

STUDY MATERIAL - 02

'AN AUTOBIOGRAPHY OR THE STORY OF MY EXPERIMENTS WITH TRUTH' BY M.K GANDHI-REVIEW

What new insights will Gandhi's Autobiography provide? A casual as well as a serious reader, both may ask before picking up the book, '*An Autobiography or the story of my experiments with truth*', as it seems that no facet of Gandhi's life remains unexplored and undiscussed. The world has been reading his '*My experiments with truth*' for a long time. So what's new in this edition?

This one is a critical edition, introduced with Notes by Tridip Suhrud, a bilingual scholar and every inch a Gandhian, who not only attempted to understand Gandhi but also imbibed the spirit of the apostle of peace to the last syllable. Gandhi needs a completely honest analysis of his persona. He himself used to appreciate those who criticised him, point-blank and never harboured any grudge. "Criticism was Gandhi's way to improve himself," Sarojini Naidu once said. He was forever engaged in candid self-analysis and introspection. Gandhi knew that no one was above reproach and unimpeachable. He knew it well that he had more demerits than merits and this level of in-your-face transparency separated him from others.

To speak the truth was truth for him. Though English playwright, George Bernard Shaw wrote that all autobiographies were lies, deliberate lies at that, but while reading Gandhi's autobiography, one can feel and empathise with his disarming truthfulness, because he himself was against his holier-than-thou and larger-than-life image.

First of all, Gandhi had no desire to write an autobiography as he believed that it was a form of self-praise, albeit literary. He wrote this to young Tusharkanti Ghosh, the founder of now defunct, *Amrita Bazar Patrika* in 1929. He further stated in his letter to the doyen of English journalism in India that, “An intentional autobiography is often negatively eclectic. It only states the good and omits the bad.”

Mahadev Desai, who translated Gandhi’s Gujarati notes into English and presented before the world, his (Gandhi’s) autobiography in English, skipped and diluted a few words and passages lest they should lower the ‘spotless’ image of Mahatma. But Gandhi urged him to retain them *mutatis mutandis*.

The well-read Gandhi knew that Abdul Rahim Khankhana, one of the nine gems in the court of Akbar, translated Babar’s Turkish autobiography (Babar knew only Uzbeki and archaic Turkish and had no knowledge of Persian) ‘*Tuzuk-e-Babri*’ into Persian as ‘*Babarnama*’ in which he never mentioned 112 passages from the original autobiography. He did that intentionally as he thought that those passages in Persian would demean Babar, the founder of Mughal empire on the sub-continent.

Gandhi wrote about this in a letter to Jawaharlal Nehru. “My life’s an open book. I needn’t hide anything” was Gandhi’s refrain. And he adhered to it till the end. The brutal frankness of his autobiography is not cringe-worthy. It’s a long statement of sustained integrity and rectitude. There’s not even a scintilla of narcissism in it.

In these times when Gandhi is dichotomized into two groups of followers and detractors: One that deifies him and the other one that denigrates him, it’s imperative to read this book. The reasons being Tridip Suhrud’s long editorial introduction that goads the readers to think deeply and Ashish Nandy’s excellent foreword.

They've not vivisected Gandhi. They've masterfully analysed the 'idea', called Gandhi. This statement needs a bit elaboration. French existentialist, Jean-Paul Sartre wrote in his rather recondite book, '*Being and nothing*' that, "A supremely great or gifted man ultimately becomes an idea and even if that idea morphs or degenerates into a (mass) ideology, the basic importance of a (super)man as an idea remains intact." We all know that Gandhi and his philosophy of truth and ahimsa already became a universal idea in his own lifetime. That the same idea later descended into a mass ideology with rough edges is inconsequential. This phenomenon has been adroitly analysed by both, Tridip and Ashish Nandy.

Both have not resorted to blind deification of Mahatma. They've not perched him on the highest pedestal of virtues. Tridip's notes have lent critical depth to the book and made it a must-read. There's a term in psychological criticism, which is known as 'objective co-relativity', coined by the American poet, critic and Nobel laureate T.S. Eliot. This concept states the 'un-involved involvement' or Gita's '*Tadaatmya tatahapi taatasthya*'. Tridip Suhrod and Ashish Nandy's cerebral involvement is the quintessence of Eliot's objective co-relativity. I.A. Richards' 'autobiography as a clear conscience conversation' is manifested here in this book. To encapsulate, Gandhi's autobiography is not pedantic or didactic. It doesn't claim to erudition.

Finally, those who want to know Gandhi sans his sacrosanct and concocted touch-me-not aura, must read this thick tome, which belies the time-tested and long-held perception that a big book is an evil. It's not. His autobiography pares him down to a mortal with all his follies, foibles and failings. In the end, Gandhi earns greater respectability and wider acceptance, thanks to this critical edition.
