



Great Soul: Mahatma Gandhi and His Struggle With India

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A highly original, stirring book on Mahatma Gandhi that deepens our sense of his achievements and disappointments—his success in seizing India's imagination and shaping its independence struggle as a mass movement, his recognition late in life that few of his followers paid more than lip service to his ambitious goals of social justice for the country's minorities, outcasts, and rural poor.

Pulitzer Prize–winner Joseph Lelyveld shows in vivid, unmatched detail how Gandhi's sense of mission, social values, and philosophy of nonviolent resistance were shaped on another subcontinent—during two decades in South Africa—and then tested by an India that quickly learned to revere him as a Mahatma, or “Great Soul,” while following him only a small part of the way to the social transformation he envisioned. The man himself emerges as one of history's most remarkable self-creations, a prosperous lawyer who became an ascetic in a loincloth wholly dedicated to political and social action. Lelyveld leads us step-by-step through the heroic—and tragic—last months of this selfless leader's long campaign when his nonviolent efforts culminated in the partition of India, the creation of Pakistan, and a bloodbath of ethnic cleansing that ended only with his own assassination.

India and its politicians were ready to place Gandhi on a pedestal as “Father of the Nation” but were less inclined to embrace his teachings. Muslim support, crucial in his rise to leadership, soon waned, and the oppressed untouchables—for whom Gandhi spoke to Hindus as a whole—produced their own leaders.

Here is a vital, brilliant reconsideration of Gandhi's extraordinary struggles on two continents, of his fierce but, finally, unfulfilled hopes, and of his ever-evolving legacy, which more than six decades after his death still ensures his place as India's social conscience—and not just India's.

Great Soul: Mahatma Gandhi and His Struggle With India Details

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From Reader Review Great Soul: Mahatma Gandhi and His Struggle With India for online ebook

Edward Sullivan says

A fascinating, insightful biography. Rather than telling the story of Gandhi's entire life, Lelyveld focuses on pivotal episodes that shaped the great man's philosophical, political, and spiritual views. This is not the Gandhi superbly portrayed by Ben Kingsely in the hagiographic but wonderful motion picture. Lelyveld has been criticized for his "all too human" portrait of Gandhi but I find it refreshing. Gandhi's eccentricities, flaws, weaknesses, and considerable naivete in some important matters makes him all the more admirable and interesting. It is difficult to follow Lelyveld's discussions of India's vastly complicated Hindu caste system, but this subject seems to be a challenge for any writer.

Hadrian says

(Written somewhere over Siberia on the plane to Incheon at 3:30 AM EST, god-knows-when actual Korean time)

Gandhi is one of those few figures whose name inspires near-universal reverence. In India, within a barely a century after his death, he is already somewhere between Jesus Christ and the Buddha. Perhaps there are a few diehard colonialists and preservers of Empire who still despise him, and aside from them, those few fervent religious devotees.

Yet he is still controversial. His role in Indian and world history, and the effects of his actions, are still yet to be determined. Great Soul tears open more than a few historical wounds and will no doubt cause history departments and devoted followers and nationalists to erupt with rage for years. It remains uncertain on the extent of his role in the renewal and independence of modern India – if he is solely responsible for its greatness, or if his meddling inadvertently worsened the centuries of sectarian strife.

In popular views, he is a saint – a simple holy man, seen in his biopics and operas. But in the beginning, in South Africa, we see the old story of Gandhi's awakening in a train as he is forced to sit in the back. He is still then a shrewd and ambitious lawyer, tempted to settle down and work for some social justice causes.

His views then were amorphous, but some guidelines have already been established – e.g. Should he include eggs or milk in his vegetarian diet? How are we to properly balance the roles of caste and religion? E.g. some traditional Hindus are in favor of maintenance of the system, etc. He first things of representation within empire, and serves as a medicine stretcher in the Boer War – by historical irony, one of the few circumstances where him and Churchill are on the same side. But later his views become more certain – Quit India! Village independence, local means of production. The dietary and sexual restrictions are part of a larger goal – improved discipline and sanitation. India does deal with the latter to this day.

A popular bugaboo of modern historical biography is discovering traces of homosexuality. German-Jewish bodybuilder named Kallenbach, who at least seems like an old friend more than anything – and male friendships were closer and more platonic in the 19th century until just recently.

Up until, and even after his arrival in India, he still has his shrewd political dealings, in contrast to his saintly

image. We see discussions with Jinnah, the Pakistani 'father of the nation'. Nehru, a 'chosen successor'. An 'untouchable' – this one is an astonishing figure in his own right, B. R. Ambedkar, who insists upon his action for Caste Reform. Chandra Bose, who will defect to the Imperial Japanese Army and fights a war of rebellion, in contrast to his own plans of satyagraha – using the force of truth.

Unfortunately, we see the limits of satyagraha, with the composition of his letter to Hitler, simply asking him politely to let the Jews go. And then public statements asking the Jews to go peacefully to their deaths, and hope the sheer remorse will overcome the Nazis. This illustrates the fundamental differences between the British and German empires – the British Empire only committed genocide when it benefitted their policies – the Nazi empire, genocide was open policy and law.

As for what Hitler thought of Ghandi, he is said to have remarked offhand to a British liaison, "Why don't you just shoot him?"

His doctrines of non-violence and satyagraha and abstention of almost all carnal urges seem superhuman. It is perhaps some relief to the aspiring ascetic that Gandhi himself had difficulty following them. His health was troubled by his diet in later years, yet he still endured to an extreme end.

Perhaps one of the most troubling chapters of his experiments with asceticism is his idea on lust. His intent was to curb all thought, and all bodily manifestations of lust, and pushing himself to even further ends. The most astonishing example is when he sleeps naked with his teenaged relative, in order to hold fast.

The author is no skeptic or amateur - or rabblrouser saying Gandhi is a racist bisexual pervert who did no good. He is a most veteran of India reporters, even taking the time to interview some 90-year-old witnesses and visit the ruins of pilgrimage sites in South Africa and India. Although I do find his writing style to be a bit turgid – helped me fall asleep on the plane several times. And he remains unduly pessimistic about India. But this is an interesting enough book to read.

Grady says

'To err is human, to forgive is divine'

Reading Joseph Lelyveld's sensitive and informative biography of the life of Mahatma Gandhi is enriching in many ways: the quality of writing is first class, the manner in which he shares the entire spectrum of the life of one of the greatest contemporary philosophers of man is both learned and involving, and the ability to discuss the human aspects of a man who has been all but officially canonized takes great courage. GREAT SOUL: MAHATMA GANDHI AND HIS STRUGGLE WITH INDIA is most assuredly an apt title for this new study of the life of Gandhi because as soon as the book appeared it was banned in India and in other places where Gandhi's influence is considered akin to heavenly. And that is sad, because a careful reading of this book simply reveals those controversial aspects of a man whose life was anything but understandable as he was living it, and bringing to readers' attention the aspects of Gandhi that allow us to see that indeed he was very human, struggling with not only attempting to unite Hindus and Muslims, but also with racism and pacifism and vegetarianism, the South African cultural influence on his thoughts and so forth.

The primary reason for the censorship and reader condemnation of this book seems to center on the discussion of Gandhi's long-term intimate relationship with the German Jewish bodybuilder Hermann Kallenbach. Yes, there are 'love letters' between the two men, but Gandhi managed to cope with the central

focus of his affection with a similar focus on his wife and his young nieces, etc. What Lelyveld seems to be doing is examining the relationship between Gandhi's approach to South Africa and India, working to define how this great thinker arrived at his concept of satyagraha. 'This is defined as resistance to tyranny through mass civil disobedience, a philosophy firmly founded upon ahimsa (nonviolence). This concept helped India gain independence and inspired movements for civil rights and freedom across the world.' The relationship with Kallenbach is simply an aside.

How a man who gave so much of himself to the welfare of society could be condemned for an intimate relationship with another man is a conundrum. The only solution to understanding the importance of this book is to read it. And it deserves to be read!

Grady Harp

Shawn says

Some readers have been upset by the fact that Lelyveld treats Gandhi not as a saint but as a complex human being, both flawed, and wonderfully courageous and persevering. The book covers Gandhi's adult life, from his arrival in South Africa to his assassination, concentrating on the great themes of that life: opposition to injustice and inequality, non-violence, and Indian independence. Like all of us, he was a man of his time and places and sometimes failed to live up to his own ideals, never, for example, extending his struggle for the rights of Indians in South Africa to the much larger and worse off black population. But his fights against the caste system and against Hindu-Muslim violence as well as for Indian independence make for an inspiring life, no less so because Lelyveld includes the man's inconsistencies and peculiarities. This is all that a good biography should be.

Zahir says

A very interesting read. Lelyveld does a good job of humanizing Gandhi instead of the mindless hero-worship of many other biographies. He talks about Gandhi's triumphs as well as his not so stellar human moments. Also describes some of the acts and ideas espoused by Gandhi that were just plain bizarre (Gandhi's treatment of his own family, highly unusual views on celibacy, and strange fascination with human excrement). Overall a good read.

Becky says

This book deserves a 5-star rating because of its content. I'm giving it 4 stars simply because it was not a compelling read. It's the kind of book I'm very glad to have read, though.

A friend who read the same book was irritated that Gandhi's faults were portrayed. Perhaps she thought the author set out to discredit Gandhi. Now that I have read the entire book and know more about Gandhi, I remain impressed with him. Yes, he managed his own public relations very well. Yes, he was more than quirky when it came to diet and control of biologic urges. Yes, he contradicted himself over and over and over again. Yes, he was a poor negotiator. However. He grew over time. He maintained a clear sense that

caste was harmful. He held tight to his view that the spiritual and the political were absolutely linked. He held both the Hindus and the Muslims to better behavior. He must have had opportunities to "sell out," to become corrupt, but he never did. All these things make him the rare person.

I learned more about the history of India, about other political figures who were also working for the Dalits and for Indian independence. I also learned that Gandhi, because of his emphasis on village self-sufficiency, was instrumental in promoting sustainable agriculture in India.

Sheila says

Fact is humans are not perfect in this realistic world and that goes for Gandhi. I found the writing very dry and monotonous. I have not read any other books of Joseph Lelyeld and this is going to be my last book by this author.

In South Africa Gandhi defended wealthy Indians and till much later he hardly supported the working Indian labourers but never supported the local African natives and thus portrays Gandhi as racially prejudiced. I find Gandhi an interesting person though I do not agree with his many religious, ideological and political views. Gandhi worked hard for religious peace, equality and basic necessities of life for every individual in India. However India is very far from achieving any of his ideologies and sanitation is the very last priority of the Government and public. India is still divided in many ways. This was my first book on Gandhi and it seems family was not important as he spent very short years with his wife and children, which brings up a question as to why he would be called a Mahatma. I believe Gandhi was a great person for that time and place in history who worked tirelessly to help the poor but I will not be reading another Gandhi's biography in the near future.

Praveen Kishore says

Its not a hagiography, and tackles various facets of Gandhi sensitively and frankly. A must read to know Gandhi - the man!

Melissa says

This book was a chore to complete. The physical book was dry and irritating to read. The audiobook was read by such a cynical voice (a Vincent Price sound-alike) that it was almost unbearable. The author seemed to spend an amazing amount of effort digging through every possible piece of Gandhi correspondence/historic record and grabbing anything that was remotely negative, conflicting, or exploitable. I kept alternately reading and listening to the book, hoping there would be some kind of message that would justify such an airing of criticism and "dirty laundry".

At the very end of the last chapter, the author finally admits that although Gandhi wasn't successful at changing the masses of India during his lifetime, that his ideas still remain as inspiration.

In my opinion, that falls way short of the mark. The author wasted all that effort pointing out how HUMAN Gandhi was, and how he wasn't born "a saint", then didn't tie that humanity into a relevant summary or lesson.

My summary for a book endlessly pointing out every mistake, inconsistency, and failure of a man whose positive message still lives on today, would be that if a man so "flawed" as Gandhi could bring so much inspiration to the world by example, then any one of us can do the same - you don't have to be born a saint. That striving to always be lifting others up, we can make lasting change in the world. That Gandhi's whole mission was to inspire everyone to live in a way that lifts others up, as opposed to beating them down.

The author gets 2 stars for bringing me to that conclusion on my own. A conclusion that is only possible when you choose to look for the GOOD in people and events.

Bakul says

I just started reading this big volume, but even the first forty pages produced a fascinating view of the complicated man. I am at a spot where the author refers to Naipaul's observation about Gandhi that he was really an European at heart. I had such a suspicion, but never could pinpoint the fact.

Mary says

An interesting biography of Gandhi and his thought over his long life. The general outline wasn't new--his activism for Indians in South Africa, his return to India determined to develop his ideas of simple ascetic living and achieving the end of untouchability. However, his inner conflicts between his political and his spiritual roles are explored at length. The author doesn't flinch from portraying Gandhi's tendency to egoistic insistence on his particular ideas of truth-- at the same time his subject's incredible demands on himself. He must have been a difficult man to live and to work with!

Politically it's hard to tell if his actions made the ultimate independence and partition of India more difficult, or if he ameliorated the horrendous struggles. His tragic but seemingly inevitable assassination in 1948 may have for a time at least brought all Indians together in the realization they had to rise above sectarian conflict--and for decades they did, until more recent flare-ups of Hindu-Muslim violence.

Spiritually he lives on in small pockets of selfless service to others in India and elsewhere.

The writing is rather cumbersome, but the book is well worth reading.

Chris says

By sheer coincidence, I read this about a month after finishing Malcolm X A Life of Reinvention. Both are recent, heralded biographies of 20th-c. liberation/anti-colonial leaders. Both are critical, sometimes sharply so, of their subjects as both men and politicians, but ultimately sympathetic. The books are not otherwise comparable: Marable was both a scholar and an activist, hence the political scope and immense detail of his Malcolm book, whereas Lelyveld's reporting background equips him more for vivid images and enticing

connections than for archival organization or theoretical analysis.

My comparison is meant to get at tone, which is maybe the most important thing in the Lelyveld. He isn't awed by Gandhi's personal sanctity or political ingenuity; rather, he treats them as facts and tries to understand how they functioned. Lelyveld's Gandhi was capable of effecting communal transformation, but didn't do so predictably or consistently, because of the limitations of Gandhi's human frailty and of any human politics. When Lelyveld invokes "tragedy" as a category for Gandhi's lapses, I hear less Aristotle than Reinhold Niebuhr, whose contemporary, contrarian reading of Gandhi in the concluding chapters of *Moral Man and Immoral Society* bears rereading in light of Lelyveld's reporting. The point, for Niebuhr as well, is not to tear Gandhi down but to see him in a realistic light.

If I were a serious student of Gandhi (either as a scholar or a latter-day acolyte) I'd probably find much to critique here, as the Gujarati government evidently did. (The BJP leadership comes in for a drubbing toward the end of Lelyveld's book; I have to wonder whether that too was a factor in the ban.) As it stands, one of my major takeaways from this book is how little I truly know about either Gandhi or India in general. That's always a very good feeling. More things to learn!

That said, one place where Lelyveld, to my eyes, suffers most seriously by comparison to Marable is in his undertheorized handling of the relation between politics and religion. What intrigues me most about Gandhi and Malcolm both is how they understood their political and religious programs of national liberation as a coherent whole. African-American studies has developed methodologies and literatures that make it very easy to see those two realities together; Marable, as one of the deans of Af-Am in his lifetime, had all the relevant strings to his bow. Lelyveld does not. He writes well and thickly about political alliances and confluences of interest, but tends to treat religious scenes as local color. He recognizes the connections Gandhi drew between the national life and that of prayer and celibacy, but at just those moments of connection he finds Gandhi most opaque. That's probably a consequence of Lelyveld's implicitly Weberian theory of politics and religion—but is that Gandhi's fault?

Still: Terrific writing, consistently interesting to this relative neophyte, that left me feeling less ignorant but wanting more. That's most of what I ask from a book of popular nonfiction.

Perry Krasow says

I heard about the controversy surrounding *Great Soul* before I ever got a copy in my hands. So the main question I had was "Is this going to read like a Jackie Collins novel, or is this a factual biography?" The main objections from the State Assembly in Gujarat, which resulted in their vote to ban the book, involved suggestions that Gandhi had a gay relationship, and that Gandhi made racist comments. For brevity, and since many readers would prefer to draw their own conclusions from the evidence (mostly Gandhi's own letters), I won't include mine here. My summary of these issues and full review of the book is at greatnonfictionbooks.blogspot.com But I can say that Lelyveld writes fairly and honestly about Gandhi. The author shows Gandhi as a political operator. The man was a lawyer long before he was a saint. This is a complete biography and not just a discussion of sex and race. Lelyveld presents his material in a sensitive, accurate manner, without the extremes sensationalism or worship.

Gautam Kamath says

I found the book to be boring at times and insightful at others. There are many things I learnt here about Gandhi that helps provide perspective of why his detractors hated him as much as they did. What I completely failed to understand here is how with all his failings, his open hypocrisy, his obnoxious personal habits, his religious superstitions, his political wiliness, his constant changes of stance, his insensitivity to the needs of those close to him and his massive ego he still came to be revered among the masses as a "Mahatma". That's the part that's missing in this book, and that's what makes it one sided despite the generous concessions by the author to Gandhi's greatness at the end of each chapter.

Mark says

For me, this was a terribly unsatisfying book. The author spends all of his effort nit-picking at Gandhi, trying to humanize him. Underneath this devotion to setting the record straight, there is a distinct whiff of hostility. Gandhi deserves better.
