

AN ANALYSIS OF THE INFLUENCE OF THE IDEAS AND PERSONALITY OF MAHATMA GANDHI ON GUJARATI LITERATURE

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Abstract: The ideas, anti-colonial movements and personality of Mahatma Gandhi had had a profound influence on different walks of life in India in the 20th century. Culture and literature of the various Indian languages also came under his spell. Probably the greatest impact of Gandhian ideas was felt in the literature of his native Gujarati language, so much so that the period of three decades beginning 1915 is designated as the Gandhian era (Gandhi Yug) by historiographers of Gujarati literature. This article analyzes in what ways Gandhi's ideas and India's freedom struggle transformed the orientation of Gujarati literature from elites to the common masses. It also brings out the key characteristics of Gandhi's own writings in Gujarati and his contribution to the standardization of Gujarati dictionary.

Index Terms - Mahatma Gandhi, Gujarati Literature, Gandhi Yug, Nationalism, Indian Literature

I. Introduction:

Good writing requires both creativity and inspiration as its essential prerequisites. While creativity is generally an outcome of the internal process of an author, inspiration is derived from an external source. Quite often, such an external source is a great personality who has motivated others through his words, ideas and actions. Mahatma Gandhi was one such person who proved to be a great source of inspiration for a generation of writers and litterateurs during his lifetime and afterwards, not just in India but also in other countries of the world.

Doubtless, Gandhi made a large impact on politics and society of India in the 20th-century through his path-breaking social and spiritual philosophy and through his mass satyagrahas that led to the attainment of freedom from the British rule. Jawaharlal Nehru rightly described the coming of Gandhi to India in these words: "And then Gandhi came. He was like a powerful current of fresh air that made us stretch ourselves and take deep breaths; like a beam of light that pierced the darkness and removed the scales from our eyes; like a whirlwind that upset many things, but most of all, the working of people's minds. He did not descend from the top; he seemed to emerge from the millions of India, speaking their language and incessantly drawing attention to them..." (Nehru, 2004, p. 358)

Gandhi's engagement with diverse fields of social life led to the transformation of India's civil society, which tried to spread the spirit of his nationalism by several means. The Gandhian movement aimed not just at achieving political freedom but also at social and economic swaraj and spiritual regeneration of the Indian society. It was "not merely a political struggle, but an all-pervasive emotional experience for all Indians in the nineteen twenties and thirties.... That was an experience that was national in nature" (Mukherjee, 1971, p. 14) Culture and literature were important domains that were profoundly influenced by the Gandhian movement and ideology. The impact of Gandhi's personality on the literature of most Indian languages was so profound that the period of three decades from the mid-twenties to the end of the forties of the 20th century has come to be designated as the 'Gandhian era' in Indian literature. Of course, nature and expressions of Gandhi's influence on the literature of different Indian languages are not always alike and are quite dissimilar in some cases.

Gandhi's literary influence was manifested both apparently as well as subtly in the form of the expression of an attitude of honour and self-respect vis-à-vis the colonial rule. Not just the writers in the Indian languages, even the writers who wrote in English or in other languages outside India came under the spell of Gandhi's ideas. Indian English writers like R. K. Narayan, Mulk Raj Anand, Raja Rao and Sarojini Naidu gave representation to Gandhian themes through characters in their fiction or through their poetry. Works of some foreign authors like George Orwell, Edmund Jones, Ellen Horrup, Romain Rolland, Pearl S. Buck, Herrymon Maurer, Dominique Lapierre and others testify to the far-reaching literary impact of Gandhi's ideas.

II. Mahatma Gandhi's Writings:

Despite his very hectic public life and leadership of the national movement, Gandhi's writings are voluminous. They run into more than a hundred volumes of collected works and cover a wide range of subjects like politics, religion, spirituality, health, naturopathy, social issues, and economic problems and so on. His inspiring autobiography "The Story of My Experiments with Truth" (1927) has been among the global best-sellers and has been translated into scores of Indian and foreign languages. His other books like "Hind Swaraj" (1909), "Satyagraha in South Africa" (1925), "Mangal Prabhat" (1930), "Anashaktiyog" (1930) etc. have also shaped the minds of political and social activists in India and outside. Gandhi published a journal named 'Indian Opinion' in South Africa. He edited papers 'Navjivan' and 'Harijan' in Gujarati, and 'Young India' in English, after his return to India.

Gujarati being his mother tongue, Gandhi was most comfortable expressing his inner feelings and beliefs in the Gujarati language. He was also quite proficient in written and spoken English. Gandhi did not write what could be called as creative literature in a conventional sense. He never "wrote anything for the pleasure of writing or of self-expression, as pure literature. But though they had always a practical aim and purpose, most of Gandhiji's writing had the quality of true literature." (Patel, 1981) Even as Gandhi did not write creative literature himself, he had a deep understanding of such literature written by others. His interpretation of devotional poems, in particular, was very scholarly.

Major forms of writing to Gandhi's credit are autobiography, letters, essay and translation. His writings were unique and did not carry the influence of the earlier writers in Gujarati literature. He developed his distinctive style of writing and diction that was easy to relate to for the common, semi-educated masses that were not initiated into sophisticated literary activity. Gandhi's language was direct, simple, unpretentious and non-ornamental. His writings were dense and contained no extra words. They were basically not aimed at literary objective or creation of beauty, but at spreading awareness about his core principles of truth and non-violence, as also about the need to resist the British rule through these principles. Gandhi's style and diction of Gujarati writing were followed by many other contemporary writers. (Modi, 2012)

III. Mahatma Gandhi's Influence on Gujarati Literature:

The growth of Gujarati literature in the initial phase of the modern period was helped to a great extent by the development of printing technology and the introduction of English education. Writers like Narmad and Dalpatram used literature as a means to spread awareness about certain harmful social practices. Their writings represented the essence of what is known as the reformist era ('Sudharak Yug') in Gujarati literature. The period of this era is roughly from 1850 to 1885. Other prominent writers of this era are Nandshankar and Mahipatram.

In the subsequent period, the emphasis shifted to the pursuit of scholarly approaches in literary writings. Writers of this period were learned scholars who wrote for other learned and educated men of their own kind rather than for the common people. Their writings referred to and were inspired by classical works of English literature that they studied during their higher education in the colleges and universities established by the British rulers. This era is appropriately called the 'scholarly era'

(‘Pandit Yug’) which stretches from around 1885 to 1915. The spirit of this era is best represented by the works of writers like Govardhanram Tripathi, Anandshankar Dhruv, Narsinhrao Divetia and others.

The arrival of Gandhi to India in 1915 and his decision to settle down in an Ashram in Ahmedabad resulted in a complete turn-around in the volume and kind of literature written by literary authors in Gujarat over the next three decades. Ahmedabad becoming an epicentre of freedom struggle under Gandhi’s leadership and several satyagrahas under his leadership brought about a qualitative transformation in the literature of those times. The period from 1915 to the end of the 1940s, therefore, came to be identified as the Gandhian era (“Gandhi Yug”) in Gujarati literature. It is considered as one of the most remarkable periods in the modern era of Gujarati literature, as both the quality and quantity of writings in Gujarati expanded and deepened.

As the well-known poet Umashankar Joshi wrote: “Gujarati literature grew inevitably in the atmosphere of the national upsurge during the 1920s and more particularly during the 1930s. The guiding spirit was Gandhi. It was, however, not so much Gandhian philosophy as things like nationalism, return to the village, preference for the language of the common man, a surface identification with the masses that colored the writings of most of the poets. This was reinforced by the newly growing awareness of socialistic ideals during the early 1930’s... it should be borne in mind that the main things in the Gandhian view of life, viz., compassion or love as the dispenser of man’s destiny, rarely figured as the dominant theme in Gujarati writings. It could be argued that the Gandhian philosophy has not yet found a vent in Gujarati writing as also in other languages. What is significant is the fact that the phenomenon called Gandhi released the creative energies in the life and letters of Gujarat. By 1930, it was a stupendous tidal wave.” (Joshi, 1973)

Literature in the pre-Gandhian era was largely confined to the elite, educated and scholarly class of Gujarat’s society. One of the greatest effects of Gandhi’s personality was the transformation of this orientation of literature from elites to the common masses. Gandhi also succeeded in aligning lot women to the literary mainstream in Gujarati. Lilavati Munshi, Vidyagauri Nilakanth, Hansa Mehta and Sharadagauri Mehta are some of the prominent women writers of the era who owed their literary careers to Gandhi’s efforts.

The impact of Gandhi’s ideas on contemporary Gujarati literature can be measured in the kind of subjects that writers of the Gandhian era took up for their prose or poetry. Likewise, this influence was manifested in the style of writing that appealed to the taste of the common masses. The purpose of literature was not restricted to the arousal of patriotic sentiments. It also addressed the need for social reform. Themes like equality and justice for women, removal of untouchability, uplift of Dalits, revival of village industries, preservation of Indian culture against the Western value system, dangers of unchecked industrialization etc. acme to be woven into literary writings.

The ethos of Gandhian-era literature is perhaps best represented in the poetry of the acclaimed poets Umashankar Joshi and Tribhuvandas Luhar, “Sundaram”. Their poems are based on themes of exploitation of the downtrodden, revolt and resistance, economic inequality, self-assertion of the common people, spiritual regeneration of the individual and society and so on. Sentiments of the rural craftsmen, farmers, women and other sections of society are reflected in their creations. Apart from Umashankar Joshi and “Sundaram”, other writers who were deeply influenced by Gandhi’s ideas and personality are: Kakasaheb Kalelkar, Swami Anand, Kishorlal Mashruwala, Umashakar Joshi, Mahadev Desai, Zaverchand Meghani, Jugatram Dave, Ishwar Petlikar, Ramnarayan Pathak “Dwiref”, Indulal Gandhi, Ravishankar Maharaj, Jhinabhai Desai ‘Snehrashmi’, Pannalal Patel, Gaurishankar Joshi ‘Dhumketu’, Vijayraj Vaidya, Vishnuprasad Trivedi, Sundarji Betai, Mansukhlal Jhaveri and several others.

Quite a few writers belonging to this era were not just creative persons who observed society from a distance and wrote about their emotions. They were also active participants in the ongoing freedom struggle. Kakasaheb Kalelkar and Mahadev Desai, for instance, had to spend several years

in prison due to participation in Gandhi's satyagrahas against the British rule. Indeed, prison became a place where a lot of literature of high quality came to be written during the 1930s and the 1940s.

Mahatma Gandhi also stressed for the reform and standardization of Gujarati language through the Gujarat Vidyapith which was established by him for promoting nationalist education. Vidyapith became the nerve centre of intellectual activities related to the freedom struggle. The "Saarth Jodani Kosh", published by the Vidyapith in 1929, is recognized even today as an authentic dictionary for meaning and spelling of Gujarati words. (Sebastian, 2009) Under Gandhi's guidance, Vidyapith prepared scores of standard textbooks written in the Gujarati language for the benefit of students from the primary to the post-graduate levels. (Achyut Yagnik, 2005, p. 174)

Considering his varied contributions as a writer and as the leader of the freedom struggle, Mahatma Gandhi was nominated as President of the Gujarati Sahitya Parishad (Gujarati Literary Conference), an apex body of Gujarati writers and litterateurs. Addressing the literary community at the Parishad's 12th conference in 1936, Gandhi exhorted the writers through these words: "I tell our writers that instead of writing for the people of cities, let us start writing for our dumb population. I am the self-appointed representative of this dumb population. On behalf of them I say, enter that sphere with enthusiasm." (1994, pp. 452-453) These words symbolize not just Gandhi's own views on the purpose of literature but also the social concern for the downtrodden and marginalized classes that was accepted as the key responsibility of literary community by a large number of writers of the Gandhian era.

While discussing the history and nature of Gujarati literature in the first half of the twentieth century, apart from highlighting the deep influence of Gandhi, it is necessary to refer to several other intellectual sub-streams that emanated from the Gandhian mainstream and became independent streams of literature later. The Gandhian era was thus not a homogeneous or a linear period. Writings influenced by socialism constitute one such sub-stream that attracted several authors. Scholars like Bhikhu Parekh, therefore, argue that the expression "Gandhi Yug" is not an appropriate description for this era and Gandhi's influence should be seen more as a continuous ideological thread that exists even today rather than as a phenomenon confined to a particular period of 20th the century. (Parekh, 2016)

IV. Conclusion:

The arrival of Mahatma Gandhi and intensification of freedom struggle under his leadership stirred up changes in many fields in India. Influence of Gandhi's ideas and personality on creative and critical literature of the pre-independence era is very deep. For more than three decades in the first half of the twentieth century, most writers in Gujarati literature reflected the nationalist ethos of Gandhi-led freedom struggle. The orientation of literature too changed qualitatively to reflect and satisfy popular expectations. Examination of the different shades of the influence of Gandhi in Gujarati literature constitutes an important domain for research and analysis by literary scholars. (Thaker, 2006)

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