

The Rumour of Ideological Opposition: Marx and Gandhi and writing-reading.

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Gandhi and Marx

- 'Whatever interest the world may or may not take in the comparative study of Gandhi and Marx, in our own country at least, it has become a subject of everyday discussion among the educated. Every discourses attempts to weigh Gandhi and Marx and measure them up according to his capacity' – Vinoba Bhave in Mashruwala (1951: 14-15)

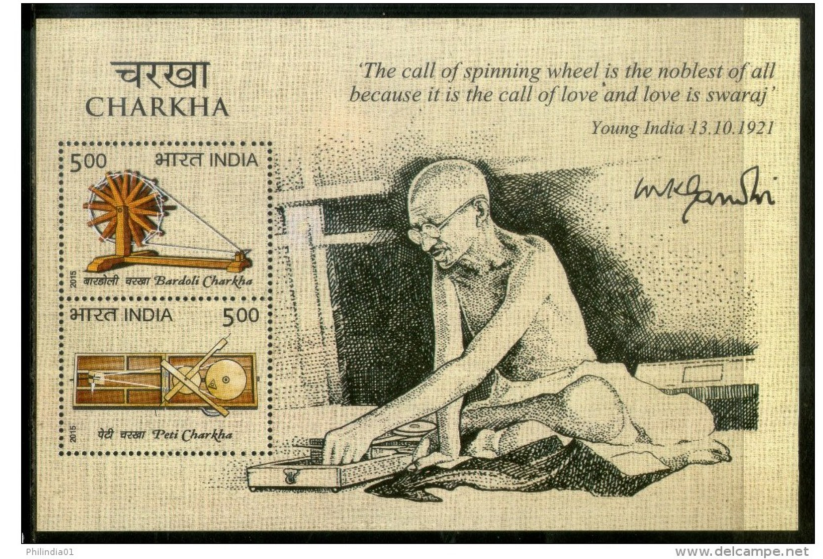


We may often think there have been far too many wild comparisons, and mild contrasts, between Mahatma Gandhi and Karl Marx, and any effort to even attempt to summarise their positions in terms that would allow overall evaluation is fraught – and anyway the applicability of such big generalisations is hardly decisive.

Let me say, however, that it is a great honour to be asked to speak on this day.

Plan of the talk

- the categories taken up here might be control, modern industry, dialectics, revolutionary violence, women, technology, class oppression, religion (of course) opium, fascism, and reading

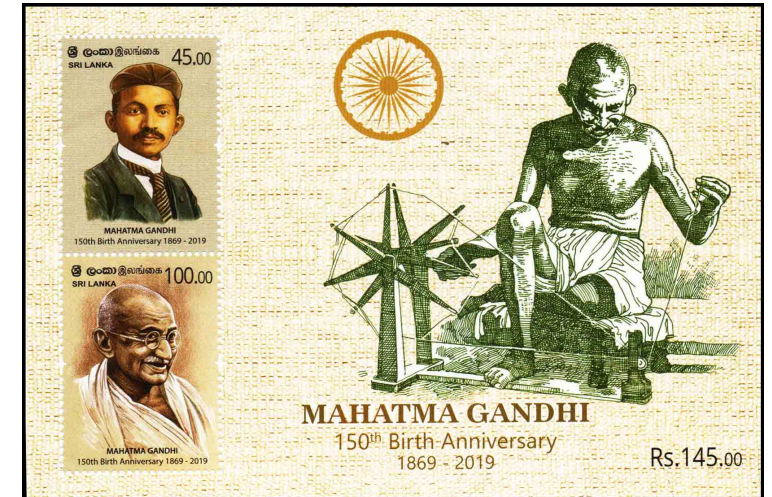


Any assessment of debates then from the perspective of now is conditioned by the point of observation. The stakes of this field are high, and fraught, so many texts.

It seems an impossible task, so I propose instead to risk an angular workaround that may reclaim the scholarship that surrounds the reified focus only on the general and programmatic. Reading the letters and prefaces, the peripheral apocrypha of the Marxian text, the notebooks as they are published volume by volume by the MEGA (*Marx Engels Gesamtausgabe*) and *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, as well as the diary, the autobiography, and other texts I can access.

Diaries and Letters

- This paper emphasises the fecundity of a diary for introspection and of letters that can share almost anything, without censure (yet of course censured, edited in practice), setting out draft versions of ideas as they are first formed, preliminary sketches of what will eventually be published, diaries as more or less often written without the intent to publish, letters meant for the ear of a confidant, or the future...



Draft scripts are never scripture, no need to invoke liturgical and hermeneutic excess. The uses we make of editing, selecting, translating, excerpting and erasing passages and paragraphs are key. (for erasure from film see Dwyer 2011, Mukhopadhyay 2011) We should of course want to avoid any dogmatic stereotyped, grand-theory-Marx, and be aware that Gandhi has been subject to caricature and stereotype in so many misrepresentations (perhaps even from Tagore through to Attenborough and more).

Comparative Diary and Letters

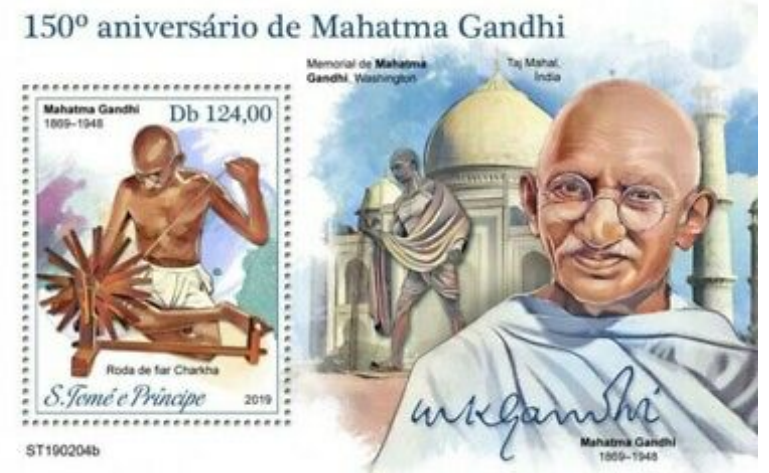
- Both wanted to change the world, not just interpret it, both had an increasingly evident sense of mission, both raised the spectre of the massed power of the oppressed, the imperative of collective endeavour, for a politics of self-determination, unalienated life, a future untrammelled by the evils of capital and exploitations. Gandhi and Marx are the names for a desire for freedom. Both work it out in their own (textual) ways.



Gandhi kept a diary throughout most of his adult life at least since his first trip to London. The first volume of *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, after three small notes (a confession, a short graduation speech, a letter to his mother) the first substantial text is his London Diary (Gandhi 1888/1999: 2).

Comparative Diary and Letters

- Gandhi advised his Satyagrahis to keep a diary which could be 'a mirror of your own mind, recording your thoughts and dreams, good and bad' (CW, 67:232)
- a 'prospective satyagrahi is expected to keep a log-book (or diary) in which he will daily enter the work done during the course of the day and the log-book shall be submitted to me' (Gandhi, 1942: 253).
- Gandhi's publication of his apparently innermost diary self for public reading
- Politics not based upon a public-private division.
- Writing diary is consciousness raising
- the effort to increase and emphasise forms of conscious self-activity that would be a greater contribution to democratic participation than any vote block, tick box, vote on this stamp, patronage and corruption



Comparative Diary and Letters

- In the Autobiography, Gandhi wrote of diary writing that:
- 'The exercise has given me ineffable mental peace, because it has been my fond hope that it might bring faith in Truth and Ahimsa to waverers' (Gandhi 2002: 463).
- Gandhi is criticized by Bipan Chandra:
- 'While Gandhi brought the masses into the political movement, he never encouraged or permitted the masses to discuss and develop political activity on their own, leave alone encourage them to have their own leadership' (Chandra 1979/2010:187).
- But Gandhi here is an advocate not just of literacy, but of reflective, contemplative, self-examination



Comparative Diary and Letters

- Marx kept no diary but an almost daily correspondence with Friedrich Engels over nearly 50 years.
 - An archive of the second half of the 19th century.
 - We can see the working out of ideas for publication.
 - The letters have the most significant points:
- E.G. the Letter to Arnold Ruge in which Marx asserts the task of communists to be a ‘ruthless criticism of all that exists [*die rücksichtslose Kritik alles Bestehenden*] ruthless both in the sense of not being afraid of the results it arrives at and in the sense of being just as little afraid of conflict with the powers that be’ (Marx to Ruge, September in MEGA III(1), 1975: 55)



Comparative Diary and Letters

- Marx writes to the editors of the Russian paper *Otecestvenniye Zapisky* pointing out that the journal should not take *Capital* and allow its writers to:
- 'metamorphose my historical sketch of the genesis of capitalism in Western Europe into an historico-philosophic theory of the *marche generale* [general path] imposed by fate upon every people, whatever the historic circumstances' (Marx 1877, in M&E1968)



The historical sketch only shows the process in Europe and 'describes the historic movement which by divorcing the producers from their means of production converts them into wage earners (proletarians in the modern sense of the word)' (M&E 1968).

Comparative Diary and Letters

In the second last year of his life, in Algeria, Marx signs off his letter to his daughter Laura with an orientalist parable (that I have not yet traced) but which surely the Mahatma would have loved:

“A ferryman is ready and waiting, with his small boat, on the tempestuous waters of a river. A philosopher, wishing to get to the other side, climbs aboard. There ensues the following dialogue:

Philosopher: Do you know anything of history, ferryman? *Ferryman:* No! *Philosopher:* Then you’ve wasted half your life!. And again: *The Philosopher:* Have you studied mathematics? *Ferryman:* No! *Philosopher:* Then you’ve wasted more than half your life. Hardly were these words out of the philosopher’s mouth when the wind capsized the boat, precipitating both ferryman and philosopher into the water. Whereupon, *Ferryman shouts:* Can you swim? *Philosopher:* No! *Ferryman:* Then you’ve wasted your whole life”

(Marx to Laura Lefarge, April 13, 1882, Algiers).



On control, nature, need.

'Gandhi and Marx both instinctively appealed to the same idea in their critical thought: the concept of an "unalienated life"' (Bilgrami 2012:8).

'Like Gandhi, Marx stressed ... - one, the objectification of the relations between nature and human beings such that nature was not seen any longer as prompting their practical and moral engagement ('living in'), but rather seen as the object of their detached and extractive gaze ('mastery and control'), ... two, the objectification of the relations between human beings themselves' (Bilgrami 2012:15)

'Gandhi seeks to shape an Indianized version of non-violent socialism consistent with what is claimed to be Marx's basic principle of communism: "To each according to his need, from each according to his capacity"' (Chakrabarti & Dhar 2019: 195)



On dialectics

The point is to learn something from Gandhi so as to renew and reclaim scholarship and understanding of Marx. And vice versa. Both have been buried under an avalanche of commentary and even hagiography.

Marx, as the most influential social scientists there has ever been, did not remain constant or stuck in earlier positions or analysis.

Marx went back to the library after each engagement, after 1848 and Boneparte, after the 1857 financial crisis did not produce another European uprising, but did in India, and soon after in North America, and then again after the Commune of 1871, writing not only on the French uprising, but extensively rewriting and serialising *Capital* in French with French working class readers in mind.



On dialectics

Gandhi too was pleased to report his changing views.

'I make no hobgoblin of consistency. If I am true to myself from moment to moment, I do not mind all the inconsistencies that may be flung in my face' (Gandhi, CW, 65:308)



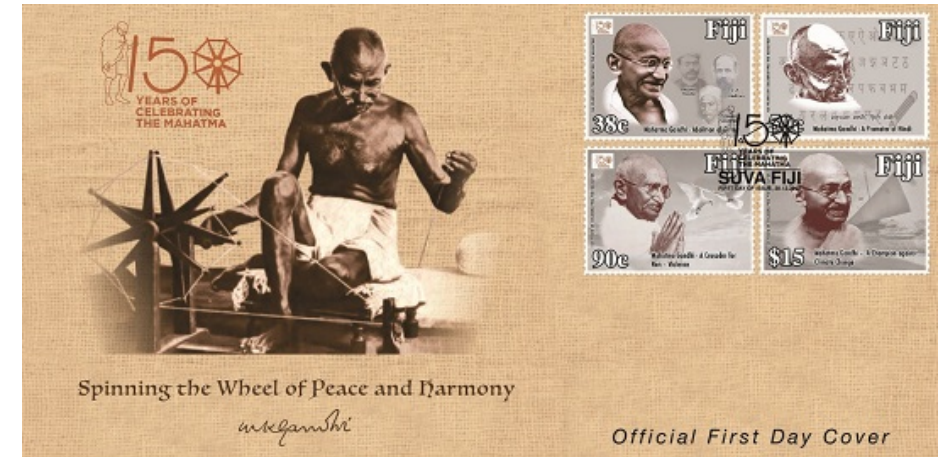
Bipan Chandra named the Gandhian strategy of Struggle-Truce-Struggle:

'this strategy of non-violence and S-T-S was adopted not because it was a bourgeois strategy, but because it was suited to a multi-class, mass movement against the semi-democratic, semi-authoritarian hegemonic British colonial state. Most important, Bipan Chandra now saw Gandhiji as a brilliant leader of a popular movement who far from being bourgeois or non-revolutionary played a critical role in trying to ensure that the class adjustment that necessarily had to happen in any multi-class movement happened in India, increasingly in favour of the oppressed' (Aditya Mukherjee, in Chandra 1979/2010:xvii)

A Coat = 20 yds of Khadi cloth (?)

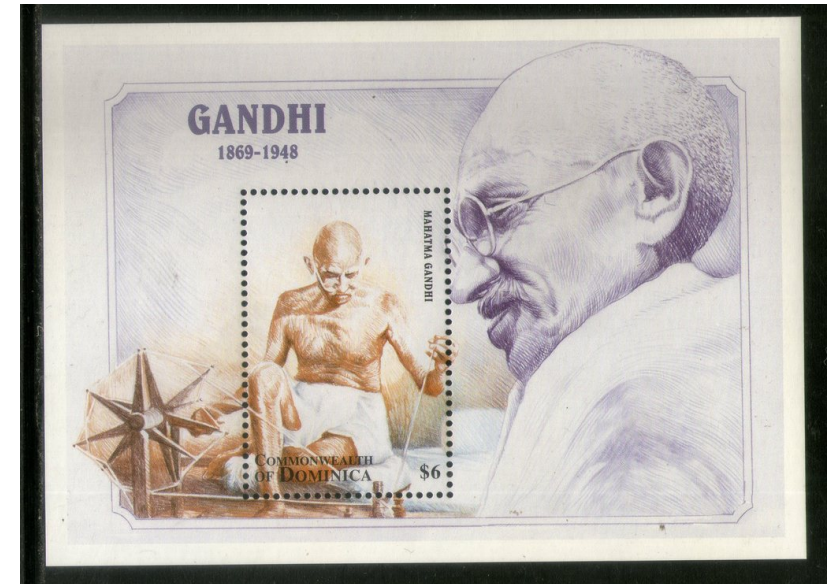
The significance of a coat, or the symbolism of homespun cloth. All through *Capital* Marx seems obsessed with the makings of a coat – 20 yards of linen transforms before our eyes.

- The famous photographs of Gandhi seated at his charkha spinning, an image reproduced on money, stamps, commemorative cups... just one among many symbolic points of resonance (see Brown 2010).
- I would pair the spinning wheel photograph with the one of Marx getting a haircut, as he wrote to Engels the same day – in Algiers – he had discarded the heavy 'rhinoceros great coat' and had himself shorn (Marx to Engels, 1 March 1882/2010, 213).



A Coat = 20 yds of Khadi cloth (?)

The first political engagements of Marx are his writings about the Silesian weavers and their struggle for adequate conditions and against the new industrial machinery



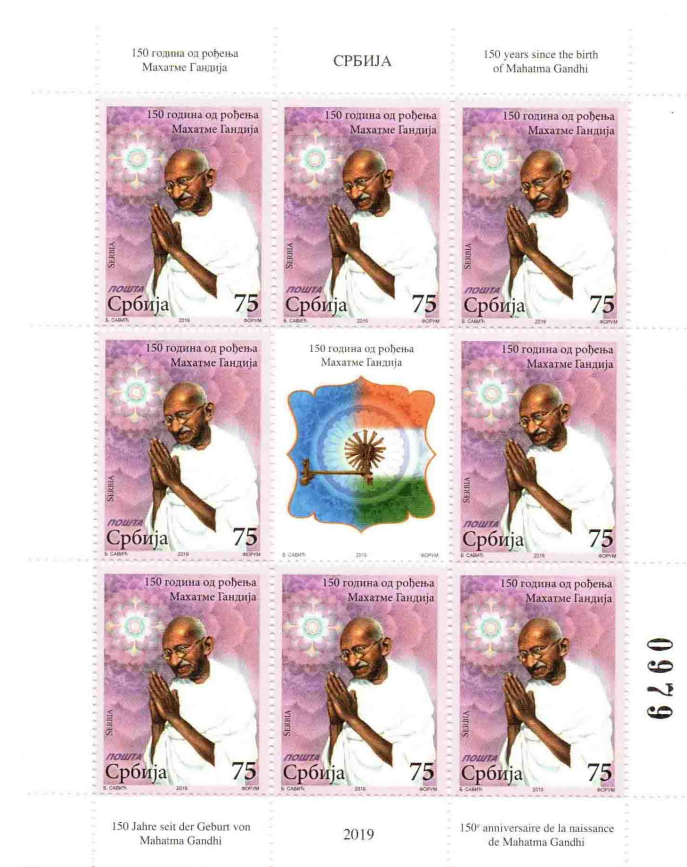
Gandhi's first entry into politics in India, after returning from South Africa, was an intervention into the issues of farmers in Champaran, Bihar, who were forced by indigo planters to grow indigo and opium without remuneration (see Farooqui, 2016).

Marx's interest in weavers also features in *Capital* where even the British Governor-General was forced to lament that: 'the bones of the cotton-weavers are bleaching the plains' (Marx 1867/ 1967:432).

A Coat = 20 yds of Khadi cloth (?)

- While the student of technologies of textiles should start with weaving, it would also not be frivolous to consider Marx's study of the impact of the sewing machine on domestic labour. But when Gandhi writes of the sewing machine he makes two interesting associations. First of all he is thinking of the effort to reintroduce homespun cotton, but the second reference is to the writing machine:

'I know that there are friends who laugh at this attempt to revive this great art. They remind me that in these days of mills, sewing machines or typewriters, only a lunatic can hope to succeed in reviving the rusticated spinning-wheel. These friends forget that the needle has not yet given place to the sewing machine nor has the hand lost its cunning in spite of the typewriter (Gandhi CW, 21:72).



A Coat = 20 yds of Khadi cloth (?)

Ten years later, in 1929, Gandhi applauds the labour saving device that is the singer sewing machine, invented by Singer out of love after seeing his wife slaving over needle and thread. Asked if this invention then does not imply a factory and industrial labour to produce sewing machines, Gandhi replies, Ah, but:



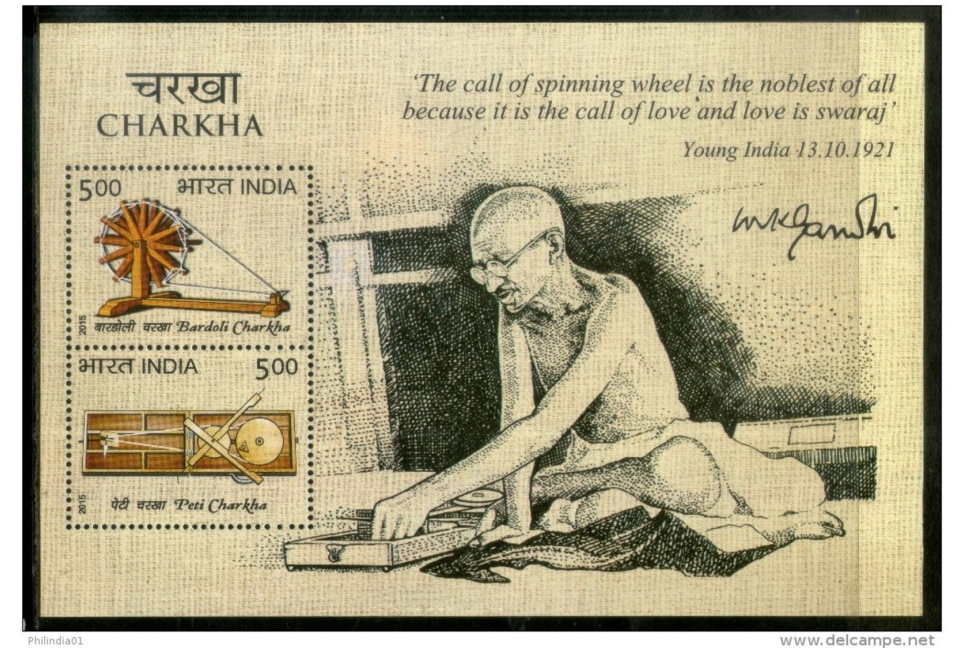
'I am socialist enough to say that such factories should be nationalized, or State-controlled ... not for profit, but for the benefit of humanity, love taking the place of greed as the motive. It is an alteration in the conditions of labour that I want. This mad rush for wealth must cease' (Gandhi CW, 29:266)

The sewing machine is key to how Marx gets into the costs of the reproduction of the family.

The oppressed classes.

On the oppressed: Marx, as Eqbal Ahmed reports the obvious, 'Focussed our attention on the poor and the working class' (Ahmad 2010: 120). As Chandra pointed out, Gandhi's role in bringing the popular movement 'in favour of the oppressed' was key to his politics.

Gandhiji's emphasis on working among the masses, and especially the untouchables. In a period when no one else had come round to taking up the cause of these sections, the Gandhian nationalists, in their own way, initiated and kept up the resistance' (Mukherjee 2004:67)



For comparative research.

On unemployment: Marx's capital lays stress on the precarious (präkerer), the latent, floating and stagnant reserve army of labour,

On the village: Marx, always interested in the communal ownership of lands, his knowledge at first derived from philosophers (Hegel on Asia! See Spivak 1999, chapter one), then increasingly from reading Maine, Lubbock and ethnographers, as well as the Bengal Harkuru

On unity. Consider what Gandhi offers in terms of Hindu-Muslim unity, all India unity, all India radio... this is not now just a discussion of tolerance, but goes to the heart of what India will become, has become. On Gandhi statues being blindfolded in Gujurat, see the essay by V Rao (2011), poignant given what has happened worldwide to Marx.



On opium

In his 1844 discussion of Hegel, Marx had said ‘the criticism of religion is the prerequisite of all criticism’. One of his most famous quips is from this essay, where he says 'religion is the opium of the people'. This much misunderstood comment should lead us to open up that quote and read the lines that give a context to that famous phrase:



'Religious suffering is, at one and the same time, the expression of real suffering and a protest against real suffering. Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the opium of the people'
(Marx, 1844)

On opium

Gandhi too was on a not wholly dissimilar track already in *Hind Swaraj*, 1909, castigating the comprador class using an analogy with the cannabis, he wrote:

'Who assisted the Company's officers? Who was tempted at the sight of their silver? Who bought their goods? History testifies that we did all this. In order to become rich all at once, we welcomed the Company's officers with open arms. We assisted them. If I am in the habit of drinking Bhang, and a seller thereof sells it to me, am I to blame him or myself?' (Gandhi 1909/1997: 40)

At one point Gandhi says salt is an addiction, and of course Gandhi was critical of those who were:

'indirectly guilty of poisoning Natives with liquor sold illicitly and of stupefying Indian miners by selling them opium in contravention of the law' (Gandhi 1906/1999:181).



On opium

in *Hind Swaraj* when Gandhi says of opium:

'An ignorant mother may, from the purest motives, administer a dose of opium to her child. Her motives will not cure her of her ignorance, nor, in the moral world purge her of the offence' (Gandhi 1909/1997: 147)



Did Gandhi know that Marx had said something similar with regard to the women who gave their children Godfreys Cordial? Citing the Sixth Report of Public Health (1864), Marx records the mortality of children from the factory districts as follows:

'high death rates...apart from local causes [these were] principally due to the employment of mothers away from their homes, and to the neglect and maltreatment arising from their absence,' or the need to keep the children silent which their mother worked, so 'dosing' their children with Godfreys Cordial, with occasional tragic results (Capital)

On opium

Again Marx and Gandhi seem on the same page. Marx supports the Chinese resistance to the British in the Opium war, and even recommends the emperor legalise the trade so as to undermine the East India Company profiteers. Gandhi laments the way the Chinese are enslaved to opium (Gandhi, CW, 12: 429)



Yet the opiate also opens the question of self-awareness, though it is very curious that Gandhi links this to the awareness of difference among 'Indians' and simultaneously the awareness needed to see how the gifts of colonialism are tainted:

‘It was after the advent of railways that we began to believe in distinctions, and you are at liberty now to say that it is through the railways that we are beginning to abolish those distinctions. An opium-eater may argue the advantage of opium-eating from the fact that he began to understand the evil of the opium habit after having eaten it. I would ask you to consider well what I have said on the railways’ (Gandhi 1909/1997:49)

On railways

Marx and Gandhi share a sensitivity to the vast apparatus of communication that was the railways. In a notorious early piece in *The New York Daily Tribune*, as everyone knows, Marx wrote:

'Modern industry, resulting from the railway system, will dissolve the hereditary divisions of labor, upon which rest the Indian castes, those decisive impediments to Indian progress and Indian power' (Marx NYDT, 1853)



For Gandhi, on his part, the condemnation of the railways was resounding in *Hind Swaraj*, and yet he had to use them, as Sumit Sarkar writes:

'If modern transport networks enhanced colonial power, their link with nationalist consolidations against British domination is at least as evident. Despite his well-known strictures against the railways, it is difficult to imagine the countrywide reach attained by Gandhi without that most visible form of industrial modernity' (Sarkar 2014:284).

Of course Gandhi travelled by train, he also wrote books, despite contending that:

'Those who are intoxicated by modern civilization are not likely to write against it'

(Gandhi 1909/2009: 35)

On violence

In *Hind Swaraj* there are times when Gandhi sounds more like Mao, in his famous essay 'Its terrible or its fine' concerning the peasants adventurism. Staging a fictional conversation between an editor and a reader, Gandhi mentions the Italian working classes anger sympathetically:

'The working classes in that land are still unhappy. They, therefore, indulge in assassination, rise in revolt, and rebellion on their part is always expected' (Gandhi 1909/1997: 76)

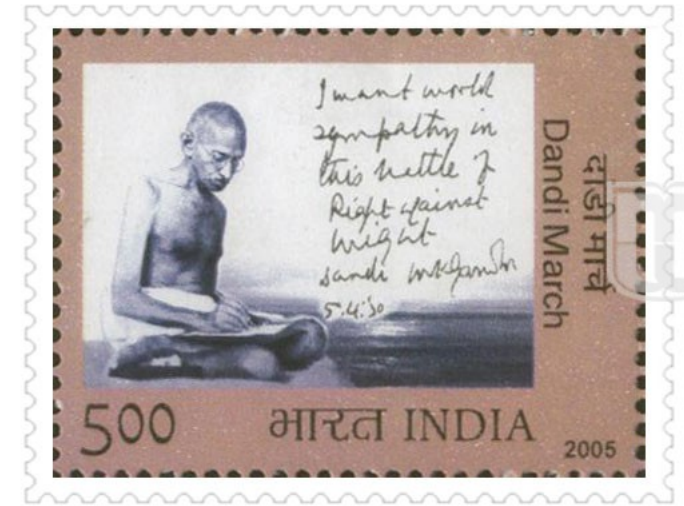


Gandhi scribbled the famous 'Do or Die' message on a piece of paper and a little later 'Either we will make India free or lay down our lives in the attempt to free her' in 1942, and wrote 'The Cult of the Bomb' (Young India, 2 January 1930)

What is significantly overlooked too often is that Marx, like Gandhi, was able to, and indeed necessarily did, change his position in the face of events which provoked critical self-reflection. This is the heart of *Experiments in Truth*, and the practice Marx set up first with the *Eighteenth Brumaire*.

On revising.

Gayatri Spivak in a lecture in Kolkata in 2018, on the 200th Marx birth anniversary conference, referred to the 1872 reissue of the *Manifesto* to emphasise the comment that the author had decided not to change the text even though the second section, on revolutionary strategy, was now obsolete.



‘However much that state of things may have altered during the last twenty-five years, the general principles laid down in the Manifesto are, on the whole, as correct today as ever. Here and there, some detail might be improved. The practical application of the principles will depend, as the Manifesto itself states, everywhere and at all times, on the historical conditions for the time being existing, and, for that reason, no special stress is laid on the revolutionary measures proposed at the end of Section II’

(Preface to the 1872 German Edition of the *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, Marx and Engels 1847/1969)

Conclusion – to be revised...

Perhaps at the end what we can add to Gandhiji's recommendation for daily writing diary is daily reading of all these kinds of text, which also should be an everyday practice of self-reflection and engagement. What we see from Marx is constant discussion of what others say, written in the newspapers and magazines, the press, in Hansard, in books and in letters – indeed the circulation of letters is popular, a cut and paste before the phrase so to speak. That a reader's ticket to the British library was so highly prized – when the coat was in hock, he could not attend – is a lesson on the level of meditations and experiments with truth. For the present, and not only for India, such reading might have consequences we should welcome. The written and writerly history of the encounter between Gandhi and Marx renews production of an immense accumulation of documents relevant to where we are today. The elementary task is to sift and sort so as to learn and reflect on new ways we think we might write the wrongs of the world. That is perhaps how we could see in their texts our own reflection on our present as we see it in these great thinker-actors of the past. In all likelihood the task is beyond any one of us, but the illustrations on offer are then so many and so profound, and moving along all the time, and while no single text can represent the effort, the point is still to change...