

Mass Mobilization through Perambulation: M.K. Gandhi

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Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi spent the majority of his time traveling or walking. His routine life, activism, and social work consisted of a lot of walking. His mobility is documented in his autobiography and biographies by various authors. According to a medical journal, Gandhi walked around 18 kms daily for 40 years, and between 1913-1948, during his political campaign, he walked a total of 79,000 kms (Tandon). Did his perambulation also carry a social message? This paper is an attempt to ascertain about it.

Interestingly, Gandhi confessed that he abstained from any kind of exercise during his childhood because of his shyness till cricket or football were made compulsory for him in school. In his autobiography, he mentions, "Today I know that physical training should have as much place in the curriculum as mental training. ... because I had read in books about the benefits of long walks in the open air, ... I had formed a habit of taking walks, which has remained with me. These walks gave me a fairly hardy constitution." Further, his experience in England and the weather taught him to walk for 'eight or ten miles a day' to save fares, to 'gain experience' and keep himself 'practically free from illnesses throughout his stay and a consequent 'fairly strong body'. He continued with this practice in South Africa as well as in India later in his life, and suggested through his writings how walking also led to economic use of resources.

Walking also added to his knowledge of men and matters to a greater extent. In London, Gandhi's friend Mr. Pincutt's advice to him that "A *vakil* (lawyer) should know human nature. He should be able to read a man's character from his face" had an underlying statement for Gandhi to have 'knowledge of the world' around.

Though his friend told him to read books on history and physiognomy Gandhi realized that walking his way up and down the streets of London would teach him to know the world in a better way. While leaving the country he said that he would return 'carrying with [him] thousands upon thousands of English friendships. I do not know them, but I read that affection in their eyes as early in the morning I walk through your streets. All this hospitality, all this kindness will never be effaced from my memory no matter what befalls my unhappy land' (Guha, p. 399).

Coincidentally, his fight for the Indians in South Africa was based on a special law that stated: "Indians might not walk on public footpaths, and might not move out of doors after 9 pm without a permit" (68). Even after an authorized letter (similar to Negro servants) from Mr. Coates, a friend, allowing Gandhi to be out on the streets without police interference, one night he was kicked and pushed by the policeman on duty. His friend was a witness to the case but Gandhi did not want to go to the court for his grievance. This incident thus deepened his feelings for the Indian settlers in South Africa. He writes, "I saw that South Africa was no country for a self-respecting Indian, and my mind became more and more occupied with the question as to how this state of things might be improved" (69).

Gandhi's autobiography mentions that in one of the conversations with his mentor Gopal Krishna Gokhale, Gandhi advised him to walk to which Gokhale replied that he had no time for it amidst his busy schedule. Whereas, Sunil Gokhale, great-grandson of Gokhale mentions that at the Calcutta Congress of 1901 Gokhale asked Gandhi to return from South Africa and serve the people of India, "that since Gandhi had been away from the country for long, he must travel across India to understand the country. He also sought a promise from Gandhi that he would not utter a word on Indian issues for one year till his discovery of India was complete" (Gokhale). Hence, it

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was also his mentor Gokhale who prepared Gandhi for a long stride in India, exploring, understanding the needs, and connecting with its environment and culture, to work for the country and countrymen through traveling, walking, and meeting people.

On the personal front, Gandhi wrote that his children were not happy with the kind of education he gave to them. The children publicly lamented the lack of literary education. In Gandhi's view literary education could be sacrificed but later on realized without regret that his nurturing along with literary education would have been a specimen of an ideal education. Gandhi wrote in his autobiography:

"I had made no other arrangement for their private tuition, I used to get them to walk with me daily to the office and back home a distance of about 5 miles in all. This gave them and me a fair amount of exercise. I tried to instruct them by conversation during these walks if there was no one else claiming my attention. All my children, excepting the eldest, Harilal, who had stayed away in India, were brought up in Johannesburg in this manner." (p. 165)

At Johannesburg, the walking regime did not only make them exercise but also supplied the children with the virtue of sharing and storytelling and thus learning some important lessons to walk the talk in their lives.

Ramchandra Guha in his *Gandhi the Years that Changed the World 1914-1948* remarks how he found that the struggle for independence was weak because of a lack of women's participation and mingling of the educated class with the peasantry. He believed that the mass movement and mobilization were all about marching together. Guha mentions how "Gandhi argued that 'we dare not turn away from a single section of the community or disown any. We shall make progress only if we carry all with us'" (66). Gandhi's marches levelled everything without differentiating amongst class, caste, religion, and gender. He believed mass participation and awareness can only take place based on equality and embracing poverty especially while marching.

For Gandhi walking was *solvitur ambulando*, that is, 'sort it out through walking'. Once while walking on the banks of the Ganga at sunrise, he was enchanted by the 'golden sheen' that appeared on the Ganga but eventually after seeing some people defecating at its banks, he ended his walk with his gloomy reflection on 'the cause of [the] degradation of the Hindus' (Guha, p. 109). He believed in walking and ruminating rather than running unlike the people of Johannesburg, and he writes, "It would be no exaggeration to say that the citizens of Johannesburg do not walk but seem as if they ran. No one has the leisure to look at anyone else, and everyone is engrossed in thinking how to amass the maximum wealth in the minimum of

time!" (Guha, p. 276). In another instance, while walking near the Brihadeeswara temple in Tanjore where only upper-caste Hindus were allowed, he reflected upon the rising sun as he remarks, "I asked myself whether he rose only for caste Hindus or whether he rose for Harijans as well. I discovered at once that he was impartial and had probably to rise more for the Harijans than for the caste Hindus, who had plenty of wealth and who had shut themselves up in their palaces, shutting out light even beyond the rise of the sun... If that temple designed by God opens out to the whole world, shall a man-built temple open less for Harijans?" (Guha, p. 459). Walking thus allowed one to contemplate and meditate and was an experiment to bringing in peace. Even in jail, Gandhi used to go for his routine walks whenever he was agitated or had something to ponder upon.

The act of walking was also therapeutic. It gave solace as well as solutions and ideas to Mahatma Gandhi along with connecting him to his immediate environment. He went on foot to preach *dharma*, the truth. To make people self-sufficient and stable he used to walk the way the masses lived, in their language, in their way. In a letter to Kasturba, his wife, he writes, "One cannot propagate dharma by traveling in trains or cars, nor bullock-carts. That can be done only on foot." (Guha, p. 463). In Champaran as well as in Dandi he wanted his march to be "a long march, or pilgrimage perhaps, where his leisurely progress would enthuse people along the way and attract wider publicity too" (Guha, p. 326). *As per* the Hindu concept, pilgrimage meant a religious journey to river fords. The journey was based on piety, obligation, ritual austerity, hardship, and suffering. But culturally it had secular associations that aimed to have meaningful travel to non-religious places (Digance; Hall). Guha mentions an anonymous anecdotal personal impression that Gandhi during his marches was a "consummate artist-realist.... The breathless walk made you see how urgent and downright and final was his call and his message. He did not tarry for the road-side honors from devotees" (Guha, pp. 334-335). To him, the walk strictly implied both mental and moral discipline.

During Gandhi's Dandi March, the core group kept walking and walked two hundred miles in twenty-four days. His band of walking people represented a strong non-violent army that "caught the attention of the entire nation, from pauper to prince, was riveted on him. Some of his contemporaries deemed his trek comparable to Napoleon's march to Paris on his return from Elba" (Sharma, pp. 64-65). Gandhi's walk was also symbolically alluded to as the 'historic march of Ram Chandra to Lanka' by Motilal Nehru, and P. C. Ray termed it as '*exodus of Israelites by Moses*' (Dandi March). Gandhi affirmed in a speech at Bhatgam that "Do not resort to

motor cars on the slightest pretext. The rule is, do not ride if you can walk. This is not a battle to be conducted with money. It will be impossible to sustain a mass movement with money" (Gandhi *Collected Works*, Vol. 48, p. 498). He also issued an appeal to the world there, "I want world sympathy in the battle of Right against Might" (Sharma, p. 65). His *satyagrahas* were all about walking and creating an understanding in people to wilfully and non-violently fight for *swaraj*.

As is well-known, Gandhi was greatly influenced by Leo Tolstoy for his connection with the local life and Henry David Thoreau for the spiritual and natural quotient of walking. His walking and civil resistance led to many mass mobilizations and also inspired many more such mobilizations throughout the world, namely: Satyagraha in South Africa between 1906-1914, Viramgam Satyagraha in 1915, Champaran Satyagraha in 1917, Kheda Satyagraha in 1918, Non-Cooperation Movement in 1919, Dandi March or Salt Satyagraha in 1930, Quit India Movement of 1942, Martin Luther King's Civil Rights Movement in USA between 1955-1968, Liu Xiaobo's protest in favor of a democratic government in Communist China in 1989 at Beijing, and Tunisian revolution against dictatorship during 2010-11. The marches were very much akin to pilgrimages in the Gandhian sense as both invoked feelings of solidarity and community.

In this light, Henry David Thoreau's essay titled 'Walking' sheds light on the philosophy of Gandhi's daily walking and his political campaigns. Thoreau's opening sentence marks the natural, spiritual, and democratic dimension of Gandhi's walks. "I wish to speak a word for Nature, for absolute freedom and wildness, as contrasted with a freedom and culture merely civil, — to regard man as an inhabitant, or a part and parcel of Nature, rather than a member of society." (Thoreau, p. 657)

In the essay, he further describes the evolution of the word 'saunter', which he believes may come from the French 'Sainte-Terrer' (Holy Land) or the French 'sans terre' (without land). He preferred his first definition and defined walking as a crusade "to go forth and re-conquer this Holy Land from the hands of the Infidels" (Thoreau, p. 657). Such an explanation almost elevates walking to a level of piety and spiritual quest. Gandhi's Satyagraha marches can be seen in this light as a pilgrimage that Gandhi himself mentioned repeatedly.

In an article in his newspaper *Harijanbandhu*, in 1934, Gandhi quoted Thoreau and linked walking with spiritual quests. He writes: "Thoreau's Walden in praise of walking is well known. All the great reformers of the world who have from time to time affected religious revolutions have eschewed the use of vehicles and walked thousands of miles to deliver their mission. Yet, by the intensity of

their faith and the strength of their realization, they were able to achieve what we, in our aeroplane age, with all the gee-gaws at our command, could hardly aspire to. Not mad rush, but unperturbed calmness brings wisdom. This maxim holds as true today as when it was first propounded ages ago." (Gandhi *Collected Works*, Vol. 65, p. 69)

In his essay, Thoreau also wrote that true walking was neither directionless wandering about the countryside, nor was it merely physical exercise. Thus, Gandhi's walks can be seen as symbolic of the path that he loved to 'travel in the interior and ideal world' a path that was difficult to travel as well as determine because it did not 'exist distinctly in our idea' (Thoreau, pp. 662-663). In the essay Thoreau further explains how a wild natural setting while walking 'recreate[s]' one and bestows health on both the individual and the society (Thoreau, p. 666).

Moreover, walking could also tame the savage nature of man and we see it through self-restraint in Gandhi. Control over one's senses was also an important concept of Gandhi towards the attainment of self-rule or *swaraj*. Historically, even *tirthas* (pilgrimages) were quoted as 'sin-destroying localities' (Das and Manirul, p. 243). Further, a pilgrimage or barefoot walking is also considered "a way to heal the body and soul by walking and opening the soul to the spirit inherent in Mother Earth" (Singh, p. 223). Gandhi in his *Hind Swaraj* also mentioned how the coming of railways, the modern means of transportation made man careless, having no self-control and thus accentuated 'the evil nature of man'. While walking the walker surrenders himself to the experience of nature and gains an inspired insight unobtainable through traditional learning and evokes the uncharted, boundless, and unrealized possibility of man. In the light of Thoreau, Gandhi can be said to have 'bathe[ed] [his] head in atmospheres unknown to [his] feet' to attain 'not Knowledge, but Sympathy with Intelligence'. Walking thus also tends to change the perception and perspective along with the creation of heightened consciousness. Thoreau has written about living free without any bondage of any law. The transportation we use daily even to commute small distances somewhere bounds us unknowingly while making us believe in the freedom to traverse the distance. In his view, the man who takes the liberty to live is superior to all the laws, by his relation to the law-maker. "That is active duty," says the Vishnu Purana, "which is not for our bondage; that is knowledge which is for our liberation" (Thoreau, p. 671).

Thoreau's conclusion to his essay and Gandhi's Walk images pure bliss and an alert understanding of the environment around him. Mentioning the 'glory and splendor' of a particular November sunset, he writes: "We walked in so pure and bright a light, gilding the withered

grass and leaves, so softly and serenely bright, I thought I had never bathed in such a golden flood, without a ripple or a murmur to it. The west side of every wood and rising ground gleamed like the boundary of Elysium, and the sun on our backs seemed like a gentle herdsman driving us home at evening." (Thoreau, 674)

Hence, the capitalist and consumerist 'games and amusements' of mankind do not let us cultivate intellectually and spiritually in the current times and further press us into an unconscious despair leading to an unfit society. It all consumes men to a greater extent before they even consider what a good living is. Walking is the only way to reinvigorate ourselves as well as emancipate our dull and subjugated inner being. Man, surely is bestowed by the power of conscious endeavor that can elevate his life. Both Thoreau and Gandhi did not only mention of economic advantage of living simply but also focussed on nurturing the understanding of the self and the universe while 'walking.'

In this light, it is important to take note of the visual representations of Gandhi's perambulation through paintings and statues which are mostly in the pose of walking. Somewhere, the location of these cultural icons in parks, gardens, or museums also unintentionally creates a dynamic culture in the public sphere through strolling. For instance, the adept woodcut painting by Nandalal Bose that represents Salt March to Dandi is kept at the National Gallery of Modern Art, Bengaluru. Even his statues in public places establish the virtue of his walking through his striding pose or a composition of taking a lead while marching along with a group of people. The various statues of Gandhi the world over is also a tribute to him and his religion of walking. In India, Debi Prasad Roy Chaudhuri's 'Gyarah Murti' statue in New Delhi; the cubistic style statue by Advait Gadanayak at the National Gandhi Museum in New Delhi; Gandhi's statue at Ridge Road, Shimla; another at the Ram Bagh Park in Amritsar; yet another depicting Dandi March and Gandhi walking with a stick erected at the Marina Beach and the Mahatma Gandhi Museum, Chennai respectively; the statue by Ramkinkar Baij at Gandhi Mandap Guwahati; and the National Salt Satyagraha Memorial at Dandi in Navsari are some of his famous representations in action. Further, the numerous Mahatma Gandhi roads, or M.G. roads named after Gandhi in both India and abroad can be seen as both social and cultural constructs. They should not only be seen in remembrance of him but as an inspiration to the *pedestrians walking as explorers*, for shopping, for strolling, or taking out time to match the rhythm of their own self.

Gandhi translated his spirituality as well as political stance through walking. As Guha says, many Indian politicians traveled, "but Gandhi traveled *everywhere*.

UP, Bihar, Bengal, Assam, the Tamil and Telugu country, Maharashtra, Punjab—Gandhi went to all these places, visiting cities and towns small and even smaller" (p. 175). Hence, Gandhi's profound need to walk even during his imprisonment can be seen as closely connected to his intellectual formation, sense of self, and fitness. Where the use of the fitbit and measuring steps daily is a new recreational activity for us, there, this walking regime has given an enough peep into stories, motivations, and concerns associated with the life of the Mahatma. We are the fitbit lost wanderers. For Gandhi walking was an activity of existential connotations influencing his thoughts and ideas; social experience; politics and sense of identity; thereby disseminating his messages of peaceful co-existence; respect for all ignoring gender, caste, class, religion, non-violence; and environmental responsibility. Hence, for Gandhi walking was both religious and secular in tone.

Thus, even according to the old science of naturopathy and the tales of monks about fitness and self-healing one needs to attend to the rhythm of one's body through walking, breathing in fresh air, and sunbathing. Gandhi wrote, "If we make it a practice to walk long distances, the *atman* within us too will be governed by the rhythm" (*Collected Works*, Vol. 37, p. 147). Hence, we need to return to the Gandhian philosophy of simple and creative living to create a fit and better India aiming at physical, mental, and spiritual well-being. In his various letters to his friends and disciples, Gandhi endorsed walking as 'the prince of exercises'. He also gave strategy for walkability, that is, factors conducive to promoting walking: "... do not walk in the sun. Go in the morning," (*Collected Works*, Vol. 86, p. 203), "man [should] walk[s] erect on his feet" (p. 235), "Do not do any reading while walking. Only think. Do not strain your eyes" (p. 354), "It is often a good thing to dash cold water on the face and even the head before starting the walk and sip cold water during the walk on the slightest warning of approaching giddiness" (*Collected Works*, Vol. 59, p. 55), and "you should live in the open air and daily go for as long walks - up to fifteen miles" (p. 201). He also mentioned how walking made an independent political statement and was a self-fashioned concept that would not require any external encouragement "... *satyagraha* does not require encouragement from others. It is like a razor's edge. He who would walk on it does not pause to think of ways of securing help from others" (*Collected Works*, Vol. 11, p. 124).

Nowadays, with the change in our lifestyle and economic boom, there has been a decline in our engagement with walking. The new fitbit era if at all has increased walking accounts to mechanical and conscious walking aimed to compete in steps only. With the alarming

and rising climate change and poor health walking the Gandhian way needs to be encouraged culturally to a larger extent. Walking is also about positive and healthy interaction with the public sphere. It increases one's connectivity with nature and the landscape one is walking in. Walking as a sustainable art of living has benefitted health, society, and the environment greatly. Thoreau had already lent a philosophical dimension to walking as an act of engagement with nature around. For Gandhi walking was an amalgam of well-being, sustainable means of travel, community improvement, and religious and political act of forming an identity and asking for rights. The literature by and on Gandhi discloses how walking also had the touch of Keatsian 'negative capability'. It provides one opportunity to find self and others while walking together or in the travails of the walk. Currently, our green audit of walking is of utmost importance with lot many automobiles on the roads, promanades, and strolling spaces taken over by malls and supermarkets, open communities turning into gated ones under the impact of fear and security. In turn, neoliberal capitalism has reduced the green and open public spheres but is promoting mechanical walking through commoditized supplies of fitbits, apps, games, walking gear, shoes, walking aids, and walking tours/activities. This endorsement of walking has turned this natural, spiritual, and creative activity into a mere footnote.

Walking produced many thinkers, writers, as well as revolutionaries in the previous times. The fitbits, pedometers, walking apps, and games have just increased the competition along with making in sync the real activity of walking with the simulated one producing an augmented reality of the same. Our spatial and experiential reality has been greatly transformed because of the interference of technology in our walking regime. The technology will increase commodification and competition but certainly reduce the public sphere along with the information exchange commons. Walking per se is a democratic act that has become quite mechanised and stringent. Walking following the way of technology removes our sense of place as well as the community around us; all people are busy doing is measuring their steps with others and challenging them on apps. Walking contributed greatly to personal as well as social well-being; but now it is all about fitness (decreasing weight, blood pressure, and sugar levels) and its tracking. The goal is outer achievement and not inner. Thus, walking today is greatly affected by sensors and apps in mobile phones and fitbits and has intervened in normal human behaviour.

Nevertheless, it's important to invoke Gandhi to find a natural nuance for our walking. How he perambulated

was all about awareness, mindfulness, and consciousness promoting inner peace. Gandhian way of walking's by-product was fitness, strength, immunity, and physical build; but it was intended for spiritual development and psychological rebalancing. Our walk today separates us from our experience which cannot still our inner selves to attain peace or achieve solutions to our daily problems. Gandhi practiced walking the Zen way by dissolving into the moment, gaining awareness, and relating to the outer environment. The meditative way of walking allowed personal grounding and non-violent solutions to challenges. The walking led to muscle relaxation and slowed down random thoughts to produce an appreciation of life. Gandhian *satyagrahas* can be seen philosophically as well as metaphorically to mean progress, unity, and strength toward a goal as walking also gives direction. Further, psychologically and physiologically listening to speeches standing or sitting would not have created an impact, than what walking did to many. The walking strength visually encouraged many to join the march while raising the commitment and determination of all toward a cause to form a bigger and more peaceful coalition. To conclude, Gandhi's power and experiences of perambulation are aptly woven in the words of the Hindi poet Sohanlal Dwivedi, in a couplet and are an inspiration for many to march ahead or delve into meditative walking:

"Wherever his two feet walked, there walked a million others
Whatever he looked upon, a million eyes gazed on."

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