

Spring 1997

Gandhi: The Spirituality and Politics of Suffering

Charles R. DiSalvo

West Virginia University College of Law, charles.disalvo@mail.wvu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://researchrepository.wvu.edu/law_faculty



Part of the [Film and Media Studies Commons](#), and the [Legal Biography Commons](#)

Digital Commons Citation

DiSalvo, Charles R., "Gandhi: The Spirituality and Politics of Suffering" (1997). *Law Faculty Scholarship*. 10.

https://researchrepository.wvu.edu/law_faculty/10

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the WVU College of Law at The Research Repository @ WVU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Law Faculty Scholarship by an authorized administrator of The Research Repository @ WVU. For more information, please contact researchrepository@mail.wvu.edu.

GANDHI: THE SPIRITUALITY AND POLITICS OF SUFFERING

CHARLES R. DISALVO*

This Article examines the 1982 film Gandhi. Although it took factual liberties with Gandhi's life, Professor DiSalvo concludes that it accurately conveyed Gandhi's dedication to self-suffering and philosophy of non-violence. The Article analyzes excerpts from the film which illustrate Gandhi's five fundamental beliefs on the spirituality and politics of suffering. Those beliefs are in suffering as a weapon, as empowerment, as self-interest, as propaganda, and as reconciliation. The film Gandhi also masterfully introduced millions to Gandhi's life, message, and legacy.

INTRODUCTION

Let there be no mistake about this biography of Mohandas K. Gandhi.¹ It is cinematic hagiography at its utmost. The film's first large scene, Gandhi's public funeral, is adulation in excess. Director Richard Attenborough uses 300,000 extras—a record at the time, and probably more than showed for the actual procession in 1948. He introduces a somber-toned radio reporter who voices over the procession with these elegant words from Albert Einstein: "Generations to come will scarce believe that such a one as this ever in flesh and blood walked upon this earth."

In addition to being almost entirely uncritical of Gandhi's life, the film distorts and twists historical fact. Recall, for example, Attenborough's treatment of a famous piece of South African history, the burning of identity passes by South African

* Woodrow A. Potesta Professor of Law, West Virginia University.

1. GANDHI (Columbia Pictures 1982).

Indians. Gandhi (Ben Kingsley) is mercilessly clubbed about the arms and face by a baton-wielding constable when he defies an order to stop. The scene ends with a bloody but victorious Gandhi, collapsing in the dust, one hand dropping the last pass into the fire.

This is a moving scene. There is but one objection to it: it never happened. Gandhi was never beaten for burning passes.

Attenborough takes many such liberties with his subject, for he is not interested in conducting a class in South African history, but in making a point about Gandhi's life.² Moreover, it would not be easy under any circumstances to take Gandhi, a complicated man who lived on three continents, in two centuries, a person with deep and always-evolving ideas, a man whose own known writings stretch out over 100 volumes, a man who was a lawyer, an organizer, an experimenter in diet, a nature healer, a father of four, a husband, an agronomist, a book-seller, a philosopher, a theologian, a sociologist, a teacher, a publisher, an ecumenist, a Hindu, an advocate for the rights of women and the untouchables, a weaver, a pacifist, a celibate, a boycotter, a civil disobedient, a politician, and, say some like Attenborough, a saint,—it would not be easy to take such a man and reduce him to 188 minutes of film.³

Does *Gandhi* accurately convey Gandhi's message? The answer is yes. The film is a powerful defense of Gandhi's dedication to self-suffering, a key underpinning of Gandhi's philosophy of nonviolence that even today, almost 50 years after Gandhi's death, affects the life of every American.

2. Attenborough relies heavily on Louis Fischer, *The Life of Mahatma Gandhi* (1950). Fischer's work is a solid piece as far as it goes—but it does not go very far. Too often it substitutes sentiment for analysis.

3. When the director of the film *Geronimo* (Columbia Pictures 1993) was interviewed by the *New York Times* about his film, Walter Hill said: "History is fascinating but history isn't a good dramatist." Later in the interview he says: "The audience doesn't go to a movie for a history lesson; it wants entertainment. At the same time, they don't want something that trashes history; so it's a delicate line." Erik Eckholm, *Geronimo, Still With a Few Rough Edges*, N.Y. TIMES, Dec. 5, 1993, at H19.

I. THE EXPERIENCE OF SUFFERING

The law is not about statutes and regulations so much as it is, as Oliver Wendell Holmes said, about experience: the experience of mercy, the experience of love, the experience of justice.⁴

It is also about the experience of suffering. And it is to Gandhi's experience and understanding of suffering, and its relationship to the law, the legal process, politics, and saintliness that Attenborough is exquisitely faithful.

A scene from 1906 in South Africa makes the point. In an effort to suppress the growing power of the Indian community, the South African government has just proposed legislation requiring all Indians to register, be finger-printed and carry identification cards. This scene takes place at the Imperial Theater in Johannesburg. Gandhi rises to speak to an audience of angry Indians, all of whom appear skeptical about non-violence:

I am asking you to fight—to fight against their anger, not to provoke it. We will not strike a blow, but we will receive them. And through our pain we will make them see their injustice, and it will hurt as all fighting hurts. But we cannot lose. We cannot. They may torture my body, break my bones, even kill me. Then, they will have my dead body—not my obedience!

When the audience responds with approving applause, Gandhi capitalizes on the support: "We are Hindu and Muslim, children of God, each one of us. Let us take a solemn oath in His name that, come what may, we will not submit to this law." The audience, first cautiously and slowly, then in a rush of enthusiasm, rises in agreement. The scene ends with Gandhi, triumphant, leading the audience in a rendition of "God Save the Queen."

This scene distorts history. Yes, there was a meeting, a rather famous one, to protest the proposed legislation. Yes, thousands pledged to oppose it, even with their lives. But Gandhi did not give the speech which rallied the troops. Rather it

4. "The life of the law has not been logic: it has been experience," OLIVER WENDELL HOLMES, *THE COMMON LAW* 1 (1881).

was Haji Habib, a member of the merchant elite, and a long-time activist in his own right, who gave the fiery speech in response to which 3000 men pledged to resist registration by the South African government. While Gandhi organized the meeting, got shopkeepers to close up for it, and spoke at the meeting, Gandhi was simply not the focal point Attenborough would have us think he was.

Nonetheless, the words Attenborough puts in Gandhi's mouth accurately, if only partially, express the Gandhian philosophy of non-violence. It is a philosophy that places great emphasis on the self-discipline and self-control needed to control oneself in the face of suffering. Gandhi once wrote, "In the composition of the truly brave, there should be no malice, no anger, no distrust, no fear of death or physical hurt. Non-violence is certainly not for those who lack these essential qualities."⁵ Later he wrote: "One must always be ready to die with a smile on his face. . . ."⁶

So there is something in suffering for the one who suffers. It is this: it purifies the sufferer.⁷ Gandhi's understanding of the meaning of suffering for the individual is in keeping with much of Eastern religion and philosophy on this subject. Goodness and pure "beingness" are equated. The acquisition of things blocks the road to pure being and, hence, to goodness. Things distract and drag one down. What is sought instead is freedom from things. In Zen terms that Gandhi would embrace, we search for "the face we had before we were born." Thus, according to Gandhi scholar Joan Bondurant, the historical Gandhi believed that "suffering is not valued for its own sake, but is held to promote non-attachment from the insistent claims of the body, to emphasize the spirit as superior to the material and physical."⁸

5. Mohandas K. Gandhi, *quoted in* GANDHI ON NON-VIOLENCE 45 (T. Merton, ed. 1965).

6. *Id.* at 49.

7. See FISCHER, *supra* note 2, at 114.

8. JOAN BONDURANT, *THE CONQUEST OF VIOLENCE* 228 (Rev. ed. 1965). At the same time Gandhi was articulating these views paleontologist and Jesuit priest Pierre Teilhard de Chardin was writing similar thoughts that echoed Gandhi's understanding: "There is a wonderful compensation by which physical evil, if humbly accepted, conquers moral evil. In accordance with definable psychological laws, it purifies the soul, spurs it on and detaches it." PIERRE TEILHARD DE CHARDIN, *WRI-*

Ultimately, self-suffering is an aid in one's search to see truth, or as Gandhi also put it, "to see the face of God."⁹

II. THE SPIRITUAL ASPECT OF SUFFERING

Now if Gandhi's thinking ended simply there, he would be just another Eastern mystic, and quite a minor one at that. Gandhi, however, took his understanding of suffering and applied it to his political work on behalf of Indian rights in South Africa and freedom from British rule in India.

This is not to say that Gandhi's allegiance to the notion of suffering stemmed solely from its practical use to him. On the contrary, he held it close to his heart primarily as a matter of religious belief. But he also exploited suffering for its full political benefit. This is but one reason why many people are confused by the question, "Was Gandhi a saint or a politician?" For Gandhi there was no difference between spirituality and politics. In Gandhi's view it was quite reasonable to practice suffering not just as a means of spiritual upliftment but as a legal and political technique as well.

Gandhi's spirituality and politics of suffering rose from five fundamental beliefs Gandhi held. I will illustrate these points with excerpts from the film, but let me first warn the reader that these excerpts are imperfect illustrations of the beliefs. Just as Attenborough could not condense Gandhi's life to 188 minutes, neither could he perfectly condense his theories to these illustrative scenes.

A. *Suffering as a weapon*

Gandhi believed that noncooperation with the oppressor was a weapon that could be used by people who were otherwise unarmed—South African Indians against a repressive white regime; Indians against the British. In a meeting with the viceroy and other high-ranking British officials in India, Gandhi

INGS IN A TIME OF WAR 67-68 (1968).

9. What I want to achieve, what I have been striving and pining to achieve these 30 years, is self-realization, to see God face to face. I live and move and have my being in pursuit of this goal. All that I do by way of speaking and writing, and all my ventures in the political field, are directed to this same end.

M.K. GANDHI, ALL MEN ARE BROTHERS 3-4 (Greenleaf Books 1982).

states that "100,000 Englishmen simply cannot control 350 million Indians if those Indians refuse to cooperate."¹⁰ A prerequisite for the use of non-cooperation, however, was the willingness to suffer. Using violence against an oppressor with superior arms was a prescription for defeat. If one were going to refuse to cooperate, one had to be willing to suffer in the streets and in jail.

B. Suffering as empowerment

This second belief is related to the first: Gandhi believed that willingly accepted suffering empowered the otherwise weak. "So long as one wants to retain one's sword, one has not achieved complete fearlessness."¹¹ This belief emerges in some degree in the Imperial Theater speech: "They cannot take away our self-respect if we do not give it to them."

C. Suffering as self-interest

Gandhi believed that the ends pre-exist in the means. If the freedom fighters in India were to use violence to establish their freedom, they would endorse violence as a legitimate political means, thus planting the seeds for future violence against their own new regime. This belief emerges clearly in an argument Gandhi and his associates have shortly after a campaign that was intended to be non-violent ends in a riot in which Indians murder a number of policemen. Gandhi advocates ending the campaign. Jinnah, the Muslim leader, argues that a little violence against the British is understandable in light of the earlier massacre of Indians by the British in the city of Amritsar. Gandhi responds, "An eye for an eye only ends up making the whole world blind If we obtain our freedom by murder and bloodshed I want no part of it."

10. Professor Gene Sharp has taken Gandhi's idea of non-cooperation and developed it into an elaborate theory for non-violent resistance to oppression. GENE SHARP, *THE POLITICS OF NONVIOLENT ACTION* (1973).

11. Gandhi, *supra* note 5, at 40.

D. Suffering as propaganda

Gandhi realized that unresisted suffering made a good argument in the court of international opinion. Those who have seen the film cannot forget the dramatic scene depicting the raid on the Dharasana Salt Works. To protest the British monopoly on salt, wave after wave of Indians openly but non-violently attempt to seize a government-owned salt processing plant. Each wave is severely beaten by the British guards, only to be followed by another wave, 320 Indians are injured; 2 die.

Gandhi understood that unresisted suffering of this sort could embarrass the oppressor, causing the oppressor to both rethink its position on the merits and on pragmatic grounds as well. The point is illustrated by the accounting of British brutality reported to the world by the renowned UPI reporter, Webb Miller ("Walker" in the film). The film captures the effect of his reporting when it depicts Webb calling in his story with these words: "Whatever moral ascendancy the West once held was lost here today. India is free, for she has taken all that steel and cruelty can give and she has neither cringed nor retreated."

E. Suffering as reconciliation

Finally, in a belief that shares some roots with the belief in suffering as propaganda, Gandhi held that suffering affects not just the one who suffers but the one who inflicts the suffering as well. Over and over, Gandhi made the point that his goal was not to kill the oppressor, but to convert the oppressor by appealing to the oppressor's mind and heart. At one point in the film screenwriter John Briley captures this sentiment perfectly when he has Gandhi say, "I want to change their minds, not kill them for weaknesses we all possess." The same point is made earlier in a scene involving Gandhi and his collaborator, the Reverend Charles Andrews. The two are walking on a South African sidewalk—the law forbade Indians from using the sidewalks—when they are confronted by some white hooligans. Andrews counsels retreat when the toughs challenge Andrews and Gandhi's use of the sidewalk. Gandhi insists on holding their ground and responds to Andrews by making refer-

ence to Christ's admonition to "turn the other cheek." Gandhi says that what Christ meant was that

[Y]ou must show courage, be willing to take a blow, several blows, to show that you'll not strike back, nor will you be turned aside. And when you do that it calls on something in human nature, something that makes his hatred for you decrease and his respect increase. I think Christ grasped that and I have seen it work.

At this point, the mother of one of the toughs fortuitously interrupts, ordering her son to work. Chastised, he and his colleagues back off, the confrontation is over. In the kindest of voices Gandhi whispers to him, "You'll find there's room for us all."

The historical Gandhi explains this belief in the power of suffering to reconcile:

It is better to endure thieves than to punish them By enduring them we realize that thieves are not different from ourselves, they are our brethren, our friends, and may not be punished. But whilst we may bear with the thieves, we may not endure the infliction. That would only induce cowardice. So we realize a further duty. Since we regard thieves as our kith and kin, they must be made to realize the kinship. And so we must make pains to devise ways and means for winning them over. This is the path of ahimsa [nonviolence]. *It may entail continuous suffering and the cultivating of endless patience.* Given these two conditions, the thief is bound in the end to turn away from his evil ways.¹²

III. THE POLITICAL IMPACT OF SUFFERING

What difference does Gandhi's contribution to the understanding of suffering make in our lives, in the law, in society?

The difference is enormous. Relations between blacks and whites in the United States would be radically different today had Gandhi not proved the power of suffering. While racial

12. M.K. GANDHI, NON-VIOLENT RESISTANCE 41 (1951) (emphasis added).

relations in the United States are not a model for the world, they would be far worse had Gandhi never lived. They would be more bitter, hostile, and violent had Gandhi not influenced racial relations here.

How did he do it?

The historical record shows a straight line between Gandhi's understanding of suffering and the vast changes in civil rights law achieved by Martin Luther King and the non-violent civil rights movement. Indeed, King is explicit on the point that he is a direct heir of Gandhi's intellectual and spiritual legacy. Here is what he said in *Stride Toward Freedom* in 1958:

As I delved deeper into the philosophy of Gandhi . . . I came to see for the first time its potency in the area of social reform. Prior to reading Gandhi, I had about concluded that the ethics of Jesus were only effective in individual relationships. The "turn the other cheek philosophy" and the "love your enemy philosophy" were only valid, I felt, when individuals were in conflict with other individuals; when racial groups and nations were in conflict a more realistic approach seemed necessary. But after reading Gandhi, I saw how utterly mistaken I was. Gandhi was probably the first person in history to lift the love ethic of Jesus above mere interaction between individuals to a powerful and effective social force on a large scale.

King wrote this merely 10 years after Gandhi's death and before the difficult movement successes in Birmingham and elsewhere that turned on the ability of blacks to endure violence without reprisal. Later King says: "We have a power. Power that cannot be found in bullets and guns, but we have a power. It is a power as old as the insights of Jesus of Nazareth and as modern as the techniques of Mahatma Gandhi."¹³

In a 1961 speech to the Fellowship of the Concerned, King says this about suffering:

Suffering has certain moral attributes involved, but it can be a powerful and creative social force. Now, . . .

13. MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR., THE WORDS OF MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR., 71 (1987).

both violence and non-violence agree that suffering can be a very powerful social force. But there is this difference: violence says that suffering can be a powerful social force by inflicting the suffering on somebody else; so this is what we do in war, this is what we do in the whole violent thrust of the violent movement. It believes that you achieve some end by inflicting suffering upon another. The nonviolent say that suffering becomes a powerful social force when you willingly accept the violence on yourself, so that self-suffering stands at the center of the nonviolent movement and the individuals involved are able to suffer in a creative manner, feeling that unearned suffering is redemptive, and that suffering may serve to transform the social situation.¹⁴

This is essential Gandhian belief, refined and applied by King.

What King does not say is that he took Gandhi's notion of suffering and used it as a constitutive element of his civil disobedience strategy. King knew that disobedience to the law would require redemptive, undeserved suffering and that such suffering would lead to public sympathy which would in turn lead to curative institutional reaction. It was a formula that worked for King and the civil rights movement repeatedly. Hence, it is not just King, but Gandhi, too, we have to thank for the civil rights advances of the sixties.

But we are indebted to King and Gandhi for what is absent as well as for what is present. Understanding Gandhi's notion that suffering was in the interest of not only the community engaging in it, but in the interests of the larger society as well, King refused to plant the seeds of future violence between the races: "I am convinced that if we succumb to the temptation to use violence in our struggle for freedom, unborn generations will be the recipient of a long and desolate night of bitterness . . . [O]ur chief legacy to them will be a never-ending reign of chaos."¹⁵

14. JAMES M. WASHINGTON, *A TESTAMENT OF HOPE* 47 (1986).

15. KING, *supra* note 13, at 71.

King found a better way, Gandhi's way, and we are the better for it.

Gandhi's way was masterfully illustrated in *Gandhi*. It was seen by millions in this country, in India, and around the world, and was nothing short of inspirational. The film prompted a fresh round of discussion of non-violence in social, theological, and political circles, the likes of which had not been seen since the sixties. For spurring such discussion alone, Attenborough's film richly deserved the acclaim it received from the critics. But an even more gratifying honor may await Attenborough. Sometime in the next century, a now unknown young moviegoer, exposed to, and inspired by, Gandhi's message in the eighties, may appear front and center on the world's stage to suffer, to liberate, and to claim Gandhi's legacy.

