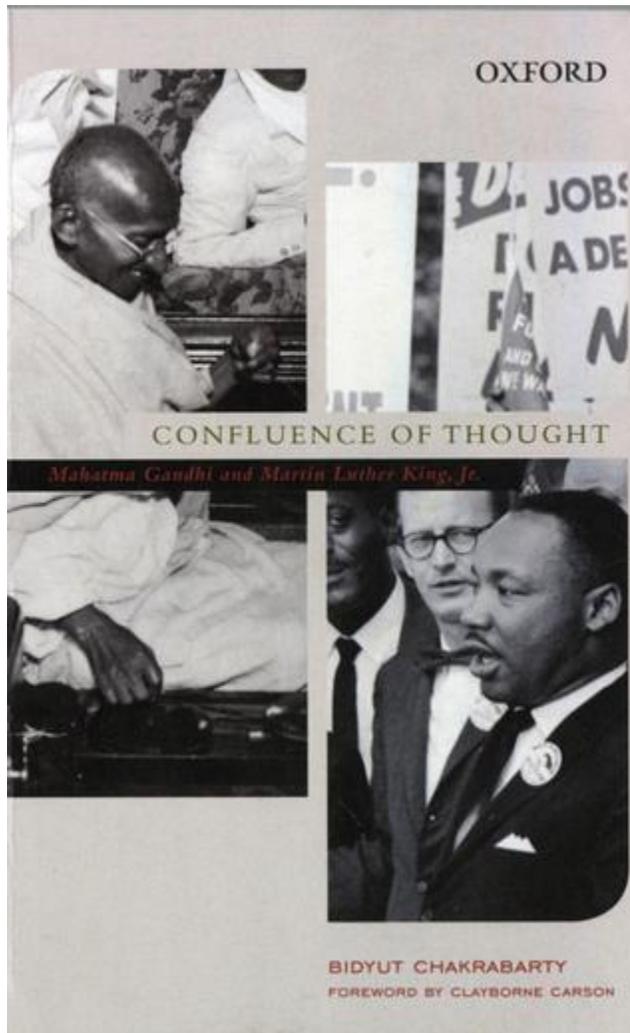


Leaders in a common thought matrix

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Confluence of Thought. Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr. Author: Bidyut Chakrabarty. Foreword by Clayborne Carson

Demonstrating how the intellectual trajectories of Gandhi and King converge on making non-violence a potent tool

In an unending worldwide research on Gandhi, *Confluence of Thought* makes two fundamental contributions. First, it shows how the intellectual trajectories of Gandhi and King — born so much apart in space and time — perfectly ‘converge’ in making non-violence a potent tool to (a) galvanise the deprived and disinherited masses and (b) propel them to re-write their equations with the all-powerful State. Second, it provides a well-rounded powerful corrective to their narrowly focused biographies and presents them as extremely gifted and innovative, and yet, products of their circumstances.

Gandhi was first to demonstrate the effectiveness of non-violent mass resistance presenting it as alternative to war and violence as the only known locomotives of human progress. In doing this, Gandhi transformed the nature of politics from being an elite-based vanity into a 'soul force' for social change through mass participation. His broad-basing of India's national movement transformed the Congress party from being a talking-shop for airing grievances into a mass-based organisation defying the British Empire.

Similar yet distinct

Similarly, Martin Luther King Jr. was the only civil rights leader acceptable to moderate whites. His campaign for de-segregation in the name of American Enlightenment and constitutionalism assuaged the whites' fears about any economic and political dislocation. Gandhi and King are presented as eclectic activists though their struggle eventually produced a very distinct body of knowledge. Of course their political experiments were cut short abruptly because of their assassinations, especially King's, who was only 39.

While Gandhi led a majority against a minority of British in India, King led an incarcerated minority against an entrenched majority. Similarly, both were rooted in strong religious beliefs, yet the role of religion in their 'tactics' was very distinct. Gandhi, in view of Hindu-Muslim differences, employed secular semantics. King had no such constraints. His use of religious texts was persistent and direct.

Also, unlike King's grooming in a family of pastors and his limited role within Church-led initiatives, Gandhi's enormous multicultural bandwidth implied repeated baptisms by fire. Gandhi began his struggle defying racial segregation in South Africa yet never took the cause of blacks. In India as well, after his initial lead at Champaran, Kheda and Ahmedabad, his experiments saw him only gradually turn from a loyal British subject into a rebel.

Gandhi brought peasants to the forefront of national politics, yet never trained them to wield power by themselves. Gandhi's *Swaraj* was acceptable to business and the socially dominant as it never threatened to disrupt extant class relations. By the time of the Quit India movement of 1942, Gandhi had virtually lost control: Muslims were exploring a separate nation, Dalits seeking a separate electorate, and loads of violence went unnoticed.

King on the other hand saw black and later white communities joining his struggle. King's four movements — the 1955 Montgomery bus strike, the 1963 March on Washington, the 1963 Birmingham campaign, and the 1965 Selma-Montgomery March — had impact in other parts of the United States as also on later anti-segregation legislation by the U.S. Congress. But King saw himself as nothing more than a disciple of the Mahatma. Like Gandhi, King learnt a great deal from his detractors.

Marxist M N Roy denounced Gandhi's use of 'cultural power' as sentimental banalities. Tagore criticised Gandhi's *Swaraj* for being uni-dimensional, and ignoring other traditions. He was critical of Gandhi's techniques of burning foreign clothes and quitting schools and colleges. Tagore was upset by Gandhi's description of the February 1934 Bihar earthquake as 'divine chastisement' for the great sins committed against *harijans*.

Ambedkar, a recognised leader of Dalits from the 1932 Round Table Conference, accused Gandhi of eulogising caste-ridden social structures of village republics where untouchables had no rights. Once the 1935 Government of India Act gave Muslims separate electorate, Ambedkar asked for the same privilege for Dalits. The British tolerated Gandhi as he seemed to emasculate the 1857 revolutionary spirit that had shaken the British Raj.

African Americans were not impressed with Gandhi's vegetarianism, celibacy or naturopathy, as these were not relevant to their struggles. Even King did not accept Gandhi's ruthless critique of Western industrialisation. But King remained indebted to the Mahatma. In his Nobel Peace Prize speech in Norway in December 1964, King said: "... non-violence is the answer to the crucial political and moral question of our times... Negroes of United States, following the people of India, have demonstrated that non-violence is not a servile passivity, but a powerful moral force which makes for social transformation."

King was not the one to bring Gandhi to America. Marcus Garvey, the founder of the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) in his native Jamaica in 1914 had set up a U.S. chapter in 1916. It was he who popularised Gandhi's non-violence. In the early 1920s, W E B DuBois eulogised Gandhi in his magazine *The Crisis* for which Gandhi also wrote 'a little love message'. In the 1930s, two books by Reinhold Neibuhr and Richard Gregg engaged in serious analysis of Gandhian non-violence and the *Chicago Defender* published editorials like "Will a Gandhi Arise?".

A delegation comprising of Edward Carroll, Phenola Carroll, Howard Thurman and Sue Bailey Thurman travelled to India to understand Gandhi and met him at Bardoli in February 1936. Dean of Harvard University's School of Religion, Benjamin Mays and Channing Tobias met Gandhi at Wardha in 1936. Krishnalal Sridharani, a veteran of the 1930 Dandi March, wrote his Columbia University doctoral thesis published in 1939 as *War without Violence: A Study of Gandhi's Methods and Accomplishments* — debated by U.S. pacifists like those of the Congress for Racial Equality (CORE).

In 1947, President of Howard College, Mordecai Johnson, led another delegation to India and met Gandhi. It was on listening to Johnson's 'profound and electrifying' speech in the spring of 1950 that King rushed off to buy books on Gandhi that revealed to him how 'love' could be an effective force, not just for personal but also for social reform. King visited India in 1959 and this 'pilgrimage' coincided with his overcoming his initial reluctance, which was to make him America's most powerful civil rights leader. King's not only linked non-violence to Christian ethics and American constitutionalism, but unleashed his non-violent mass resistance using the whole range of the Gandhian arsenal — picketing, boycotts, strikes, marches, flooding jails and mobilising the media. Amongst King's lieutenants, Bayard Rustin was to put Gandhian methods into practice for his leader. He along with Philip Randolph and James Farmer of CORE were baptised by A J Muste, who had met Gandhi in 1931. Together they tried to replicate Gandhi's Dandi March in the 1941 March on Washington which actualised only in 1963, marking the peak of King's career.

Unfinished agenda

However, their agenda remained unfinished. India's Constitution (1950) and the U.S. Civil Rights Act 1964 and Voting Rights Act 1965 created ideal legal frameworks for equality-for-all yet, socio-economic deprivations continue to engulf their successors. While the state of Dalits in India remains too well known, even the U.S. African Americans continue to subsist on inferior housing, public schools and limited healthcare. Termination of voting rights to ex-felons becomes an instrument when the proportion of black men going to prison is staggeringly high compared to their white counterparts.

Global finance capital has become overbearing, contorting the very nature of democracy to ensure skewed distribution of resources and privileges. One is not sure if Obama's White House stay has been anything more than a flash in the pan. *Confluence of Thought* also has its limitations. Its small font, overly long chapters and invariably page-long paragraphs make it taxing on aging eyes. Some of this fat becomes tiring given multiple repetitions of ideas, even sentences.

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