

Book-Review

Finding Gandhi

Moinak Dutta

Ballad of Bapu

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My first impression of M.K. Gandhi is a simple drawing of a drooping figure of a frail man with a stick in hand. It was drawn by one of my cousin brothers when we were studying in primary school. That drawing then appealed to me as a simple thing to do without much artistic skill. From that pictorial knowledge of Bapu, I graduated to something celluloid, when my father one beautiful spring evening brought home a videotape cassette (at that time VCP was in a rage) titled 'Gandhi' I was told that the movie was the first one to get American Motion Pictures Award for India. After watching the flick for many days I thought Ben Kingsley to be the real Gandhi. That got rectified later when I was made to read an interesting article on Gandhi (this time by my mother). On Gandhi, several research books with razor-sharp debates and deliberations can be easily found in our country. After all, Bapu had remained one of the most 'loved and hated' man all through his life. But reading 'Ballad of Bapu' is like having a dream of Bapu, colourful, smooth and enchanting, for it is not a mere research work on Gandhi's life and his doctrines. It is a Ballad, a lyrical one, sustained from

page one to the last. Divided into several short chapters and decorated with rare photographs of Bapu's life, the book is a poetic analysis of Gandhi and his works. I might have said that it is a poetic biography, but if even by mistake should I say that for once about the book, I will be committing a great blunder; I will be completely overlooking the deft touch of analysis of Gandhi's works as done with meticulous ease by the author-poet. The author is not merely writing a biography. She has mined out several incidents apparently small and insignificant, of Bapu's life, only to indicate a larger pattern. For any student of history, the book will amply provide details which are astoundingly well researched. But that is probably not the focal point of the book. The author has found how by different actions and deeds, Gandhi laid a foundation of non-violence as a principle which is undoubtedly Godly and because it is Godly, it had to face severe challenges, the final challenge being the assassination of Bapu. By sacrificing his life, Bapu had, with finality, proved the Godliness of his principle. Chapter by chapter, events by events, the author has shown how Gandhi became Mahatma. Of all the chapters, the 'Centrestage', 'Phoenix farm', 'Tolstoy and Gandhi', 'Tolstoy farm', 'Gandhi in India', 'Annie Besant and Gandhi', 'Jallianwala Bagh', 'Chauri Chaura' and 'Imprisonment' appeared to be the most engaging for in these chapters we not only find different anecdotes on Bapu's life but also the valuable authorial commentary on Bapu. For example, in 'Phoenix farm' we get to know about Gandhiji's reading habit ('At dawn Gandhi read The Gita, the Koran at noon'), in 'Tolstoy and Gandhi' we find how voraciously Bapu read Tolstoy while in jail at South Africa. ('In jail, in Tolstoy's books he found a soulmate/ Greatly inspired by this man born in 1828'). To write history is difficult, to write personal history is more difficult, but to write personal history of a man like Bapu and that too in ballad form maintaining 'a a b b a' rhyme scheme all through is simply superhuman a work and that Santosh ji has performed, as if she is a musician or a pianist who is just running her practised fingers on words to make them sing. And they sing in tune with

Gandhian philosophy, his unwavering faith on non-violence and peace. A testimony to the author's assertion on Gandhian philosophy can be found in the chapters like 'Jallianwala Bagh' where she has written: 'Towards a self disciplined Bardoli his eyes turned/ A policy of senseless gore he had always spurned' (156). The same assertion comes to the fore in the (in)famous 'Chauri Chaura' incident. Bapu with all resilience stood up for non-violence and went to prison again, blaming himself for the crime which was not his doing, truly like a father, who can go any distance, to any extreme, for his sons and daughters. 'No provocation can justify murder, he exclaimed/ For the protestors' crime, himself he blamed' (160). The unshakeable faith in non-violence, however, never posed any hindrance to Bapu to stand for what is right. While he was imprisoned, he wrote to the British Government why he felt sedition was the creed that he followed. In fact, Bapu was imprisoned more on charges of sedition than any leader of that period, yet how mistakenly oft his non-violent acts are interpreted. The author has rightly pointed out: 'Sedition was their creed, said the man with integrity/ In his first article 'Tampering with Loyalty' (page 163). In similar vein Santosh ji has carried on in the chapter 'Imprisonment' when she explained: 'On 19 September 1921 Fearlessly wrote this son The government was shocked at his sheer audacity' But Gandhiji probably had been too much for both the British and those who could not make out proper his philosophy, as the author has pointed out: 'He started Harijan, a weekly new Which, with his rapier touch he did imbue... ... But for the Sanatanists an unpalatable brew' This outer struggle led eventually to an inner struggle in Bapu. So, even after independence, he could not be happy. He had remained restless with agony, hurt by pains. '2nd October 1947 did not dawn like any day Though it was the Mahatma's 78th birthday He was restless The fury relentless Dampened his spirits he could smell decay' (259) And that decay took him to the point of being challenged which he answered by sacrificing his life. 'Was he a mad man or a coward? He whipped out a pistol, with no compunction?' (308). The author has left that

rhetorical question beautifully, almost theatrically poised towards the end of the concluding chapter. If we are to rediscover and relearn Gandhi, if we are to trace the path between Gandhi and Mahatma, we are sure to read this book. Another interesting feature of the book is the bibliography. A poem by P. B Shelley (which was once recited by Bapu at a gathering) titled 'The Mask of Anarchy', provided in the additional reading section serves as a proper embellishment to this wondrous book.

About the Reviewer

Moinak Dutta has been writing poems and stories since school days. Presently engaged as a teacher of English. Many of his poems and stories are published in national and international anthologies and magazines and also dailies including 'The Statesman', 'World Peace Poetry Anthology', 'Setu'. 'Riding and Writing,' 'The Indian Periodical,' 'Pangolin Review', 'Tuck Magazine' 'Duane's Poetree', 'Tell me your story,' 'Nature Writing magazine,' 'Oddball magazine,' 'Soft Cartel' magazine, 'Diff Truths' magazine, 'The Literary Fairy Tales' 'Defiant Dreams,' 'Dynami Zois' etc.

He has written reviews of books and fictions, among which notable ones are: on 'The Upanisads' (translated by Valerie J. Roebuck) which can be found at www.blogapenguinindiaclassic.blogspot.com and the review of 'The Ballad of Bapu' (written by Santosh Bakaya). Some of his essays and articles were published in both ebooks/e-journals (like Cafe Dissensus) and as printed books/ papers, like one on 'Amalgamation of Social Media and Literature: Pros and Cons,' published by Viswa Bharati Research Centre and Sahitya Anand), 'Erothanatos' etc.

His first full-length English fiction *Online@Offline* was published in 2014, by Lifi Publications. His second fiction titled *In Search of la Radice* was published in 2017 by Xpress Publications. He also worked as an editor of a poetry collection titled 'Whispering Poesis,' which had over one hundred poems from sixty poets from different parts of India and abroad, published in 2018 by Poesis. He may be contacted at moinakdutta@yahoo.co.in.