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Unfinished Symphony

Ananya Vajpeyi



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BOOKS

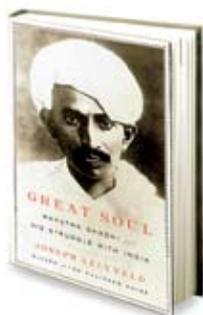
Unfinished Symphony



COURTESY DAYANITA SINGH

ANANYA VAJPEYI

A STELLAR NEW BIOGRAPHY CAPTURES THE STORM AND STRESS OF GANDHI'S OPERATIC STRUGGLES, WITH HIMSELF AND WITH INDIA



**Great Soul:
Mahatma Gandhi
and His Struggle with India**
Joseph Lelyveld

HARPERCOLLINS INDIA,
452 PAGES, ₹699

THE LIFE OF MOHANDAS KARAMCHAND GANDHI seems to have had four themes, and the Mahatma dwelt on each of these, throughout his life, for different lengths of time and with varying amounts of emphasis. The four themes were Hindu-Muslim unity, the eradication of untouchability, the ideal of social service and the cultivation of non-violence (ahimsa). Seen as a structure with these themes, the political biography of Gandhi becomes a sort of opera—integrated, majestic, complex, extended, dramatic and with an overwhelming mood of pathos, even tragedy. It is important to keep in mind the operatic nature of this life, because only then do individual episodes in it make sense, and only then can we appreciate the astonishing extent to which its protagonist (Gandhi, the political actor), who was also its author (Gandhi, the tireless teller of his own story), had a composite vision of how he was to live and how his goals were to be realised.

In his new biography, Joseph Lelyveld reads the political career of Gandhi as though it were a piece of music. Gandhi's life-history became, through his own unique genius—at once historical and artistic—a historic life and a work of art. Lelyveld sets himself the task, not of mere narration, not even of reconstruction, but of composition, in the musical sense: creating the complete notation of the opera that was the life of Mahatma Gandhi. Not everyone can read music, and not everyone can hear the music as it would sound if all the notes on the page were played aloud. *Great Soul: Mahatma Gandhi and His Struggle with India* demands as much effort from the reader as it has clearly taken from its writer. By the time we put down this deeply resonant, even sonorous book, we can only begin to appreciate how difficult it must have been for Gandhi to live out his character, his persona and his destiny.

Ramachandra Guha, who is currently working on his own two-part biography of Gandhi, some years ago wrote

FACING PAGE: 'Untitled' / 'Being of Darkness', from *House of Love* by Dayanita Singh.

an essay titled, 'Why South Asians Don't Write Good Biographies, and Why They Should'. They write plenty of history, literature and hagiography, argued Guha, but somehow miss the genre that lies at the intersection of these three forms. Gandhi—like his peer Rabindranath Tagore—has been the subject of numerous biographies in the six decades since his death in 1948, by Indians, Britons and Americans. The Frenchman Romain Rolland wrote a biography as early as 1924, when Gandhi was only 55 years old. But it is Lelyveld who I think produces the most effective Gandhi biography thus far (we will have to wait another three or four years, at least, for Guha's version to appear). And the reason for this, I suspect, is not only that Lelyveld has lived and worked as a journalist in India and South Africa, the two countries where Gandhi spent most of his life; not only that Lelyveld has a personal connection with India through his brother David Lelyveld, a scholar of Urdu, and his sister-in-law Meena Alexander, a poet; not only that Lelyveld has trawled the archives, mastered the vast Gandhi literature, and travelled to every big and small place that Gandhi visited on what Lelyveld calls "both subcontinents".

A big factor in Lelyveld hitting all the right notes, in my view—to continue the musical metaphor—is the peculiarly

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American mastery of the genre of the biography of a founding father. Lelyveld brings to his study of Gandhi a long-standing scholarly tradition in his own country: the ability to grasp, as a compelling whole, the life and work of the makers of the American Revolution, the American Constitution and American democracy. Led by Guha—and his friend and fellow historian, Sunil Khilnani, who has been working for the past few years on the life of Nehru—perhaps Indians too, are beginning to examine their own founders as individuals, as a group and as the authors of the nation-state as well as the unprecedented political experiment that we call India. Lelyveld is not an Indian, and thus does not think of Gandhi as the father of his nation; he is not a Briton, and thus does not see Gandhi as the one who vanquished the British Empire. He is American, coming from a culture where the founders have been remembered, analysed, lauded and criticised for over two centuries. By getting behind the eyes and underneath the skin of Gandhi, but also recog-

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nising at every moment that he was a great man and seen as such even within his own lifetime, Lelyveld has set the bar for future biographers very high indeed.

GREAT SOUL DESCRIBES Gandhi's life as a musical structure composed of four themes. Another way to understand the book is as an attempt to prise open the prison-house of mahatma-hood in which Gandhi lived out most of his political career, especially its second act, in India (1915-1948). The injunction to ever keep on becoming and to always try to be a 'great soul' was partially of Gandhi's own making, partially foisted upon him by the expectations of others, and partially the verdict of history that any account of Gandhi's life must retrospectively justify. This injunction itself—over and above the contingent dictates and terrible demands of historical circumstances as they unfolded—drove Gandhi's decisions and shaped Gandhi's personality to a degree not commonly seen even in the lives of other famous men and women who might have loomed large in the histories of their nations.

The elusive formula of 'how to be a mahatma' provides much of the script, the template, and the peculiarly intense conflict that characterised Gandhi's trajectory. It is the title of "Mahatma"—or its curse—that lifts Gandhi's life far beyond that of your run-of-the-mill politician, mass leader, sovereign ruler or social reformer, and takes it to the level of a saint—an Augustine or a Francis of Assisi, perhaps. Indians sensed this saintly quality from the very get-go, and never stopped turning up in their millions just to see Gandhi, to touch the dust of his feet, to be in his presence as they would want to be near a person with religious charisma, a spiritual aura. Gandhi himself, as we gather through Lelyveld's relentless probing, experienced his mahatma-hood as both a burden and an aspiration. We may read his life between his arrival in South Africa in 1893 and his bloody end from the bullets of an assassin in New Delhi 45 years later, as an unremitting striving to achieve this self-dictated, or externally imposed, steady state of greatness, nobility, purity, responsibility and ultimately, immortality.

The four themes that Gandhi kept dwelling on and returning to encompassed such disparate compulsions as communal harmony, public sanitation, spinning the *charkha* and non-violent *satyagraha*. Uniting them, in my view, is "the self", the central pillar of the entire Gandhian edifice. The "self" appears in both "mahatma" (as *-atma*, which is "soul" or "self") and "swaraj" (as *swa-*, which is

again, "self"). The categories "mahatma" and "swaraj" are the warp and the weft of Gandhi's life: in the fabric of that life are woven both a personal striving—to be, in himself, a great soul (mahatma)—and a political quest—for India to achieve self-rule (swaraj).

Gandhi's was the quintessential search for the self in modern India: he saw clearly, I believe, that neither individual greatness (*mahanata*), nor political sovereignty (*raj*) could be coherently defined without a strong, stable and unitary self at the centre. Both Gandhi the man and India the nation had to discover the selfhood that would unify, stabilise, rationalise and drive the historic transformation that we now recognize as the Indian "independence movement" or "freedom struggle". Lelyveld does not discuss Gandhi's 1909 tract *Hind Swaraj* in any detail, but it was in this small, epiphanic work that Gandhi's theory about the all-important relationship between self (*swa*) and sovereignty (*raj*) was most precisely—and prophetically—spelled out. Gandhi states there, in no uncertain terms, that political sovereignty and the mastery of the self are for him not just mutually enabling but indeed mutually constitutive ends, and can only ever be achieved in concert with one another. The hyphenation of elements in "self-rule" does not do justice to the compounding of them in *swaraj*—in the Gandhian metaphysics, the connection between "self" and "sovereignty" is not a mere ligature, but an alchemy.

The conflicts between different aspects of the Indian self—between Hindus and Muslims, say, or caste Hindus and untouchables, or rural and urban populations, or traditional knowledge and modern science—were often so shearing and so prolonged as to rent the nation asunder, even before it came into existence. These conflicts, in fact, continue to pull India apart in painful ways even today, long after independence. Gandhi's entire struggle, with India and not for India or on behalf of India (as Lelyveld's subtitle spells out), was to find and articulate its unbroken, whole, complete self—a self at peace with itself. With Partition, military-industrial modernity, Western economic models and the bio-political state that emerged upon India's decolonisation in 1947, Gandhi, in Lelyveld's telling, failed to realise the integral and reconciled Indian selfhood that he had continuously sought.

NOR WAS GANDHI'S STRUGGLE with himself any less monumental, though it might arguably be evaluated, in hindsight, as having been somewhat more successful than his struggle with India. Lelyveld returns to several junctures in Gandhi's life, starting with the early years in South Africa, continuing on through his period of active leadership at the helm of the national movement in India (1920s); his years spent either in jail or in retreat from politics (1930s); and ending in his final years during and immediately after Partition (1946-48), when Gandhi made what appear to be counterintuitive, even mysterious connections between the state of his own sexual life, on the one hand, and on the other, non-violent resistance, communal peace, caste egalitarianism or whatever political goal he was trying to achieve.



HULTON-DEUTSCH COLLECTION / CORBIS

Gandhi and his wife, Kasturba, in 1922.

Why did Gandhi repeatedly react to the extreme violence in the outside world with renewed vows of personal celibacy? Whether in 1906, in the aftermath of a massacre of Zulus by whites in the Natal region of South Africa, or in 1947, in Muslim-dominated Noakhali district in eastern Bengal where Hindus became the victims of sectarian violence, Gandhi's response to the horrors of racial or communal hatred was to try to master his own sexual urges with increased vigilance and sternness. He also made a habit of confessing these reactions—at once singularly idiosyncratic and intensely private—to his admirers and critics alike through his writings and speeches. Why?

Lelyveld reiterates his puzzlement at Gandhi's repeated merger of the personal and the political, and more specifically, the Mahtama's seemingly Freudian linkage of violence (out there in the world) with sex (in his own mind and body). Back in the 1960s, in their groundbreaking study of Gandhi, the American scholars Lloyd and Susanne Rudolph, contemporaries of Lelyveld's, wrote an important essay titled, 'Self Control and Political Potency', to try and understand why Gandhi insisted on placing sexual absti-

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nence at the heart of his political creed.

The Rudolphs explained this by looking at what they called "the traditional roots of charisma", interpreting Gandhi as a Hindu *sannyasi* (renunciant), for whom *satyagraha* (steadfastness in what is true), *sannyas* (renunciation), *abhaya* (fearlessness) and *ahimsa* (non-violence) merged into a single and coherent type of political action. Truth, asceticism, courage and non-violence, for Gandhi, were all in equal measure the ingredients of the type of power that he aspired to possess, and to inculcate in those who volunteered to do political work as his followers. Sexual self-discipline, tending to absolute desirelessness—a state of mind taught in the Bhagavad Gita, Gandhi's preferred text of religious instruction—was necessary to combat the material power of the British Raj with the moral power of *swaraj*.

Gandhi firmly believed that not only sexual activity, but even sexual desire, had to be weeded out of consciousness for him—or anyone, really (for he considered himself but a token of a type)—to be a true *sannyasi* and a true *satyagrahi*. In reality, this presented several types of difficulty for Gandhi—in his relationship with his own conscience, his relationships with men and his relationships with women. Lelyveld expends considerable attention not only on Gandhi's various personal crises born of sexual causes, which amount to almost superhuman confrontations with the devil of desire, but also on a few of the particularly challenging intimate (though not sexual) relationships in his personal life, for example with his male friend Hermann Kallenbach in South Africa, and his grand-niece Manu Gandhi many years later in India.

He was betrothed at six, married at the age of 13 and had fathered four sons by the time he was 31; his wife Kasturba died in 1944, after 61 years of marriage to him. They did not sleep together after 1906. Gandhi had close ties not only with Kallenbach, a German Jewish architect who later became a Zionist, but also CF Andrews, an Anglican priest who worked with Gandhi and Tagore in India for several years. A number of women—young and old, married and single, Indian and Western, relatives and unrelated—formed part of his entourage in India throughout the 1920s, 1930s and 1940s, ministering to all his physical needs, including his diet, bath, massages, enemas, spinning and sleeping arrangements—but never having sex with him. Rather, he not only remained celibate himself, he also insisted that everyone in close proximity to him practice celibacy, disapproving even of his sons and their wives when they had marital intercourse or produced children.

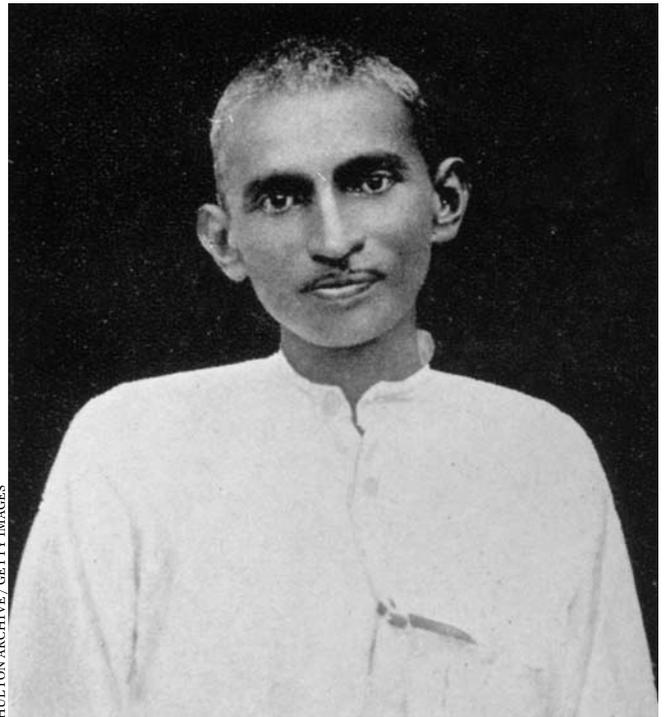
Gandhi's issues with physical desire and human intimacy made for recurrent stormy passages in his life, often with political and sexual crises overlapping and feeding one another, resulting in episodes that can only be described as

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Gandhi's dark nights of the soul. Fires raged outside and fires burned within, almost as though the body of Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi were the moral touchstone of the universe. (Isn't that what we mean by a saint? Humanity's moral touchstone?) The pressure of trying to live up to mahatma-hood, combined with the turbulence of an unruly self, meant that Gandhi, even though he stopped living like a family man early on, and spent the better part of his political career in celibacy, had to struggle continuously and painfully with himself.

Gandhi knew, with a kind of visceral immediacy, that sexual mastery over the self (sannyas) was harder to achieve than the political sovereignty of the self (swaraj). His sexual (mis)adventures, which he obsessively chronicled and confessed, not to entertain but to edify the public—he acted as his own therapist, so to speak, and also as society's shrink—were cause for gossip during his lifetime, and scandal ever after. But Lelyveld narrates them in such a way that we can only feel sympathy for this tortured, lonely and, in some ways, almost misguided man, who did enough good through his political and social work that had he consulted anyone other than his own exacting conscience about his sexual conduct, friend and foe alike might have told him to give himself a break. By the last months of his life, his political isolation from the Congress party and the new Indian ruling classes, his growing conviction that he would be killed by religious fanatics, and his desperate attempts to deal with the still formidable force of his insurgent desires converged into a monumental wave that almost drowned the tenacious old man. We cannot help feeling that Nathuram Godse with his Beretta pistol did the Mahatma a favour by putting him out of his nearly unmanageable misery.

GANDHI WAGED A WAR, personal as well as national, against sexual desire because of the danger he thought such desire posed to the moral power and physical strength of Indians, including himself, who were engaged in the fight against colonialism. If we think of this as his position against any kind of sexually charged contact between human beings, then at the opposite end of the same spectrum was his equally long and arduous struggle against untouchability. As Lelyveld shows, it took Gandhi many years of political trial and error in South Africa before he was able to overcome his instinctive prejudices—as an educated and Anglophone British subject against illiterate and indentured Indian labourers; as an upper-caste and wealthy Bania against poor untouchables; as an Indian against Africans; as a brown man against black people. Each



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Gandhi as a young man in South Africa around 1900.

aspect of his original, unreflexive elitism, of class, caste or colour, had to be faced and conquered, and this process of the self-fashioning and self-purification of Gandhi took several years, several campaigns, and arguably, several lives.

If we put it starkly, sexual desire and the prejudice that leads to untouchability—in other words, wanting to touch another person, and refusing to touch another person—are related and opposed aspects of the problem of selfhood, and Gandhi understood them as such. That was why he created a sort of chiasmus between celibacy and non-violence on one axis, and the eradication of untouchability and equality on the other, intersecting axis. Again Lelyveld finds that some of the key encounters in Gandhi's life, for example with the Reverend John Dube in South Africa and Dr BR Ambedkar in India, were all about coming to grips with the fact that colonialism, racism, untouchability and violence were of a piece; that freedom or self-mastery or political sovereignty could only be said to have been achieved if Indian society (for Gandhi left South Africa after 1914, never to return) dealt with its fiercest demon, its most endemic and pervasive form of inequality, that based on caste. With as much effort as Gandhi lavished on rooting out his own sexual urges, he went about emptying latrines and cleaning human faeces, doing the work of untouchables, insisting that untouchables be invited into caste Hindu homes, that caste Hindus eat with them and drink water touched by them, and in all other ways remove from their bodies as from their souls every last trace of caste discrimination. Gandhi's early hesitations were far outstripped by his later zeal.

There are few difficult relationships in Gandhi's life that Lelyveld does not delve into—or perhaps every one of Gandhi's relationships with religious or caste “others”

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was difficult, which is why we watch with a kind of fascination the contortions that Gandhi has to go through with Mohammad Ali and Shaukat Ali, the Muslim brothers who led the Khilafat Movement in India; with BR Ambedkar, his unacknowledged soulmate and intimate enemy, leader of the Indian untouchables; with Mohammad Ali Jinnah, Congress member turned leader of the Muslim League, and the founder of the thing Gandhi dreaded most—a separate Muslim homeland called Pakistan; and with Shaheed Suhrawardy, a leader of Muslims in eastern India whom Gandhi had to deal with in his final stand against communal carnage in Noakhali, Bihar and Calcutta.

It has to be said though, especially after reading Lelyveld's biography, that these "others"—men whom Gandhi experienced as both distinct from and unassimilable into the capacious folds of his own self—brought out the best in the Mahatma. Faced with their implacable otherness, Gandhi went as far as it might be possible for a self to go, to try and arrive at a common ground, a place of understanding and acceptance, a true non-violence. After all, ahimsa, etymologically understood, is the reorientation of the self so as to remove from it every last vestige of the desire to harm the other. With the greatest of his Muslim and Dalit interlocutors, Gandhi can be said to have reached that place. Inevitably, and thus tragically, the rest of the subcontinent was unable to follow its leader to that farthest horizon—that "other" country.

IT'S POSSIBLE TO CONCLUDE that Gandhi failed on every front. After independence, Hindus and Muslims, India and Pakistan, have continued to be at loggerheads. Obvious forms of untouchability may have disappeared, but caste is more entrenched than ever in Indian society. Ever since the Nehru years, but most definitely since the early 1990s, India has embraced industrial and technological modernity, global capitalism and the many forms of social, physical and psychic violence that go with this idea of civilisation that Gandhi called, in his native Gujarati, *kudharo*, literally "the unethical stream". His ideal of social service has been replaced by its very opposite, consumer culture. Both self and sovereignty are in such deep crisis that it's as if swaraj had never been achieved. Another way to think about it, however, is to remember that even the greatest symphony must be followed by silence. It is in that silence that it becomes possible to recall the structure of the music, its sound, its mood, its meaning. What we might justifiably regard as Gandhi's failure does not negate his significance—quite the contrary.

Over a century after *Hind Swaraj*, our best handle on the



JAMES KEYSER / TIME LIFE PICTURES / GETTY IMAGES

Joseph Lelyveld's biography of Gandhi reads his political career as though it were a piece of music.

import of Mahatma Gandhi's life and work is not, paradoxically, a more and more historically detailed and archivally accurate knowledge of his actions and words, but rather, our own unflinching curiosity about and attachment to this quirky and remote figure. Each generation writes Gandhi off, but the next generation comes back for more. Lelyveld's book is an excellent allegory for the peculiar dynamic of hostility, scepticism, compassion and finally, a kind of love that every contemporary reader of Gandhi must experience. *Great Soul*, like an ice cube, begins cold and hard, and ends almost in tears. It becomes difficult to say whether the transformation underway is in Gandhi, or in his biographer, or in us, or indeed in all three—a melting down of prejudice that mirrors quite closely what Gandhi himself intended, perhaps, with his elusive injunction to non-violence.

Lelyveld is a superb writer, gifted especially with the revealing understatement. He is also a seasoned journalist, able to bring a scene alive with a telling touch of reality—so we visit, in a few chapters overloaded with some of the most significant history of the 20th century, small stops in the Mahatma's pilgrimage that we will never again forget: Tolstoy Farm, Sabarmati, Wardha, Srirampur, Birla House... past, present and future blur into a time outside time, in which the only thing that matters is that Gandhi was there. But what really makes *Great Soul* the great book that it is its author's fearless curiosity, his moral audaciousness, his willingness to look Gandhi in the eye and part that singular curtain, to see behind it the raging chaos of intelligence and emotions, a relentless quest for the anchor of truth in the turbulent waves of history, and a soul mid-flight, soaring towards its final freedom. ■