

or otherwise, in the wake of partition naturalises and reinforces the pre-existing notions of fundamentally opposed Hindu, Sikh and Muslim communities. Datta strictly adheres to her protocol, scrupulously avoiding any normative position while recounting Subhashini's testimony, and skilfully crafts memory as history giving us an account that is credible. In the process she opens up a historian's territory to look at an event from various perspectives, not necessarily congruent.

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M. K. Gandhi, *Indian Home Rule [Hind Swaraj]: A Centenary Edition with an Introduction by S.R. Mehrotra*, New Delhi & Chicago: Promilla & Co., Publishers in association with Bibliophile South Asia, 2010, 238 pp. Rs. 495.

Hind Swaraj is acknowledged as Mahatma Gandhi's root text, and even in the closing years of his life he expressed his unchanging adherence to the main ideas expressed in it, first published in Gujarati in 1909. However even when he was expressing his continuing faith in its ideas, apparently in the nature of a paradox, in his letter of October 5, 1945 to Jawaharlal Nehru, he made certain qualifications that he did 'not think' to have made in the *Hind Swaraj*, notably in relation to science, and to some extent towards technological innovations like the railways etc. But it should not be imagined that it had been a frozen text with him even earlier. Commencing from the twenties, he had repeatedly clarified on various occasions that he did not visualize a return to rusticity (my choice of a rather unhappy word), and, that he never advocated the rejection of both the principles as well as the spirit of scientific research. But he never deviated from the position that *Hind Swaraj* contained his basic ideas. Writing in the *Harijan*, on October 10, 1939, Gandhi called *Hind Swaraj* - 'that incredibly simple (so simple as to be regarded as foolish) booklet'. It represented an 'attempt to see beauty in voluntary simplicity, poverty and slowness'. It was the 'picture' of an ideal, which he never expected to reach himself, and 'hence cannot expect the nation to do so.' But he nevertheless asserted that, having 're-read it carefully' in the recent past, he wanted readers to know 'that I could not revise a single idea. I had no desire to revise the language.'¹ Since its first publication, *Hind Swaraj* has attracted critical commentary, not to mention the fact of its almost immediate proscription. Gandhian scholarship has variously seen in it, a

fundamental ideological text, a testament of the politics of decolonization, a formative position in the tradition-modernity dialectic, and of course, an alternative economic theory. Commencing with the year 2009, we have witnessed a renewed interest in the work, substantially owing to the fact that it was the centenary of its first publication, although some contemporary trends in world politics have made Gandhi seem much more relevant as a political thinker, than was being acknowledged in the recent decades. However, it is also essential that the text, containing many of Gandhi's key ideas, be also critically interrogated, particularly, his evaluation of some professions, as well as his idea of villages as the necessary embodiments of truth and non violence. This apart from such knotty issues, as those pertaining to its translation, the circumstances of its conception, and the genealogy of its ideas.

S.R. Mehrotra's lengthy and comprehensive Introduction to this centenary edition of *Hind Swaraj*, has addressed itself to some of these issues. Many of these it deals with directly, while some others find indirect elucidation in his tracing of the growth of Gandhi's ideas, done mainly towards the close of the introduction. Regarding the genesis of the text, Mehrotra has adduced Gandhi's statement to establish his contention that the book was written primarily for Pranjivan Mehta. He has also sought to dispel other related 'myths', particularly, that *Hind Swaraj* 'was the outcome of some sudden inspiration'. His argument appears valid that the ideas contained in the text had been forming in Gandhi's mind over a period of time. However, it seems from Gandhi's own testimony that at a certain stage the ideas had 'taken a violent possession' of him. But for me, the appeal of Mehrotra's introduction lies mainly in his highlighting, with his characteristically meticulous scholarship, how Gandhi situated himself in the violence - non violence debate, which forms the core of *Hind Swaraj*. The introduction also mentions in detail Aurobindo's response to Gandhi's "Passive Resistance" in the Transvaal, but unfortunately, it offers no discussion on why Gandhi opted for the term in his English version of *Hind Swaraj*, in spite of the fundamental difference between his and Aurobindo's position on the basic philosophy of passive resistance. It does not seem likely that Gandhi could have been unaware of Aurobindo's definition of the concept, when he was evidently so familiar with the ideas and policies of the 'Extremist Party of India.' In fact Lord Amthill's disquiet at the possibility of passive resistance in the Transvaal being financed by 'sedition-mongers' in India - mentioned in the Gandhi-Amthill correspondence otherwise treated in detail in the introduction - was probably directly

informed by the fact of Aurobindo's unpublished last article on *The Doctrine of Passive Resistance - "Boycott,"* used as an exhibit for the prosecution in the Alipore Conspiracy Case of 1908, in which Aurobindo was an accused. An examination of this dimension would have been welcome. The introduction is marked by a few startling disclosures, such as, that even by 1909 Gandhi was 'not a believer in representative government for India, being fond of saying "that benign autocracy was the best form of Government"'. It is also forthright in linking Gandhi's 'tirade against modern/western civilization' to a 'phobia' imbibed 'during his student days in London'; elsewhere Mehrotra states that Gandhi's 'treatment of "ancient Indian Civilization" was, to say the least, unhistorical, and his call for a return to it unrealistic.' The detailed analysis of the circumstances surrounding the proscription of *Hind Swaraj* constitutes another positive virtue for the comprehensive introduction, although the repetition of the views of the Oriental Translator, mentioned once, could have been avoided. The introduction also probes the English psyche while discussing the validity of satyagraha. Even while having doubts as to the stated conclusion that the success of satyagraha depended substantially on the opponent, it is undoubted that the natural British inclination towards constitutional norms, outlined with such felicity by Mehrotra, left the conclusion of the Gandhian freedom movement much less in doubt, and so much more non-violent than may have been possible in a different political scenario. The closing section with its concise sketch of Gandhi's mind - 'a strange mixture of the Victorian liberal, Indian patriot, philosophical anarchist and simple-lifer' - dismisses through the sketch, the more trite and superficial criticisms of Gandhi's theories in general, and of *Hind Swaraj* in particular. The publication of this Centenary Edition of the *Hind Swaraj* is timely and relevant; its value enhanced by a scholarly and insightful introduction.

NOTE

1. *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, Vol. LXX, New Delhi: Publications Division, 1958-1978, p. 242.

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Sheoraj Singh Bechain, *Mera Bachpan mere Kandhon Par*, New Delhi: Vani Prakashan, 2009, pp. 422. Rs. 695

Sheoraj Singh Bechain's recently published autobiography, in Hindi, *Mera Bachpan Mere Kandhon Par* (My Childhood on My Shoulders) is remarkable in many ways and destined to be placed among the best books in this genre. The writer courageously recounts some of the most painful experiences of his childhood which was full of unimaginable hurdles and hardships. While going through the pages of this voluminous book no one can remain unmoved. Reading page after page one feels the prick of conscience which makes deep bruises on the hearts of the readers, taking the reader into a socio-economic arena which is virtually suffocating. The moment the reader enters into the world of the author the reader is stunned and wonders if this the real state of our much-touted, India Shining? In the book Sheoraj not only describes his childhood with pathos with the sharpest edge of his pen, wielding his pen ed like a knife, he has also pricked the festering boil of social discrimination that persists in our country despite many reformist, constitutional and legislative initiatives

Sheoraj's childhood was a construct of the many interwoven threads of socio-economic disparity, class injustice, caste exploitation, the superstitious ways of rural India, and above all the callous indifference of those whose responsibility it was to eradicate these. The child that Sheoraj looks back towards from his present position has three childhoods mixed in one - first, of a child who has lost his father and is the member of a family that has three blind grandfathers none of whom with sufficient earnings to fill the bellies of the hapless family, the second, of a child who is an untouchable *chamar* by birth and is ostracized by his own caste people because his family still depends on the meagre earnings of the shunned occupation of skinning dead animals, tanning the skins and selling them in nearby markets; and the third, of a child who despite all adverse circumstances cherishes a dream to educate himself. A child in any of these three conditions would find it hard to survive, yet here in Sheoraj's life as a child all the three conditions extended their stranglehold on him.

This child witnesses the tragic death of his father, the only able-bodied earning member of the family at a marriage function at which some people forcibly induce him to consume country liquor as a result of which he contracts poisoning in his stomach dies. The patient cries out to be taken to some hospital but the family elders take him to *ojhas* who treat him with brutal beating intended to exorcise the so-called ghosts that they said had possessed him. As a result death snatches away his