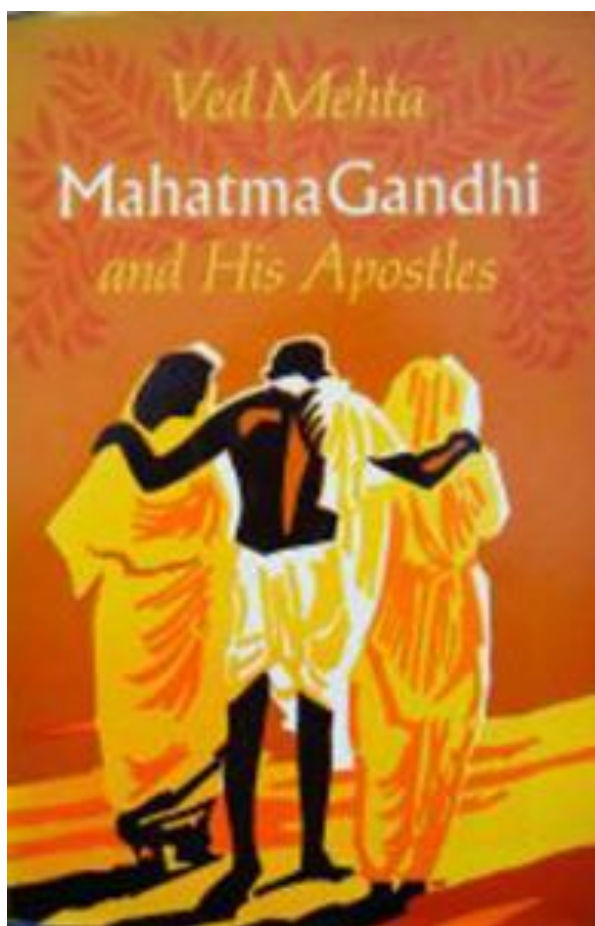


## Gandhi and his Apostles



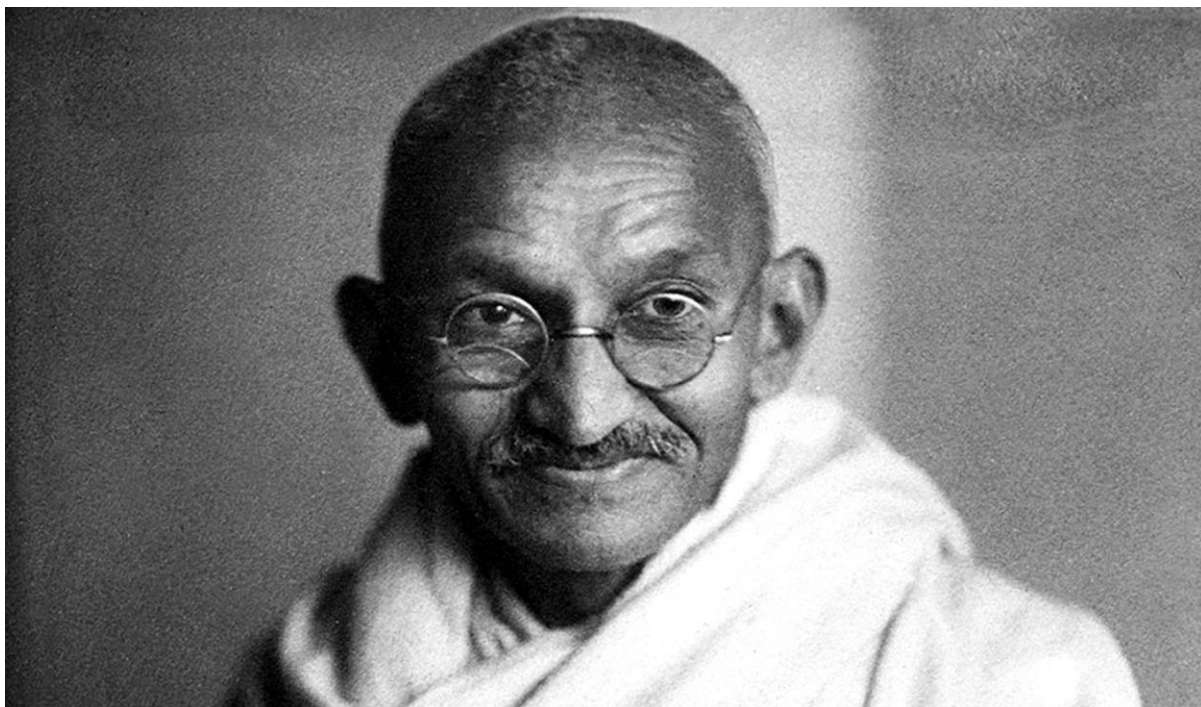
By Ved Mehta

Reviewed by Garry Victor Hill

Ved Mehta, *Gandhi and His Apostles*.

New York, The Viking Press, 1976. 260 pages.

**Illustrations:** Under Indian copyright laws pictures more than seventy years old are in the public domain. Most of the pictures are from Wikipedia/Wikimedia and Creative Commons. Those that are not are allowable under Australian law through two rules. Illustrations for review purposes have permission. Teachers are also allowed to recreate and use images for study from websites, but are not allowed to print or distribute multiple copies. The author is a qualified, registered and active teacher.



*Mohandas Gandhi (1869-1948)*

Seventy years after his assassination Mahatma Gandhi remains as a figure of global importance. He must be one of history's most divisive figures, which is ironic as he spent most of his life trying to unite people. One vehement opinion bitter enemies Trotsky and Churchill shared was that Gandhi was a faker. Others who hated each other venerated Gandhi, much of the world still does. His influence was and is titanic. The American Civil Rights battles, the successful struggles against apartheid, imperialism and for nuclear disarmament owed much to the tactics he developed. The global wide 1980s slogan of the environmentalists "Live simply so that all may simply live" is virtually a condensation of some of his major teachings. The global movements for self-sufficiency, sustained energy and communal living are permeated with his ideas and have been built on by others. Yet Gandhi's methods for social change probably achieved more success outside India than within it. Mehta's book does not examine the global picture: he focuses on Gandhi in two places where he lived, India and to a lesser extent South Africa.

In the first half of the 1970s Ved Mehta interviewed several of Mahatma Gandhi's leading followers and also those relatives who knew him. He did this not only to glean information about Gandhi before these people died, but to see what had happened to these people, what happened to Gandhi's vision of how India should be and what influence his ideas still had within India.

When dealing with these people Mehta does not give a deep analysis on these questions or speculate. His focus stays on the survivors. He observes, records their opinions and recollections and combines his observations with his questions. Both his observations and the survivors speak for themselves, and both are usually succinct. The one thing everyone agrees on is that since independence India has become something very different to what Gandhi envisaged and spent his life trying to achieve.



*Gandhi lived in South Africa from the early 1890s on working as a lawyer*

What was Gandhi's vision? This was inchoate for decades, emerging after years of eclectic religious and political study and activism. Eventually, by around 1919 he wanted what was then colonial India independent of British rule, a nation where people of all faiths would live united in a harmony based on tolerance, respect, non-violence and a search for truth. While admitting the authority of the patriarchal family, holy men and of religious texts, he had a deep suspicion of state power, the police the military and colonialism. While a devout Hindu, he wanted a Hinduism where the non-caste status of Untouchables was abolished and they would be welcomed as equals by those of other castes. While he did not call for its overthrow, he disliked elitist caste systems, encouraging high caste Hindus he came into contact with to follow his example and do menial work usually done by the lower castes. Much of his time was spent on encouraging sanitation and cleanliness. This was no eccentricity or

an anal retentive obsession. Disease spread by filth was perennially one of the biggest killers in India and perhaps the biggest cause of misery, pain, anxiety and stress. There was also a question of self-respect: for how could people living in filth reach higher levels of thought and development? His tactics for achieving his different aims were the same. They were based in education and explanation and when they were resisted he used passive resistance, fasting, boycotts, publicity and non-violence. All his tactics were built on the basis of an idea in Hinduism, that all humans are a battlefield between good and evil and so his tactics appealed to what was good in every person.

He also encouraged people to turn away from materialism and live simply through vegetarianism, meditation, consideration for others, self-sufficiency, studying for truth, and abstinence from drugs and alcohol. The structure for these ideas would be village life, farms and ashrams. Tying in with this self-sufficiency was his distaste for greed, status, misdirected learning and self-indulgence. The latter included sexuality: he expected his followers to live as he did, in celibacy, even already married couples would live this way. Supposedly the only reason for sexual involvement was to procreate. Otherwise sex was egotistical and also wasting energy which could go into the struggle for a better society. Misdirected learning included western style university education. Mehta mentions how Gandhi forbade two of his sons from going to university. Instead he encouraged them to live austere lives while taking part in the independence struggle. Both briefly did so, but ended up living short, self-indulgent, self-destructive lives. Sumitra Kulkarni, Gandhi's daughter in law, was stronger and finally won the battle and got a university education, going on to be an elected representative in India's government.

The difference in these two paragraphs, between the visionary high ideals applied to improve the world and their application (or misapplication) on the personal level is at the core of *Gandhi and His Apostles*. Three sentences from amongst those interviewed stay in the memory and act as a summary of Mehta's investigation.

*Mama Saheb Phadke, a resident of Gandhi's ashram since 1917:*

‘Truth and non-violence are as old as the Hills! But nobody listens!’

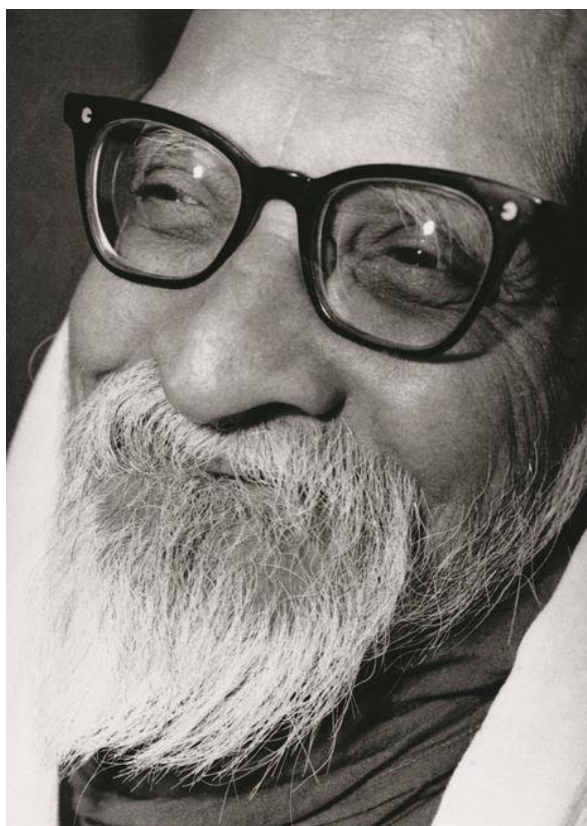
*Chakravarti Rajagopalachari, Governor-General of India 1948-1950, one of Gandhi's leading political associates and father of Gandhi's daughter in law:*

‘The handful of Gandhians who still believe in his philosophy of a simple life in a simple society are mostly cranks.’

*Madeleine Slade, an active follower of Gandhi for thirty four years:*

“Please don’t ask me any more about Bapu. I now belong to van Beethoven.”  
(Bapu meant father and was a moniker for Gandhi; van Beethoven is Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827))

Sad cases do abound in Mehta’s account. One woman informed Mehta of how much better Mehta’s life was in his previous incarnation. Another Gandhian suggested that Mehta return later so he could speak to Gandhi directly in a séance. A third insisted a diamond was forming in his palm as a sign of merit. One follower denounced another ethnic group for being filthy in between spits at the floor. Another was trying to observing the world through astrology.



*Vinoba Bhave (1895-1982) and his ashram*



Others were more serious and were usually involved in setting up ashrams, schools, farming communities and health centres. Madeleine Slade often emerges as an impractical idealist in many accounts, but as Mehta mentions, she established several ashrams and a photo shows her teaching how to use a spinning wheel. He does not recount it, but she also realised the practical effects of cutting trees and vegetation on slopes long before many others. However officials ignored her, so one of her efforts was ruined by landslides. She left India in 1959 for Austria and focused her life on Beethoven and his music. When Mehta met him, Vinoba Bhave had lived in retirement and meditation in an ashram for nearly a decade already, stating that he was a very old man who must prepare to meet his God. He would have a long retirement, living until 1982. One of Gandhi's leading followers, he had continued working as a translator editor and commentator after Gandhi's death, trying to maintain Gandhi's ideas through his own writings. His most important practical scheme concerned land donations and development during the 1950s. While massive donations were made, coming to over four million acres and over a thousand new villages being set up, the land was often of poor quality and needed much work. One success story involved the scientist Satish Babu, who knew and adored Gandhi. At the worst possible time, in the famine of 1966, Babu was able to use his knowledge to find and exploit underground water and using only Gandhi's simple ideas about basic agricultural technology, soon turned an arid landscape into a food bowl.

Unfortunately such successes are rare. Gandhi was able to enthuse people with his vision, but even in his lifetime many could not sustain their initial enthusiasm or follow him consistently. Mehta recounts the story of rich Indian women being inspired to donate their jewellery at Gandhi's meetings – and then going home to redecorate themselves with other kept pieces.



*Images of Gandhi and his wife at an Indian museum*



*Lancashire factory workers welcome Gandhi in 1931.*



*Madeleine Slade (1892-1982) (centre) teaching Indian women spinning*



*Nehru (1889-1964) and Chakravarti Rajagopalachari (1878-1972)*

There were two other problems involving consistency with Gandhi's ideas. Even where they were followed they did not lead to paradise, at least as most people envisage that. Mehta presents an account of living in Gandhi's ashram at Sevagram by an anonymous survivor. The locale was in one of the hottest, driest, dustiest and remote parts of India. It was something less than a participatory democracy as Gandhi made the rules and the ashram's population were "totally reliant" on Gandhi. They lived by his timetable, read what he decided, ate his austere diets and lived in poverty. "There was no such thing as privacy." What little clothing there was simple and hand made. They were told to clean each other's excrement and to believe that this was an honour. Celibacy was a rule as sexuality burnt up energy that could be put to good purposes and distracted from the cause. When it came to control Gandhi had an eye for detail: his son was scolded for losing a pencil stub. The most expensive thing in the ashram was a donated woollen wastepaper basket. Anything resembling luxury did not exist there. No sensuality, colour or relaxation emerges in either the apostle's account or Mehta's description. For fun there was chanting the name of God; nothing pleased Gandhi more.

Amazingly this apostle was affectionate and admiring in describing all this. It says something about Gandhi's followers that to differing extents they either lived like this or tried to. It also says something about human nature that



voluntarily living like this never became a mass movement, for who would or could live like this for long if they did not have to?

Gandhi was also his own worst enemy, not only this ashram lifestyle alienated many, his reversals and staggering inconsistencies alienated many more.

Mehta recounts an interesting revelation about Gandhi's promotion of the spinning wheel. These were widespread in homes across India and seemed a practical basis for self-sufficiency in clothing. Every home could use the spinning wheels to produce their own cloth to make their own long-life clothes, carpets, pillow cases sheets, tablecloths and curtains. There was no need for clothes making factories where people slaved away in terrible conditions to sell to the impoverished. The idea was so attractive that in 1947 the spinning wheel got centre placing on India's flag. Gandhi asked a follower, Maurice Frydman who was an engineer to design a simple practical spinning wheel – and he did. So far so very good, but then the flaw in Gandhi which became a flaw in his practices emerges.

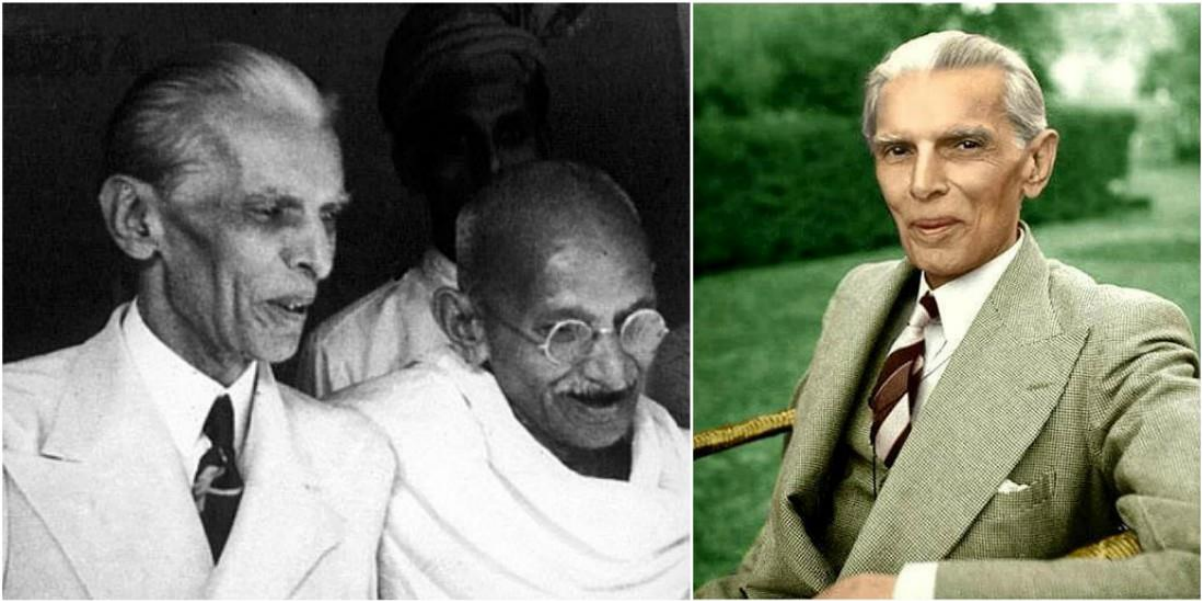
Ghandi disliked Frydman's wheel because it was in his opinion too complicated for villagers to use, not that he apparently conferred with any villagers for their opinions. When Frydman said that a simplified design would have less output, Gandhi thought a lower amount produced per wheel would be a good thing as it would keep everybody employed. People have to work unnecessarily in drudgery because Gandhi thinks that they should? Why not have more free time? What would the spinners think of this? Consultative democracy was not Gandhi's strong point.

According to Mehta, Gandhi did not believe women had sexual desires. This would help explain why he thought nationwide celibacy was achievable. While practising celibacy, Gandhi decided to show how he could overcome temptation by sleeping naked with naked teenage girls. This became widely known and was of course much commented on. Although this obviously lowered his status and credibility and gave the enemies of Indian independence a weapon, he persisted. It gives some idea of how naïve Gandhi could be that when he visited a very proper English girls' school he explained his nocturnal habit to the headmistress - and then asked for a suitable girl for the night! If this had been anyone else the police or a lunatic asylum would have been called. Mehta interviewed some of the surviving Indian women involved, who confirmed the stories and that nothing sexual happened, but what type of man, approaching eighty, by his own admission, feels sexually tempted by teenage girls?

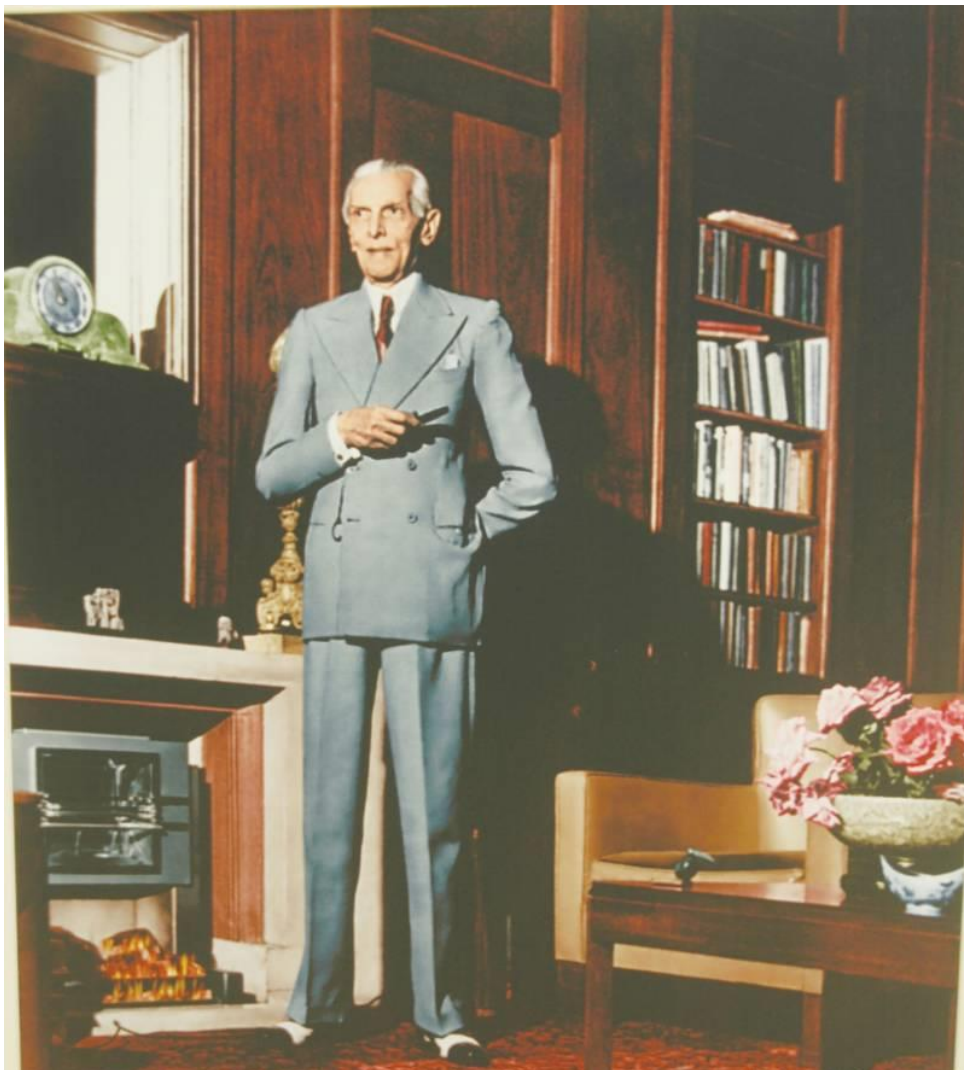
Similarly his fasting and austere diets had a reverse side. Chakravarti Rajagopalachari recalled that Gandhi was “one of the hungriest men I have ever known” and he had a huge appetite –for food and for sex. He also recounted that Gandhi overcame these appetites through strong self-discipline. Is this why he tried to get the world to live through rigid self-deprivation of various kinds?

Supposedly non-violent, a friendly source described how he used physical force against a violent lunatic at the Sevagram ashram. Opposed to war, imperialism and government, he openly and actively supported all three in the South African War of 1899-1902, The Zulu uprising of 1906 and World War One. In 1918 he stunned his supporters with his role as the Viceroy’s recruiter of Indians for the war effort. His defence of this behaviour boiled down to one must know war to oppose it. In 1939 World War Two was widely recognised to be a justified war if ever there was one, but Gandhi opposed it, working against the British and for the independence they had already promised to give as soon as the Indians could resolve their internal conflicts. This policy was adapted at a time when the Japanese were bombing Calcutta and massing armies on India’s eastern borders. They considered invading India, but decided to deal with the Americans first.

India’s Moslem leader Muhammad Ali Jinnah is usually and apparently accurately described as the individual most responsible for colonial India’s partition and the murderous havoc that came with it. However a retired missionary I worked for was resident in India between 1935 and 1941 and again between 1946 and 1966. She had access to India’s and Pakistan’s ruling elites and apparently knew Jinnah. Because he established Pakistan many assume he was some type of Moslem fanatic, yet as Mehta states, he ate pork, smoked tobacco and drank alcohol, all forbidden by the Koran. Years of studying and then working in England had made him “more English than the English.” Shrewd, practical, urbane, wealthy and witty, he had a succinct way of speaking. His mindset was a contrast with Gandhi. In her account Jinnah conferred with Gandhi, wanting definite and practical proposals concerning Moslems and Hindus in a united India. What he got from Gandhi were nebulous speeches along the lines of “a man must make his own choices.” Jinnah rhetorically asked “How could he trust them after this?” “Them” apparently meant Gandhi and his followers. She also recounted another reason for distrusting Gandhi, whom she never met. When he was hospitalised he insisted on being put in the private ward, but on hearing that journalists were coming insisted on being put in the public ward for their interviews, telling the journalists that “a charity ward was good enough for the Mahatma.” She was told this a few days after Gandhi left hospital and her sources were British nurses who tended Gandhi. This story did not get widespread media coverage



*Gandhi and Jinnah. As the photos of Jinnah strongly suggest, Jinnah was witty and was westernised in his ways.*



(if any) but was widely spread and believed in ruling class circles, gaining Gandhi contempt and distrust. Journalists seldom relate being taken in.

Even before India gained independence in August 1947 Gandhi was despondent and must have known he was heading for failure. From the early 1930s onward he was seeing the veniality and corruption within the Congress Party.

Supposedly dedicated to a united independent India, it was split on religion, personalities and tactics. In writings, speeches and protests he had repeatedly if unsuccessfully tried to stop the sectarian attitudes that tore his vision of a united India apart into predominantly Moslem Pakistan (east and west) under Jinnah and predominantly Hindu India under Nehru. In what may have been Gandhi's finest moment he rejected becoming India's national leader. He offered the position to Jinnah, if only he would keep India united. Jinnah could have been another Akbar, a tolerant and therefore popular Moslem ruler of a predominantly Hindu nation. He refused Gandhi's offer. It was widely believed this was because he felt if he accepted the offer he would be voted out in the first India wide election.

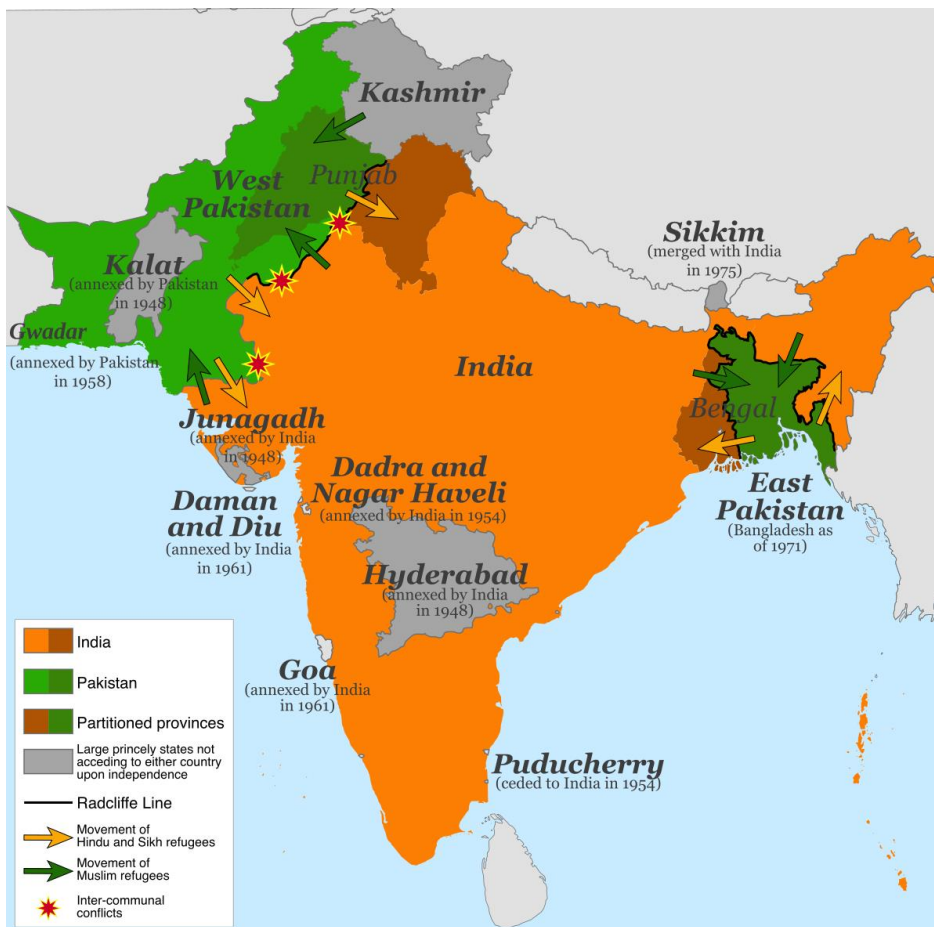


*Gandhi fasting in 1924. The six or seven year old girl beside him is Nehru's daughter and eventual successor, Indira Gandhi (1917-1984). She was not related to the Mahatma, Her husband's surname was a coincidence.*





*Gandhi's dream: One India. Ceylon and Burma, separate colonies may have become aligned. The reality.*



Churchill's recently revealed then secret May 1945 plan to establish Pakistan must have been a crucial factor, with Jinnah's distrust of Gandhi being another, probably less important factor.

During the partition crisis Gandhi courageously and sedulously did everything he could to stop the massacres and the division of India, sometimes at local levels, sometimes effectively. If he had not been assassinated in January 1948, what would have been his fate? By continuing to oppose partition once Nehru and the Congress Party ruled India he was in opposition to the government he set up and was simultaneously venerated as the father of his country and marginalised in politics.

Gandhi has frequently been compared to Jesus, but such comparisons should be ironic. With both men their names were venerated, many studied their words, temples, statues and community centres of assorted kinds were set up in their name – and their ideas remained rarely practised.

Soon after Gandhi's use of the spinning wheel as a symbol of self-sufficiency was placed in the centre of India's new flag, Nehru opted for modernising India through industrialisation. In one of Mehta's interviews Chakravarti Rajagopalachari, India's first native born Governor-General and a cabinet minister under Nehru aptly described the problem for both India and the world: "The glamour of modern technology, money, and power is so seductive that no one – I mean no one- can resist it."

If in 1947 Nehru had resisted and put Gandhi's ideas into practice, what would India have become? The annexations of Hyderabad, Sikkim and Goa would almost certainly not have happened. Gandhians would have put India in the forefront of the battles against climate change. Pollution in Delhi/New Delhi which is now killing hundreds of thousands a year would not exist – as would few if any factories, fast food outlets, obtrusive call centres, nuclear arsenals or massive highways congested with traffic. Few of the benefits of industrialisation would exist either – or hospitals as Gandhi believed illness was caused by imbalances with nature. This gives a hint of how impractical Gandhi's ideas were when applied to a nation, not a village. The idea of hundreds of millions in high rises living in celibacy munching on assorted weeds and grains so that they could direct their energy into working inefficient medieval spinning wheels becomes ridiculous. And what would he have done with India's burgeoning cities?

Although he permeated his society with ruthless, sadistic violence that would have horrified Gandhi, Pol Pot was also a visionary who dreamed of a

decentralised village based utopia and he depopulated Phnom Penh to do it. Like most visionaries who bend their society to their will, Pol Pot used terror to force his people into a dystopian nightmare. Trotsky, one of the world's most erudite and passionate anti-militarists until a few months before getting command of the Red Army, also launched a terror in a futile attempt to gain his utopia. Would Gandhi who had proved himself so erratic have done the same for his utopian vision? Probably not, his better side had a way of shining through.

\*