level. To Lelyveld, Gandhi's failure to persuade Indians to clean their dirt was his ultimate frustration, his greatest defeat, his profoundest tragedy.

This, we should recall, was how colonialists had always looked at Gandhi. In 1917, only two years after Gandhi's return to India from South Africa, when he was fighting white indigo planters in Champaran, and also addressing India at the grass roots, a British official in Bihar called Merriman wrote to another called Morshead about Gandhi and his team: "Personally, I think that... they will soon get sick of trying to teach hygiene to the Bihari cultivator".³

From then on until 1947, India's British rulers steadily cheered Gandhi's sanitation efforts, while predicting failure for those efforts, and even as they placed hurdles in his bids for unity between Hindus and Muslims and between caste Hindus and dalits. A man with Gandhi's energy and character should focus, these rulers were clear, on what was really important, namely, basic cleanliness, and leave India's governance, as well as relations between India's conflicting groups, to those chosen for the task, namely, the empire's guardians. And any unhappy Indian group – e.g, the dalits, or the tribals, or the Muslims, or the caste Hindus – should look to the empire for relief, not to a neighbouring community, and certainly not to a native leader striving to bring the groups together, and most certainly not to a native leader with the gall to assert that what was prodding him against the empire was his conscience.

Pointing out that the just-arrived 23-year-old barrister did not immediately “identify” with the indentured among South Africa’s Indians (p 10), Lelyveld says that Gandhi’s identification with the indentured population was not total, instant, or constant. He also stresses that Gandhi’s sentiments, 120 years ago, for South Africa’s blacks were inadequate and at times prejudiced. Both “accusations” are valid. But the opposite would have been more surprising. In fact, it was impressive that “scarcely three months after he arrived in the country” (p 9), a letter from the 23-year-old about the condition of the indentured and other Indians appeared in the *Transvaal Advertiser*. Protesting in the letter at the use of the word “coolie” for Indians, Gandhi wrote, “Indian is the most proper word for both the classes. No Indian is a coolie by birth.” Given Gandhi’s elite background and his “Barrister” title, this was an interesting (one ought to say early) sign of a broad engagement with the indentured. It also suggests that the Pretoria meeting that Lelyveld doubts ever took place may have been of some consequence.

Aids to Belittle

Lelyveld is at his most strenuous in arguing (suggesting is the truer word; ever willing to imply a view, Lelyveld is usually careful not to express one) that the cause of the indentured workers is something that Gandhi “stole” from P S Aiyar, one of Gandhi’s contemporaries in South Africa, who edited *African Chronicle*, published from Durban. The suggestion can be contested. There is plenty of evidence that Gandhi was arguing for the rights of the indentured from 1894. Suppose, however, that the “charge” is valid; further suppose, assuming a difference, that Aiyar was often right and Gandhi often wrong in tactics or timing for struggles for the indentured. How would that detract from the Gandhi-led Great March of 1913, in which thousands of the indentured took part?

A sound leader always incorporates ideas taken from colleagues and critics. But Lelyveld wants us to know that Aiyar (whose attitude to Gandhi alternated between bitter criticism and sweeping praise) was during some periods a better defender of the indentured than Gandhi.

If so, all honour to Aiyar, but it is not exactly dust for Gandhi.

Lelyveld similarly wants us to know that another of Gandhi’s contemporaries, in this instance, one of Gandhi’s most constant comrades, Thambi Naidoo “sometimes had to press his leader to lead”. This, says Lelyveld, is “an impression [that] has lingered in the oral tradition of South African Tamils” (p 109). The impression is wholly believable. Gandhi would have been right to await clarity before launching a struggle in which participants would risk a lot, and Thambi Naidoo would have been right to press if he thought his leader was being too cautious.

But it is not to exalt Aiyar and Naidoo that Lelyveld speaks to us; he uses them to belittle Gandhi. We should indeed learn more than we know about Aiyar and Naidoo, and several others like them. But that is not what Lelyveld is getting at. His point – again only hinted at – is that the Great March in fact was not all that great. It did not achieve all it set out to; it greatly hurt the participants.

In a struggle of this kind, the adversary of the period is usually a better judge than a critic a hundred years later. Smuts in South Africa, Churchill in England and Linlithgow in India were better judges of the effectiveness of, respectively, the Great March of 1913 in South Africa, the Salt March of 1930, and 1942’s Quit India. Smuts breathed a sigh of relief when, after 1913, Gandhi left South Africa. Of the Salt March and accompanying acts, Churchill said that these acts had “inflicted such humiliation and defiance as has not been known since the British first trod the soil of India”.⁴ In a letter to Churchill, Linlithgow, the viceroy, called Quit India “by far the most serious rebellion since that of 1857”.⁵

Nelson Mandela would acknowledge that the Defiance Campaign Against Unjust Laws of 1952 that encouraged him as a youth – organised jointly by the African National Congress and the South African Indian Congress – had been modelled on Gandhi’s Great March of 1913. Though Lelyveld cites Mandela’s statement, he wants us to appreciate that Gandhi did not deserve to stand out in South Africa, and that in any case his major initiatives there were flawed.

Lelyveld also strives laboriously to establish Gandhi’s failure, while in South

Africa, to fight for African rights. Gandhi never said, nor can students of his life say, that fighting for African rights was his central goal in South Africa. It was not. Nor can it be said that from the start he was totally free of ignorance, prejudice or condescension in his attitude to black Africans. He was not.

Still, on such questions he was a good deal ahead of most of his Indian contemporaries. In a major 1908 utterance in Johannesburg (which Lelyveld cites), he was in fact greatly in advance of his time. Referring to South Africa’s Africans, whites, Indians and Chinese, and naming each community, he said:

If we look into the future, is it not a heritage we have to leave to posterity, that all the different races commingle and produce a civilisation that perhaps the world has not yet seen? (8: 323)

Lelyveld quotes inappropriate remarks that Gandhi on occasion made about Africans. Others including this reviewer have also cited these remarks, and they sound unbecoming. But Lelyveld is unwilling to provide context or say in mitigation that some of the remarks were prompted by harshness towards Gandhi from convicts in the prison cell to which he was assigned.

One of Lelyveld’s criticisms is that a Gandhi who objected to the use of the word “coolie” to describe an Indian, nonetheless used the word “Kaffir” for Africans (53). Extenuation is called for here too, for many Africans at this time also spoke of themselves as Kaffirs, whereas no Indian called himself or herself a coolie.

From the start of his days in South Africa, Gandhi wanted Africans to receive their rights, and from the start he underlined the fact that as children of the soil their claim to political rights was stronger than that of South Africa’s Indians. In 1905, a 36-year-old Gandhi spelt out his horror at the enslavement of blacks in America, while penning a portrait of Lincoln for readers of *Indian Opinion*:

It is believed that the greatest and the noblest man of the last century was Abraham Lincoln. Only a person who has a clear picture in his mind of the America of those days can properly appreciate Lincoln’s virtues and his services... Nobody saw anything wrong in openly selling Negroes and keeping them in slavery. The high and the low, the rich

and the poor saw nothing strange in owning slaves... Religious minded men, priests and the like, saw nothing amiss and did not protest... Some even encouraged [slavery], and all... thought that slavery... was a divine dispensation and that the Negroes were born to it... (26 August 1905).

It is in the teeth of such evidence that Lelyveld uses the term “racist” (p 57) for words Gandhi used while objecting, in 1904, to a government-planned influx of Africans into an overcrowded and plague-hit location of Indians rather than in other places available. Gandhi’s words were certainly ill-advised: he complained against “dumping down all the Kaffirs of the town” and “the mixing of the Kaffirs with the Indians”.

But the context was the overcrowding and the plague and a callous insistence from the authorities that “neither overcrowding nor insanitation could be helped”. Convinced that “every minute wasted over the matter merely hastens a calamity”, Gandhi also proposed, to the Johannesburg municipality, a practical step for averting it.⁶ Knowing this context, but not providing it clearly, and knowing also the dynamite packed into the word “racist”, Lelyveld still uses that word.

There is no evidence of Gandhi using the term “Kaffir” after 1911, when he wrote in a letter, “I regard the Kaffirs, with whom I constantly work these days, as superior to us”. His comprehension of Africans grew steadily; he developed an understanding with John Dube, the Zulu leader who was one of the founders of the African National Congress and whose settlement existed close to Gandhi’s Phoenix settlement; and in 1936 (in Bardoli in Gujarat) Gandhi expressed to African-American visitors his belief that it would be “through the Negroes that the unadulterated message of non-violence will be delivered to the world”.⁷

In 1995, Nelson Mandela wrote: “All in all, Gandhi must be forgiven these prejudices and judged in the context of the time and the circumstances”.⁸ Lelyveld, however, is less willing to be charitable.

An example of Lelyveld’s acute scepticism is his reluctance to accept the genuineness of a 1914 conversation between John Dube and W W Pearson, a British pastor close to Indian protestors. In the conversation, Dube recalled his witnessing (the previous year, outside Durban city)

the beating up by police of about 500 striking workers of Indian origin. Dube evidently expressed admiration to Pearson for the strikers whom he found to be firm yet non-violent despite the roughing-up they had received.

“Some such conversation may have occurred”, Lelyveld grudgingly concedes (p 73). For real belief, he would have preferred an English-language document, dating from 1913, recording Dube’s reaction to what he had seen, instead of the translated text available at the University of KwaZulu-Natal. Years ago, this reviewer found an account of the conversation in the memoirs of Raajibhai Patel, one of Gandhi’s young colleagues in South Africa, and found it believable enough.⁹ There was no benefit for Raajibhai in inventing the Dube-Pearson conversation.

Lelyveld underlines the fact that though living close to each other, Gandhi and Dube met only a few times, but he does quote Dube’s pro-Great March remark, published in his journal *Ilanga*. “Go for it, Gandhi”, Dube wrote (p 114). Rightly or wrongly, Gandhi felt, and Dube seemed to agree, that the African and Indian struggles would both advance if each remained separate for a time. Premature fusion would endanger both. But both realised, as did the white government, that the Indian struggle was setting an encouraging example for Africans. Already in 1908, Smuts had warned his constituents in the Transvaal that Indian defiance could lead one day to Kaffir defiance.¹⁰

Sceptical about Untouchability

Predictably, Lelyveld is sceptical also about Gandhi’s positions on caste and untouchability. Addressing the recollections that Gandhi at times offered of the boy Uka who cleaned the lavatory in the Rajkot home where Gandhi grew up, and of his mother’s admonitions to Mohan against contact with Uka, Lelyveld does not exactly challenge Gandhi’s accounts of having disputed with his mother. But he does say this of the boy Gandhi:

At the age of twelve, he didn’t think of helping Uka empty the Gandhi family’s latrine, and his readiness to shrug off untouchability didn’t instantly mature into a passion to see it abolished (p 31).

While the second of these two observations can be seen either as a statement of

fact or as a criticism, the former comes across only as a complaint. Where another might have stressed the independence of a 12-year-old boy disputing with his traditional mother, Lelyveld points out – correctly – that this particular 12-year-old was limited in his protest.

Lelyveld’s attitude of questioning every statement that Gandhi makes about himself – his demand that Gandhi provide documentary evidence for every account from the past – is in sharp contrast with Lelyveld’s suspension of scepticism when it comes to Gandhi’s assassins.

By his assassin’s own testimony, it was Gandhi’s announcement of his fast on the twelfth (of January) that had lit the fuse on the plot he and his main accomplice hatched starting that night; and it was the declaration three days later that the cabinet had reversed itself and decided to transfer the blocked reserves to Pakistan... that had clinched the secret verdict of the conspirators condemning him to death (p 339).

The slightest curiosity, the smallest wish to test the veracity of a killer’s statement in justification of his deed, would have led Lelyveld to an easy discovery of the well-established fact that the plot to kill Gandhi was hatched several months prior to 12 January 1948, and that the excuse of Gandhi’s fast and the Rs 55-crore transfer (Pakistan’s share of the reserves of undivided India) was a falsehood invented by Godse and his accomplices to supply the Indian public with a marketable reason for the assassination.

But no curiosity or doubt was called for. “The assassin’s own testimony” sufficed. As between Gandhi and his adversaries, be they white, Hindu, Muslim, dalit or whatever, Lelyveld seems in each case to give the benefit of the doubt to the adversary.

Lelyveld’s *Great Soul*

Who in the end is the subject of Lelyveld’s *Great Soul*? By his own testimony, it is the failed social reformer. Gandhi’s successful liberation struggle, which inspired women and men on all continents, is not worth looking at.

That a Martin Luther King, a Dalai Lama, an Aung San Suu Kyi, and Native Americans, Latin Americans, black Africans, and Arabs, including Palestinians, have in their thousands been inspired by Gandhi to fight

simultaneously for justice and reconciliation is of no interest to Lelyveld. Such people do not feature in his book.

Gandhi's unceasing, and remarkably effective, commitment to Hindu-Muslim partnership, helping produce among other things an Indian Constitution that protects everyone's rights, even if in reality these rights are often hard to secure, is also unworthy of notice. His equally uninterrupted passion that caste Hindus should face the injustices of Hindu society, a passion which helped shape the route for justice – by no means free of hurdles and potholes – that free India today offers to dalits, tribals, and backward castes, should likewise be ignored.

Gandhi's provocative claim that the conscience had to be a critical element in fights against injustice or empire, and his equally provocative claim that he wanted Indians to fight but also love the British, are also not worthy of discussion. Yet, Lelyveld must minutely examine whether, at each and every stage of Gandhi's numerous campaigns for Indian rights in South Africa, from 1894 to 1914, some cause for heartburn was not given to Hindus or to Muslims, to Indian workers or to Indian merchants, to whites or to Africans.

Similarly, in respect of the Gandhi-led campaigns in India, from 1915 to 1948, Lelyveld must scrutinise whether the dalits, the Hindu high castes, and the Muslims always and in each case benefited as much as they were entitled to. His painstaking research proves to Lelyveld that the oft-conflicting desires of Gandhi's different constituencies were seldom satisfied fully or at the same time. At different stages in South Africa and India, the Hindus or the Muslims, the caste Hindus or the dalits, the Africans or the Indians or the whites felt aggrieved. Time and again, Gandhi was forced to see that he could not remake his world the way he wanted to.

This QED enables Lelyveld to say (sorry, to imply) that Gandhi failed when he went beyond social reform and strove to unite all Indians. Even while questioning some of Lelyveld's research findings, others would say that this "failure" was not surprising to anyone, least of all to Gandhi. Indeed, given Indian and South African realities and the coloniser's ability to divide-and-rule, it was inevitable.

What was not inevitable, and what was surprising, was what did happen. Gandhi and the numberless Indians who marched at his side to prison did win freedom. And, no matter how imperfectly, they accepted as partners people they had not wanted next to them, or joined hands with groups they had thought of as enemies. And they inspired the colonised world, enabling it to meet the colonisers eye to eye, in dignity.

As for Gandhi's assassination, it was – like Lincoln's assassination eight decades earlier, and unlike what Lelyveld implies – the very opposite of a failure or tragedy. It printed on millions of minds in India and elsewhere the reminder that justice and reconciliation are goals worth dying for.

But such goals are not what Gandhi should have set his mind on. He should have focused harder on cleansing India. An Asian, Arab, African or Latin American cannot – he or she should not – threaten the west's hegemony by taking on tasks like uniting Hindus and Muslims in India, or dalits and caste Hindus in India, or Shias and Sunnis in the Arab world, or blacks and Asians in South Africa (or in Europe), or other divided communities in the non-western world, even if such partnerships would help the west too.

This was/is the colonial view, and Lelyveld shares it. That V S Naipaul is the author of Indian origin most frequently quoted in the book is one of the many indications warranting the harsh assessment I offer.

Conclusions

Those troubled by the book's spirit of denigration have not always expressed themselves in frank language. For example, reviewing Lelyveld's exercise in the *New York Review of Books*, Anita Desai wrote (28 April 2011):

One might think that Gandhi's legacy on the whole has been depicted negatively and yet there is no denying Lelyveld's deep sympathy with the man.

Lelyveld has... heaped up so many defeats that his life of Gandhi could easily be read as an ultimately critical one, however judiciously and carefully constructed.

An Indian scholar who had read the book said to me, "But finally Gandhiji got to him, no?". Maybe the Mahatma did have some impact. Lelyveld concedes, for instance, that, decades after Gandhi's trek there Muslim and Hindu villagers in Noakhali continue to

remember and love Gandhi. But I am not sure the Mahatma has as yet "got" to Lelyveld. Maybe one day he will, for, whatever his motives, Lelyveld has followed Gandhi closely, examining and cross-examining him at many a turn. He has lived near Gandhi.

But the mindset I am referring to is tough. It can also be exceedingly well-mannered, as Lelyveld is. Who wants to say harsh things to a gentleman-biographer? But gentlemen are not immune from a wish to belittle. The book's style is decorous. Here and there it offers guarded praise. But as far as Gandhi's standing is concerned – a standing important for the pride and unity of once-colonised and yet-to-be-fully-decolonised peoples – this work is ill-intentioned.

To many in the east and west, Gandhi, imperfect human being, towers among most fellow humans because of what he aimed at, how he took aim, and how often his arrows hit the target. But Lelyveld cannot look up. His eyes are focused on the ground. He is looking for the dust.

However, his effort is not illegitimate, and its product should not be fettered. Those offended by it should – in the spirit of the Mahatma – reflect (a) on where Gandhi could have done better than he did, and grown even taller, and (b) also on what they can do today to improve life, and strengthen justice and reconciliation, within and beyond the once-colonised and yet-to-be-fully-decolonised world.

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NOTES

- 1 *India Today*, 8 April 2011.
- 2 "Gokhale in Lahore, 1909", quoted in Karve and Ambedkar (ed.), *Speeches & Writings of G K Gokhale* (Bombay: Asia), 1966, Vol 2, p 420.
- 3 Quoted in D G Tendulkar, *Gandhi in Champaran* (New Delhi: Publications Division), 1994, p 103.
- 4 Churchill quoted in Madhu Limaye, *Prime Movers* (New Delhi: Radian), 1985, p 34.
- 5 Linlithgow to Churchill, 31 August 1942. *Linlithgow Papers*, F 125/58, India Office Library, London.
- 6 Gandhi's letter of 15 February 1904 to Medical Officer of Health, Johannesburg, CWMG 3: 428.
- 7 *Harijan*, 14 March 1936; CWMG 68: 237-38.
- 8 Nelson Mandela, "Gandhi the Prisoner" in B R Nanda (ed.), *Mahatma Gandhi – 125 Years*, New Delhi: Indian Council for Cultural Relations, 1995, p 150.
- 9 Raojibhai Patel, *The Making of the Mahatma*, Ahmedabad, 1989, pp 216-17.
- 10 Cited in Sushila Nayyar, *Mahatma Gandhi* (Ahmedabad: Navajivan), 1989, Vol 4, p 168.