

Role of Gandhi as a Communicator

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Abstract— Although Gandhi might appear to be a well-studied subject, there are indeed aspects of this subject that await serious scholarly attention. In our view, Gandhi as a communicator is one such. It is generally held that Gandhi was a great communicator and it has often been observed that Gandhi's success as a communicator was due to the various strategies that he had insightfully designed to communicate with the people of India, but this is perhaps only part of the explanation. Besides, one might argue that those strategies worked primarily because it was Gandhi who used them. The language and the style of Gandhi and his use of the verbal and non-verbal resources for communicative purposes await careful study. To understand his effectiveness as a communicator one might also consider studying his ideas and thoughts, although communication theorists tend to neglect the content or the interest value of what is being communicated in their attempt to build models of communication. Here we do not aspire to go beyond merely scratching the surface of the subject under study, namely, Gandhi as a communicator, and we propose to present our observations in the form of somewhat loose notes, rather than of a well structured essay containing a well formulated thesis.

Index Terms—Gandhi, Communicator, Real life.

I. INTRODUCTION

It has often been asserted that Gandhi's impact on the people he met and spoke to was simply electrifying. These people were not just freedom fighters and politicians, writers and thinkers; there were among them slum dwellers and villagers, farmers and labourers, little-educated people and illiterates. But Gandhi wasn't a populist, saying what he thought his audience would like to hear; he was on the contrary quite capable of saying things or doing things that were rather incomprehensible to the people at large or were considered unacceptable, which may not be surprising since he was a great deal more than the leader of a freedom movement; he was a social reformer too. Communication theorists see communication essentially as sharing: sharing of meaning, although they are not unanimous with regard to who are involved in this sharing (Fiske; 1990). Does this sharing involve, in all instances of communication - real life, day-to-day interactions, and reading of texts both - only the speaker (the writer) and the hearer (the reader) - one might use the term "speaker - hearer" in the context of real life interaction - or does this involve only the readers, who engage themselves with the text, the writer not coming into the picture at all? How much is shared in communication: only the basic meaning or the meaning and the entire emotional field in which this meaning is created? There could be obvious difficulties in knowing, except in the clear cases, whether in

some specific instance there has been a considerable degree of sharing, no matter who the "sharers" are. At another level Gandhi interacted with a very different part of the population, namely, the educated and the sophisticated, through what he wrote and said. Language here becomes very important, being the main resource of communication. Even a cursory look at his writing reveals the sincerity and the genuineness of his concerns because of which his style had a certain character: it was simple, direct and clear. Consider these examples:

(1) Hinduism has sinned in giving sanction to untouchability (Young India, April 24, 1921).

(2) We glibly charge Englishmen with insolence and haughtiness. Let us, before we cast the stone at them, free ourselves from liability to reproach. Let us put our house in order (Young India, May 11, 1921).

(3) We are guilty of having suppressed our brethren; we make them crawl on their bellies, we have made them rub their noses on the ground; we push them out of railway compartment - what more than this has British rule done? What charge can we bring against Dyer and O'Dwyer, may not other, and even our own, people lay at our doors? We ought to purge ourselves of this pollution (Young India, May 4, 1921).

(4) The curse of foreign domination and the attendant exploitation is the justest retribution meted out by God to us for our exploitation of a sixth of our race and their studied degradation in the sacred name of religion (Young India, December 29, 1920).

There is no ambiguity in the language, no hedging, and no avoiding saying directly what he thought about some matter in apprehension of the possible resentment that these thoughts might evoke in the people. In fact, it is this directness that makes his expression forceful.

Gandhi eschewed rhetoric in favour of clarity and directness. One rhetorical device that Gandhi used effectively, like many other effective journalists, was rhetorical question. He used it only occasionally, as in the third extract above and in the following:

(6) The Qaid-e-Azam says that all the Muslims will be safe in Pakistan. In Punjab, Sind and Bengal we have Muslim League Governments. Can one say that what is happening in those provinces augurs well for the peace of the country? Does the Muslim League believe that it can sustain Islam by the sword (Speech at a Prayer Meeting, September 7, 1946)?

(7) What good will it do the Muslims to avenge the happenings in Delhi or for the Sikhs and the Hindus to avenge cruelties on our co-religionists in the Frontier and West Punjab? If a man or a group of men go mad, should everyone follow suit (From a Prayer Meeting, September 12, 1947)?

Apart from rhetorical question, he sometimes used irony, as in (8) and occasionally, a simple metaphor, as in (9). Simplicity of language, the balanced structure and the irony make (8) effective.

(8) I believe myself to be an orthodox Hindu and it is my conviction that no one who scrupulously practices the Hindu

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religion may kill a cow-killer to protect a cow (On "Hindu Muslim Unity", April 8, 1919).

(9) Let not future generations say that we lost the sweet bread of freedom because we could not digest it (From a Prayer Meeting, September 12, 1947).

II. MAHATMA GANDHI AS A MASS COMMUNICATOR

In the contemporary media world, where the 'advertorials' probably bear more importance than the 'editorials', I believe it should be interesting to know how the Father of our Nation, Mahatma Gandhi, contributed to the fields of journalism and mass communication. An effective communicator, Gandhi was fearless and eloquent with his words. He reached out to millions of people and convinced them of his cause. According to Chalapathi Raju, an eminent editor, Gandhi was probably the greatest journalist of all time, and the weeklies he ran and edited were probably the greatest weeklies the world has known. He published no advertisement, and at the same time he did not let his newspapers run at a loss. He had gained considerable experience in South Africa, where he had taken over the editorship of the 'Indian Opinion' and published it in English, Tamil and Gujarati, sometimes running the press himself. Young India and Harijan became powerful vehicles of his views on all subjects. He wrote on all subjects. He wrote simply and clearly but forcefully, with passion and burning indignation. One of the objects of a newspaper, he said, is to understand the popular feeling and give expression to it, another is to arouse among the people certain desirable sentiments, and the third is fearlessly to expose popular defects.

III. GANDHI - THE GREAT COMMUNICATOR AND JOURNALIST

Apart from being a national leader and social reformer, Gandhi was a great communicator. More than any one else, he recognized that communication is the most effective tool to shape opinion and mobilize popular support. He was successful because he had a latent skill in communication that surfaced in South Africa where he had gone initially to set up practice as a lawyer. This gave him the clue to rally millions of his countrymen when he returned to India. Gandhi's journalism belonged to an era when there was neither radio nor television. Such was the power of his 'soul communication' that whatever he said and wrote reached the farthest corners of this country within days and to the entire world thereon. Gandhi, in a journalistic career spanning nearly four decades, edited six journals. None, including Harijan and Navjivan, at first, could boast a circulation of more than a few thousand copies. But such was Gandhi's grasp of the basics of mass communication that he ensured that his daily "outpourings of heart and soul" reached all. If one were to ask the question as to who came first- 'Gandhi - The Freedom Fighter' or 'Gandhi - The Media Crusader', the truth would be that latter pre-dated the former by at least 20 years. In less than a few months' stay in South Africa, Gandhi realized the need to become a journalist to fight for the rights of the Indian community. And he brought the highest qualities the profession could boast of-courage in the face of adversity, unswerving adherence to truth, pursuit of public causes, and objectivity in presentation. His first paper, Indian Opinion was started in South Africa. In order to ventilate the

grievances of Indians and mobilize public opinion in their favour, Gandhi started writing and giving interviews to newspapers. He focused on open letters and Letters to Editor, but soon realized that occasional writings and the hospitality of newspapers were inadequate for the political campaign he had launched. His letters to the editors of South African dailies are a lesson to all journalists on how to fight injustice in a country where the laws are loaded against one section of the people, without giving offence to the rulers themselves. He needed a mouthpiece to reach out to the people and so he launched Indian Opinion. It served the purpose of a weekly newsletter which disseminated the news of the week among the Indian community. It became an important instrument of education. Through the columns of the newspaper Gandhi tried to educate the readers about sanitation, self-discipline and good citizenship. Gandhi learnt in South Africa how important the press and public opinion could be in politics and had learnt to use the written word most effectively. Indian Opinion lasted for 11 years. It more or less forced the South African provincial regimes to modify their repressive laws against Indians. One day Gandhi got a call from Bihar where the Indigo farmers of Champaran were subjected to the same kind of indignity and exploitation as the indentured labourers in South Africa. He promptly went there and investigated the issues, and produced a report that would be the envy of the greatest investigative journalist anywhere in the world. After Champaran it was only a matter of time before the Mahatma took to journalism as his most potent weapon of satyagraha. As coincidence would have it, Gandhi was persuaded to take over the editorship of Young India. Simultaneously, he started to edit and write in Navjivan, then a Gujarati monthly. The two journals Young India and Navjivan were used by him to ventilate his views and to educate the public on Satyagraha. Gandhi's writings in it were translated and published in all the Indian language newspapers. Later Navjivan was published in Hindi, as Gandhi was convinced that Hindi would be the national language of free India. The Mahatma's crusade for the repeal of the Press Act of 1910 was a unique piece of journalism. He was telling the rulers that it was in the best interests of the government to repeal the law. Issue after issue of Young India and Navjivan carried samples of Gandhi's journalistic genius which blended seemingly earnest appeals to the government to do what was "just and righteous". Young India and Navjivan folded up in January 1932 when Gandhi was imprisoned for a long spell. In 1933 Gandhi started Harijan, Harijanbandhu, Harijansevak in English, Gujarati and Hindi, respectively. These newspapers were the vehicles of his crusade against untouchability and poverty in rural areas. These papers published no advertisements even then they enjoyed wide circulation. His note of defiance and sacrifice gave a new stimulus to the evolution of press as a weapon of Satyagraha. Gandhi's approach to journalism was totally devoid of ambitions. To him it was not a vocation to earn his livelihood. It was a means to serve the public. Gandhi believed that it was wrong to use a newspaper as a means of earning a living. He felt that running a newspaper was a task having such a bearing on public welfare that to undertake them for earning one's livelihood would defeat the primary aim behind them. When, further a newspaper is treated as a means of making profits, the result is likely to be serious malpractices. He also said that Newspapers were meant primarily to educate the people and familiarize them with contemporary history.

IV. GANDHI AND RADIO

The first and only time Gandhi visited the Broadcasting house, Delhi was on 12 November, 1947, the Diwali Day. He arrived at the Broadcasting House accompanied by Rajkumari Amrit Kaur. A report on this event published in the issue of 'The Indian Listener' of 22 February, 1948, after Gandhi's death, read: "A special studio was fitted with the 'takhposh' (low wooden settee) which was daily used by him for his prayer meeting addresses at Birla House, Appropriately, the prayer meeting atmosphere was created in the studio. Gandhi was at first shy of the radio and it was after much persuasion that he agreed to broadcast from the studios of AIR, but the moment he reached the studio he owned this impersonal instrument as his own and said: "This is a miraculous power. I see 'shakti', the miraculous power of God". He spoke for 20 minutes and his voice was exceptionally clear. His message was followed by recorded music of Vande Mataram"

The news of Gandhi's assassination on the evening of January 30, which had spread like wild fire in Delhi, was flashed by foreign correspondents and news agencies all over the world within minutes. That evening at 8-30 p.m. Prime Minister, Nehru whom Gandhi had called his heir in the freedom struggle, broadcast from the Delhi station a very moving talk which began with the oft quoted words: "A light has gone out of our lives". Others who broadcast later were Sardar Patel, Sarojini Naidu and numerous leaders and prominent personalities from all walks of life. Lord Mountbatten came to the Delhi station on 12 February to pay his homage in a broadcast talk.

V. CONCLUSION

Mahatma Gandhi's speech during his visit to 'The Hindu' sums up his philosophy and vision of journalism: "I have, therefore, never been tired of reiterating to journalists whom I know, that journalism should never be prostituted for selfish ends or for the sake of merely earning a livelihood or, worse still, for amassing money. Journalism, to be useful and serviceable to the country, will take its definite, its best for the service of the country and the views of the country, irrespective of consequences."

To confine Gandhi to India and to view him as merely the great Indian national leader is to diminish his greatness and personality. Gandhi belonged to the whole world, the humanity at large. The Time magazine, while chronicling the sweeping forces and great events of the 20th century, catalogued Gandhi as one of the greatest activists, who fought for change from outside the traditional halls of power, who was bound to an abstract vision for which he would pay any price was life. The world that revered few men had revered Gandhi. Although Gandhi died believing his lone voice was unheard, he was mistaken. The power of his message would not fail to move men and nations for all times to come. We can, in a way, say that Gandhi laid down the ground rules for interaction with the masses or Mass Communication, in India.

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