

## **Prison Writing in India: Suppressing Dissent & Generating Consent:**

### **NATIONALIST AUTOBIOGRAPHIES AND PRISON**

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#### **ABSTRACT**

Literature is an imaginative recreation, representation and an expression different from reportage. In prison writings it is an expression of birth of suppressed feelings it is the exact mirror of life we lead. The prison in colonial India housed inmates of various kinds from common criminals to political prisoners. Notwithstanding the oppression, the prison also became the site of conception of some of the known accounts of the inmate's lives and times. Eminent national leaders like Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru, Lala Lajpathi Roy, Subash Chandra Bose, Bala Gangadhar Tilak, the communist M.N.Roy, the Hindu Nationalist V.D.Savarkar and others, vividly they documented their life in the form of autobiography. They described their days in jail which written in English or other varnakulars. In their autobiographies they gave prominence to prison experience.

The prison was birthplace of some famous autobiographies. Specially some nationalists explain the personal forces behind some well known events and bring to light many unknown facts of the freedom movement. Nationalists created a consciousness of India's destiny and helped to generate a spirit of sacrifice which, in Gandhi's hands, became the instruments of a vast political cum moral upheaval. In 1919 to 1948 he occupied the centre of the Indian stage and hero of the Indian independence. My paper is going to discuss about Gandhiji's autobiography *The Story of My Experiments with Truth*.

In this autobiography Gandhi narrates in his own words from his childhood onwards, Gandhiji has always strived to attain the absolute truth. For him, God was truth. From his schooldays to his marriage, his failing to his atonements, his journeys abroad, experiences in Africa to his participation in the independence movement in India. Gandhi records all these events, and reflects on how they created an impact on his life. He also deals with celibacy, fasting, vegetarianism and other personal aspects of his life, apart from his struggle against colonialism and racism. An extremely personal and riveting autobiography, this book reveals the man who went on to become the Mahatma.

## INTRODUCTION

In pre-independence India, prison played a significant role in shaping the personalities of nationalists involved in the fight against the British colonial rule. Going to prison was a matter of honor then—a sacrifice in the service of the nation.

The prison writings are in all respects since they appeal to reader's heart and soul. Prisoners had the opportunity to write about the time of their incarceration, and through process they not only shed a light on political life of contemporary India. But they transport the reader to the pre-independence period through their autobiographies. The reader feels the graphic descriptions of torture in prison for example in Andaman execution of young freedom fighters like Bhagath Singh, Raj Guru, Sukh Dev, Chandra Shekhar Azad, move the readers to tears.

Prior to the colonial era in India, the country was a highly prosperous nation, divided into several kingdoms, ruled by powerful Hindu and Islamic dynasties. India was well known across the world as a rich nation and the grandeur of Indian kings, palaces, art and architecture were unmatched in the rest of the world. Thus, India had it all to attract the colonists of Europe to try to gain control of this “land of plenty”. After Europeans, British gradually gained control over

the entire country. The British colonists emptied the Indian treasury and treated Indians with disdain. India was under the British Government rule for over 200 years. So many nationalists born and died, but no one succeeded to achieve independence. Only Gandhiji who brought a wave of unity and oneness in Indian people and under leadership of him India got freedom.

The present paper divided into two sections. The first section deals with life of Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi and his participation. The second section deals his autobiography "*The Story of My Experiments with Truth*".

Gandhiji is widely recognized as one of the twentieth century's greatest political and spiritual leaders. Honored in India as the 'Father of the Nation', he pioneered and practiced the principle of Satyagraha-resistance to tyranny through mass Non-violent Civil Disobedience. Employing non violent nationalist movements as his weapon, Mahatma Gandhi stirred Indian men and women to fight for independence without 'shedding blood'.

Gandhiji was born on October 2<sup>nd</sup> 1869, at Porbandar in Gujarat. His full name was Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi. He belongs to Bania family. His Grandfather had risen to be Dewan or Prime Minister of Porbandar and was succeeded by his son Karamchand who was the father of Mohandas. Putlibai, Mohandas's Mother, was a saintly character, gentle and devout, and left a deep impress on her son's mind.

Mohandas's went to an elementary school in Porbandar, where he found it difficult to master the multiplication tables. "My intellect must have been sluggish and my memory raw", he recalled with candor many years later. He was seven when his family moves to Rajkot, where his father became Dewan. There he attended a primary school and later joined a high school. Through conscientious he was a "mediocre student" and was excessively shy and timid.

At the age of thirteen he married Kasturbai who was also the same age. In that age marriage meant only a round of feasts, new clothes to wear and strange and docile companion to play with. He has described us in his autobiography to his personal experience of ‘the cruel custom of child marriage’.

After his early education, he went to England for higher education study of Law. There he became a barrister. He returns to India as a lawyer. As a barrister he went to South Africa to plead case. He lost the case and he is thrown out of office of a British Official. He did not become as well-known as a lawyer. He never attracted toward the legal profession. Next Gandhi accepted a post in South Africa. When travelling the Court y he is ejected form a first class train carriage because of his skin color. Appalled at the treatment of Indian immigrants, he sets up the Indian Congress in Natal to fight segregation and to expand the idea of “Self Purification” and “Satyagraha “ – Non violent civil protest.. He takes a vow of celibacy and begins wearing what he calls his ‘mourning robe’, a traditional white Indian Dhoti. In 1913 Gandhi organizes a strike against a £3 tax on people of Indian descent. For the first time he is leading working class Indians- agricultural laborers and miners. Building on his year protest, Gandhi decides to lead a march of 2,221 people from Natal into the Transvaal in his final act of public disobedience. Gandhi is arrested and sentenced to nine months imprisonment. But the strike spreads all over and the British are forced to drop the tax and release Gandhi. News of his victory is reported in England and Gandhi starts to become an International figure.

When he returned India he established Sabarmathi Ashram, he called it Satyagraha Ashram. The first of the Gandhi-led movements was the Non-Cooperation Movement lasting from September 1920 until February 1922. Gandhi during this movement, he believed that the British were only successful in maintaining control because the Indians were very co-operative. If the residents of a Country stop cooperating with the British, then the minority Britishers would

be forced to give up. He gave importance to 'Swadeshi', and he started spinning on wheel. The movement gained popularity, and soon, millions of people boycotting British-run or cooperative establishments. The name Mahatma Gandhi became popular. However, the non-Cooperation movement ended when a violent mob erupted in Chauri Chaura in Uttar Pradesh. The individuals involved burned a police station, killing 23 police officials. Gandhi stopped this movement and he started fasting for penance.

The ending of the Non-cooperation movement did not anything to stop the quest for independence. On March 12, 1930, protesters took part in the Dandi March, a campaign designed to resist taxes and protest the British monopoly on salt. Gandhi began the 24 day, 240 miles march with 79 followers and ended with thousands. When the protesters reached the Coastal town of Dandi they produced salt from salt water without paying the British tax. This act was accompanied by Civil Disobedience across the country. This movement prompted nearly a year of Civil Disobedience, illegal salt production and purchase, refusal of pay taxes, boycotts of British goods and the imprisonment of approximately 80,000 Indians. The movement earned National and International attention and increased the number of Gandhiji's followers.

During the first years of the Second World War Gandhi's mission to achieve independence from Britain reached its zenith, he saw no reason why Indians should fight for British rule, in other parts of the world, when they were dominated at mother land, which led to the worst instances of civil under his direction, through his Quit India movement. And his aim was "Do or Die" to getting 'Swaraj'. As a result, he was arrested on 9<sup>th</sup> August 1942 and held for two years at the Aga Khan Palace Yeravada Jail in Pune. February 1944, three months before his release, his wife Kasturbai died in the same prison. At last, on August 15, 1947, India gained independence from British rule.

On January 30 1948 at Birla House, Gandhiji was assassinated by Nathuram Vinayak Gadse. Gandhi lived, suffered and died in India for Indians, it is not relation to India's destiny alone that his life has significance. Future generations will not only remember him as a patriot, politician and nation builder but much more.

Mahatma Gandhi's *The Story of Experiments with Truth* is a most inspirational autobiography. It is written in a five parts which begins with Gandhi's birth and his experiences in his personal life till 1921. The original script was written in Gujarati language by M.K.Gandhi, later translated into English by Mahadev Desai.

Mahatma Gandhi's writings were recollections of incidents which initially got serialized in *Young India* and *Navjivan*, and were influential in shaping his autobiography, *The Story of My Experiments with Truth*. It is Gandhi's prison experiences in South Africa had become part of a book entitled *Satyagraha in South Africa*.

Gandhi speaks about what made him to write autobiography: "It is not my purpose to attempt a real autobiography. I simply want to tell the story of my numerous experiments with truth, and as my life consists of nothing but those experiments; it is true that the story will take the shape of an autobiography. But I shall not mind, if every page of it speaks only of my experiments. I believe, or at any rate flatter myself with the belief, that a connected account of all these experiments will not be without benefit to the reader. My experiments in the political field are now known, not only to India, but to a certain extent to the civilized world".

Gandhi found the prison to be the right place to put his principles to practice. The prison becomes another laboratory for Gandhiji. 'Truth', for Gandhi, was supreme principle, which includes many other principles. During his incarceration in Yeravada prison, he practiced

explaining 'Truth', 'Ahimsa', 'Brahmacharya', 'Control of the palate', 'Not stealing', 'Non possession', 'Fearlessness', 'Removal of Untouchability', 'Bread Labour', 'Tolerance', 'Humility', 'Yajna', 'Important of vows' and 'Swadeshi'. Mahatma Gandhi mainly proposed the acceptance of 'Truth', 'Non-Violence', 'Vegetarianism', 'Brahmacharya', 'Simplicity' and 'faith' in God. Though he would remember forever as the man who fought for Indian independence, his greatest legacies are the tools used against the British. His life was one continuous striving, an unremitting sadhana, a relentless search for truth, not abstract or metaphysical truth, but such truth as can be realized in human relations.

He tried to apply these spiritual principles to the practical situations. Gandhiji did it with the scientific spirit. Sticking to the truth means Sathyagraha. Gandhi therefore called his experiments as '*Experiments with Truth*' or '*Experiments in the science of Sathyagraha*'. This autobiography focuses on Gandhi's struggle for Non-Violence and Civil Disobedience through the acts of Sathyagraha.

In the post –Gandhi era of Indian politics, Gandhiji's 'Sathyagraha' techniques have been identified with practically every form of protest, especially with strikes, hartals, fasts, dharna, pen down campaigns, bundhs and gheraos.

*My Experiments with Truth* (1927&1929) is an outstanding autobiography. Albert Einstein's remarks about M.K.Gandhi speak volumes "A man who has confronted the brutality of Europe with dignity of the simple human being, and thus at all times risen superior. Generations to come, it may be, will scarce believe that such a one as this ever in flesh and blood walked upon this earth".

Gandhiji gave importance to sanitation and hygiene from which Indians profitably learn. Our prime minister of India Narendra Modi started Swachh Bharth mission in influence of Gandhiji, this mission was started the day of Gandhi Jayanthi in memory of Gandhiji.

He called prison is 'Mandir', he mentioned it as a 'Yeravada Mandir' it is a place of 'heaven' and 'palace' where he learnt self purification. If we say prison changed Gandhiji, but more than that Gandhiji changed prison.

With his powerful tools of Satyagraha and Non-Violence, he inspired several other leaders all over the world including the likes of Nelson Mandela, Martin Luther King Jr. and Aung San Suu Ki.

Knowing that violence only begets violence, he began practicing passive resistance, Satyagraha. Mahatma Gandhi was a leader that brought one of the world's most powerful nations to its knees... by using peace, love and integrity as his method for change. His life was a message of peace over power, of finding ways to reconcile our difference and of living in harmony with respect and love even for our enemy.

## CONCLUSION

The purpose behind any autobiography is to reveal the events of a crucial period of India's freedom struggle in their true perspective. People write autobiographies because they want the information about their life on earth to be preserved after their death. Why because they believe their experiences in life can inspire others and can change people's lives. Some nationalists write autobiographies because they feel their lives are important and notable enough that others would follow their examples. Not only that nationalists want to morally enlighten people and lead them towards freedom movement.

Gandhi's impact was indelible. He guided India to independence. He forced his countrymen to question their deepest prejudices about caste and religion and violence. Gandhiji's purpose was to fight for the freedom of India from Great Britain using non violence. He also wanted the idea of Satyagraha, or passive resistance, to help oppressed people. He believed in Peace and Co-operation between people of different religions and advocated fair treatment of untouchables of India.

Gandhiji expressed himself and his ideas in a plain, distinctive and impressive manner and conveyed his views and feelings to the reader. He wrote truthfully and without fear of anybody, because he even loved his enemy. He was sincere in his thoughts, words and deeds. His style reflects the transparent sincerity and frankness of his heart. In fact, perfectly *sincerity*, *truthfulness* and *frankness* were his chief aim of his writing. Gandhi is a source of inspiration and his autobiography is a reference book for all those fighting against racial discrimination, oppression, domination, wars, environmental degradation, lack of freedom and human rights.

We can still derive inspiration from the teachings of Mahatma Gandhi who wanted us to remember his principles he quoted "in spite of death, life persists, and in spite of hatred, love persists".

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