

## An Open Letter to Arundhati Roy by an American

- Dr. P. K. Willey

Dear Arundhati Roy,

Greetings! I have been peripherally following your writings, interviews, and efforts since 2008, when first introduced to your 1999 essay, "*For the Greater Common Good*," via the Narmada Bachao Andolan website. That was my first awareness of your brilliance as a writer, your wry sense of humour, your sheer, fearless pluck, your social daring, and your patently sincere good intentions. I am touched and inspired by your profound concern for India and for human justice.

In this essay, I saw also your view on Gandhi – frankly a school girl's view. Following your activities, I now see that a misinformed view of his thought and action has led you to misrepresent Gandhi unfairly to the public around the planet. Churchill said, "A lie gets halfway around the world before the truth has a chance to get its pants on." On your own lack of accurate historical perspective on caste and other issues, you yourself have said, "I do not write from a position of authority. I write from the position of a writer who engages with things that she feels are important to her, and to the society that she lives in." And as you write, so do you speak.

Over the years it has been at the back of my head that someday, I must try to meet you, talk with you, and explain a perspective that I have gained on Gandhi that has come from intense scholarship of his words and writings (over 25 years of fairly hard core research) and practical experimentation into his methods. My father's first 37 years were also Gandhi's last. A Professor of History in Connecticut, USA, he named my elder brother Mohandas, in admiration of

Gandhi. My mother grew up under colonialism; I experienced first-hand the effects of colonialism's conditioning on the human psyche and outlook. Gandhi's ideas and influences have been with me throughout my life.

This difference in our starting points is the basis of our different views of Gandhi. Your impression of Gandhi has been a populist and rather defamatory view, with much disjointed fact, possibly some fiction, and no understanding of the context behind it. Mine is the inside view of watching a fellow truth seeker, as he worked laboriously through his mind and context. It has been said that a man's writing is a window to his mind. By virtue of his prolific and often self-expository writing, Gandhi lived in a glass house. His life is an open book, perhaps too open, as people tend to beat him with his own avowed mistakes.

As an American, it's always a bit of a surprise to see how little modern, "educated" India seems to value Gandhi. With all the inside acrimoniousness of an extended family, many people feel free to take potshots at him based on hearsay. As a long-term resident and guest in India at different times in my life, I have been genuinely dismayed to even see some 'ochre-clad sannyas' types filled with anger and disgust towards him. Discussion has been limited: Their ideas of themselves being 'sannyas' has an order in it, in which I am on the receiving end of their entitled intellectual outpourings. They are right because they are 'red'. Input is not desired, nor even possible.

One of the most important things to bear in mind about Gandhi is that he clearly reserved his intellectual right and liberty to continue growing.

Gandhi came to consider himself, first and foremost, a sadhak, a truth seeker. Any rational human will prefer their legacy to reflect, not the mistakes they made on their path, but the state they achieved, before removed to a higher call. This he said at age 63.

“I would like to say to the diligent reader of my writings and to others who are interested in them that I am not at all concerned with appearing to be consistent...What I am concerned with is my readiness to obey the call of Truth, my God, from moment to moment, and therefore, when anybody finds any inconsistency between any two writings of mine, if he has still faith in my sanity, he would do well to choose the latter of the two on the same subject.”<sup>1</sup>

To know his stance on a given topic we should look not to a keyword search of his writings, but to the latest mind-sketch of him that we can construct from his writings. Minus his caveat, you could quote his own admission of attempting to engage prostitutes in college as where he was at his whole life. History, intended audience, socio-cultural factors, psychology, environment, context; none of these factors can be ignored in any reading and analyses of Gandhi's words and must be researched to gain a better understanding of his intentions.

I want to respond to your references to Gandhi in your televised interview with Laura Flanders 'Debunking the Gandhi Myth' on True Grit this past October, and your recent university address in Kerala (2014).

### **Sex and the "Saint"**

In the interview with you, Flanders ends with a comment and cluck on Gandhi at 70 years of age, sleeping naked with his young grand niece! The distinct impression the viewer is left with is that you have created and backed a view of Gandhi as a racist,

a caste supporter, and with your statements and visible agreement with Flander's comments, that Gandhi was a dirty old man.

It is clear that you have no real understanding of what brahmacharya entails, and that you react on the global perception of Gandhi as Mahatma. You call him the 'Saint' then paint him as dubiously so. Do you know that Gandhi did not appreciate the title of Mahatma bestowed upon him by Tagore? It awoke that great idealizing worship of personification that lies in the breast of the Indian psyche, which has made democracy into dynasty, and humans into gods. Both publicly and privately, Gandhi expressed his own sense of unworthiness for such a title. He never claimed Mahatma-ship, and once when 66 years old, he spoke about one of the times that he experienced sexual lust:

I have been trying to follow brahmacharya consciously and deliberately since 1899 [the time of the Anglo-Boer War in South Africa which affected him greatly]. My definition of it is purity not merely of body, but of both speech and thought also. With the exception of one lapse, I can recall no instance, during more than thirty-six years constant and conscious effort, of mental disturbance, such as I experienced during this illness. I was disgusted with myself. The moment the feeling came, I acquainted my attendants and the medical friends with my condition. They could give me no help. I expected none. I broke loose from the experience after the rigid rest that was imposed upon me. The confession of the wretched experience brought relief to me. I felt as if a great load had been raised from over me. It enabled me to pull myself together before any harm could be done. [by 'harm', he does not mean indulgence in sexual relationship, but inner harm, a weakening of his intense control over his mind] But what of the Gita? Its teaching is clear and precise.

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<sup>1</sup> Gandhi, M.K. Harijan, April 29, 1933. Age 63.

A mind that is once hooked to the Star of Stars becomes incorruptible. How far I must be from Him, He alone knows. **Thank God, my much-vaunted mahatma-ship has never fooled me** [my emphasis]... Unwearied ceaseless effort is the price that must be paid for turning that faith into rich infallible experience. But the same Gita says without any equivocation that the experience is not to be had without Divine Grace. We should develop swelled heads if Divinity had not made that ample reservation.<sup>ii</sup>

But let us look at the elephant in the room: Gandhi slept near a young girl, both naked. Under a sheet. If there was any sexual attraction, interchange, coercion, no matter what his intention, that was wrong. The girl was young and impressionable. Even if she wasn't, I would think it wrong. Gandhi was an elder, a leader; in any situation, that itself would exert coercive pressure. But again, context is everything and in this case, the facts of the context with his grandniece are: (1) There was no sexual contact or arousal on either party; (2) the sleeping arrangements were not at all private or behind closed doors – Gandhi's cot was in what we might term a dormitory where others slept as well; (3) Gandhi claimed these experiments helped his brahmacharya.

You cannot judge Gandhi when you cannot understand or respect what brahmacharya means. The populist view holds that sex is one of the greatest rights and fulfillments life has to offer, and therefore assumes there is 'repression' in brahmacharya, and imagines that Gandhi secretly wanted sex, and that by undertaking these experiments he was in some way enjoying some form of sexual contact. Wrong.

To understand what was happening in those experiments, you have to understand Gandhi's effort

to walk a life of brahmacharya. If you read the quote above, brahmacharya is expressed by him as purity of body, speech and thought. For Gandhi, as soon as he began to embrace ideals, his personal life took on the hue of scientific experimentation. He named what is popularly termed his 'autobiography' as *The story of my experiments with Truth*. He began experimenting first with diet, through vegetarianism. Later, he added social service, then brahmacharya which is all encompassing. He always claimed that by his own nature, he was truthful, he learned about ahimsa – love – later.

Later on, around 1938, Gandhi realized that this experiment was a stupid thing to do, no matter how he looked at it. Having caught the tricky false justifications of his mind, its quick and sure capability to self-deceive the truth seeker, he wrote a repentant and confidential communique to ashram inmates:

I feel my action was impelled by vanity and jealousy. If my experiment was dangerous, I should not have undertaken it. And if it was worth trying, I should have encouraged my co-workers to undertake it in my conditions. My experiment was a violation of the established norms of brahmacharya. Such a right can be enjoyed only by a saint like Shikadevji who can remain pure in thought, word and deed at all times of day.\* My conduct has not been responsible.<sup>iii</sup>

What appears to me to be lacking here is empathy for the young girls who assisted him in those experiments. This lack of empathy seemed to be there towards Manu as well. For Gandhi, it was Gandhi dealing with Gandhi. The experiments for Gandhi were exercises in which he critically and ruthlessly watched and judged himself.

<sup>ii</sup> Tendulkar, D.G.(1920). *Mahatma: Life of Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi*. Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Government of India, New Delhi: 4:52.

<sup>iii</sup> Thompson, M. (1993). *Gandhi and His Ashrams*. Popular Prakashan, Bombay: 202

\* Even then, a person having genuinely equal vision of all creation would undoubtedly not feel the impulsion to undertake such experiments.

A little more on context. Gandhi was in an ashram setting when these different experiments took place. In fact, once he had established his first community in South Africa, everywhere he went became an ashram setting. Ashrams usually form around a charismatic leader, have connotations of monasticism, cooperative work, self discipline, and living in the light of pure ideals. They are a different type of sub-group in any society. The rules governing conduct within them stem from ethical ideals and how to achieve them. They are theocratic, not democratic, in nature. But because of Gandhi's emphasis on truthfulness, he did have community members that questioned him strongly about many ideas he had, and argued vociferously with him about his brahmacharya experiments.

Leaders are self-confident, determined people, with strong will power. They have to be ready for, and unconcerned by, any loss of support in carrying out their ideas and goals. There is much more in this group context that needs to be respectfully understood in order to grasp a clearer picture of Gandhi's experiments.

Ashrams are not sylvan peaceful abodes; they are battlefields with human nature inside and outside. The effect on the leader of having fawning followers seeking his/her guidance or attention in their lives, must also be considered. Certainly, elements of over-confident arrogance, a degree of narcissism, autocratic nature, favoritism, all kinds of things, can creep in. These in turn corrupt both the leader and community social relations.

The roles of men and women are clearly defined in India. Gandhi was breaking molds in all kinds of ways. He wanted to see women strong and self-reliant. Historically, in numerous religious faiths, woman's ways of uniting to universal awareness have often, but not always, been through a path of love and intense yearning. The young girls around Gandhi in his ashram seem to have been in this bhava or mental attitude, and were very attached to physical proximity to Gandhi.

Gandhi was self-admittedly and historically a difficult man to live with. He was harsh in his expectations and demands upon his wife and sons, and harsher upon himself. There is the story of a young mother who wanted her child to stop eating sweets, and went to Gandhi and asked him to tell him to stop having them, feeling that if the child heard it from Gandhiji, he would follow suit. Gandhi asked her to come back the next week and he would see if he could advise the boy then. The next week, she brought her son before him, and he told the child to stop eating sweets. The mother asked why he couldn't have said that the week before? Gandhi told her that he himself had not yet given up eating sugar, but now he had. Can you give up sugar? Would you even want to?

Control of the mind takes constant vigilance. Gandhi relied heavily on prayer, and mentally chanting a name that meant truth to him – his Ramanama – to help him. When he claimed that the experiments helped his brahmacharya, he didn't mean that they increased his libido – the conclusion of an ignoramus. He meant that they helped him increase his inner mental strength and control. Gandhi had incredibly mastery over his mind. Look at the records in London in 1931 on how he spoke at the Round Table meetings.

There is the undeniable aspect, that love, pure love (as opposed to sexual love) is an energy. Gandhi loved Manubehn as a dear child, she was an intimate family member since age 14. At times he embraced her. Now here, we have to understand what embrace meant in 1930. We can't apply today's language to words from decades ago, as sick minds are doing now to Gandhi's use of the terms 'upper house' and 'lower house' to imply bi- or homosexuality. Manubehn's innocence, and Gandhi's determination to vigilantly direct his energy into channels for heightened awareness, kept sexual lust out of the relationship.

Manu's mother had died. Kasturba and Gandhi welcomed her into their lives as their own daughter. Her new mother figure, Kasturba died, and a few

short years later, so did Gandhi, in her arms. She was alone in life, with mostly hostile and jealous former associates. Is the traumatic stress of this event and its affect on her life, being overlooked in the psychological discourse on her diaries?

Another aspect is Gandhi's methodology for action. He prepared himself and society for large actions, which you have termed 'brilliant political theatre' by building up to them through smaller steps. Control of response is incumbent upon a Satyagrahi, one who would fight with truth force. It begins within the individual with self control of inner responses in all respects. And that too, can only be achieved through small steps, one by one. Gandhi described how in seeking the ideal of *aparigraha*, non-possession, he struggled first to do without this or that, to give things away. At a certain point, everything just slipped away from him, to his joy and positive relief. Non-possession is a fruit of *brahmacharya*, not a deprivation. Can you understand that joy?

Another gift of Gandhi's life to the planet due to his experiments, was a revival in public discourse about the ideals behind *brahmacharya* for men and women, and a secular awakening to the metaphysical blueprint of India's ancient social architects. India's temperament is scientific in many aspects: psychology, medicine, innumerable cultural expressions. Gandhi was a product of that ethos. The overall goal of these sciences united, is harmony with Nature, leading to transcendental experience and knowledge of Her and therefore, oneself, as part and parcel.

There are universal laws which affect our lives; a truth seeker seeks to know and be obedient to them. These laws create ideals, the depth of which is expressed by the limits of capability by each practitioner. From the governing law of the equality of all life, we see the ideal of justice expressed in varying degrees throughout the earth. Ideals become

tools to free a person's mind and sensibilities from what are false self-identifications, to truth – reality. These universal laws, arrived at similarly by all different religious and spiritual adepts, are not to cramp and hinder. I suggest you read Swami Shivananda of the Divine Life Society. He is held to be a genuine master, and wrote prolifically about the benefits of *brahmacharya* as well as lived the life.

Manu was the only one that he took with him to Noakhali, in what was a desperate and life threatening situation of vicious and senseless communal killing. Gandhi sensed his time left was short. He wanted intense alertness. Nonetheless, wherever Gandhi went, shades of the ashram soon followed. From those days:

Gandhi's Bengali secretary, Nirmal Bose, reported that he heard Gandhi "slap" himself, and later say, "I am not a Mahatma...I am an ordinary mortal like you all and I am strenuously trying to practise Ahimsa." Sushila Nayar [involved in experiments with Gandhi and Manu] also came to join him and Manu, but soon left. His typist and shorthand secretary also left him when he saw them sleeping naked, and Pyarelal reported he heard Gandhi mutter to himself: "There must be a serious flaw deep down in me which I am unable to discover...could I have missed my way?"

[To Miraben Gandhi wrote then] "Do not ever worry how I am faring or what I am doing here,"... "If I succeed in emptying myself utterly, God will possess me. Then I know that everything will come true." Yet he continued to worry about a "deep flaw" within himself. "God's grace alone is sustaining me," he confided to his diary. "I can see there is some grave defect in me...All around me is utter darkness."<sup>iv</sup>

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<sup>iv</sup> Wolpert, S. (2013) *Master of His Own Mind*. India Today. June 7. As seen on Dec. 1, 2014: <http://indiatoday.intoday.in/story/mahatma-gandhi-relationship-young-women-celibacy/1/278965.html>

The three-month experiment with Manu ended when Gandhi showed her a letter an associate had secretly written to Gandhi. After reading it, Manu told Gandhi she wanted to sleep separately, to which Gandhi immediately acquiesced and wrote two associates who were very bothered about the experiments, that they were over.

The point is not that he was right: he was wrong. His experiments in this regard did not enable him to clear his inner path as he hoped. But, Gandhi could admit his mistakes, although he may not have seen solutions for them. He didn't consider himself a saint. What greater icon can there be for a nation, than a man who was truly honest, who strove with all his might to help others, to raise the down trodden, to help India become aware of her own gifts and potentials? To err is human, to forgive is divine; but to admit a mistake and change one's thinking is an act of bravery too rare on our planet.

Distorting Gandhi's response to the Mehad Satyagraha

You told True Grit's Laura Flanders how surprised you were that you could not find any response from Gandhi to Ambedkar about the 1927 Mehad satyagraha in which you claimed thousands of untouchables militantly marched to get drinking water from a well restricted to "touchables" only. This indicated to you that he was not really concerned about untouchable work done by Ambedkar. The problem is, your historical facts are wrong. You did not even look to find his response. It is easily found through the indices of the Collected Works. When Gandhi finally learned of the incident, more than a month later, he wrote about it in his public newspaper, *Young India* on April 28, 1927:

Untouchability itself has no reason behind it. It is an inhuman institution. It is tottering and it is sought to be supported by the so-called orthodox party by sheer brute force...

I cannot help thinking that Dr. Ambedkar was fully justified in putting to test the resolution of the Bombay Legislative Council and the Mahad Municipality by advising the so-called untouchables to go to the tank to quench their thirst. No incident of this character should pass by unnoticed on the part of associations like the Hindu Mahasabha interested in this reform...There is nothing like the growth of enlightened public opinion for eradicating everything evil, which untouchability undoubtedly is."<sup>v</sup>

The correspondent of that time gives a very different account of history from what you said in the Flanders interview. From his report, it was not a pre-planned satyagraha of thousands on a militant march to the well as you have said. The facts are that "untouchables" had gathered for a conference. Before the meal break, with the encouragement of Dr. Ambedkar leading them, they went to the well located in the Brahmin district, and quenched their thirst. The "touchables" were unaware that such an action was going to take place. Those witnessing were enraged, and spread rumours that the untouchables planned a temple entry. They mobbed the temple, and when no untouchables came to attempt entry, they went into a frenzy, and attacked every untouchable they could find in the street, including untouchable shops. The untouchables in the conference hall were safe, although taunted, and no untouchables, including those attacked, responded violently.

This account is so different from what you have said on an international forum. I am left wondering: why do you want to make Gandhi appear as a person who ignored Ambedkar and promoted caste? It was very simple to find the correct information. Why didn't you look for it?

I wondered why Gandhi had taken so long to respond, and reviewing the material found that not

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<sup>v</sup> Gandhi, M.K. *Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*. Navajivan, Ahmedabad. 33:267-68.

only was he under constant touring for the beginning of March, 1927, but on March 28<sup>th</sup>, a telegram to Mirabehn from Mahadev Desai<sup>vi</sup> explained that Gandhi was suffering from overwork, nervous exhaustion, and high blood pressure. He was finally forced to go to Mysore and take bedrest, to avoid an attack of apoplexy. Did you think there could be a reason for Gandhi's lack of immediate response?

### Varna versus Caste

To define caste to Flanders, you said, "Caste is essentially a question of entitlement and ancestral occupation." However, this is not the meaning of the word caste that Gandhi referred to in his day. Here again, I see your lack of understanding the root principles that provide the philosophical basis of Indian culture. I hope you will take the time to deeply examine those principles. They provide an inspiring standard for living life. Universal and inherent, they cannot be brushed off because people are ignorant about their application.

Gandhi is correct. Hinduism as such, offers many gifts to humanity as a whole. Among them is the acknowledgment of *varna*, which has been translated to you as caste, to which you are applying *your* definition of that word from *your* context, which you see in operation today. Gandhi was both a social reformer and a religious reformer. He approached the concept of caste through *varna*, an entirely different perspective. To apply this perspective to your world, you need to translate the ideas rather than quote out of context. At age 64 he said,

Whilst I have said that all men and women are born equal, I do not wish, therefore to suggest that qualities are not inherited but, on the contrary, I believe that just as everyone inherits a particular form, so does he inherit the particular characteristics and qualities of his progenitors, and to make

this admission is to conserve one's energy. That frank admission, if he will act up to it, would put a legitimate curb upon our material ambitions, and thereby our energy is set free for extending the field of spiritual research and spiritual evolution. This is the doctrine of *varna ashrama Dharma* which I have always accepted.<sup>vii</sup>

This did not mean that Gandhi felt people should be forced to follow the vocations of their ancestors:

"Neither I nor anybody else can impose the restriction on anyone. *Varna Ashrama* is not a man-made law to be imposed or relaxed at his will. It is natural to man in his regenerate state."<sup>viii</sup>

Gandhi's definition of *varna* is idealistic and pragmatic at the same time. For example, the child of a carpenter is very likely to know more about carpentry; therefore it's much more efficient for them if they should take up carpentry. Gandhi saw one's material occupation – the labour of the body – as secondary to the pursuit of philosophical inquiry – the labour of the mind – for life satisfaction. After attaining our basic requirements in order to simply live, genuine contentment and satisfaction comes by the ways in which we use and occupy our minds. While Gandhi's order of precedence may not be shared by all, the argument of efficiency is the same argument that forms the true idealistic basis for capitalism; in essence, that people should work at what they do best, thereby achieving greater returns for themselves.

Genetic research is now finding that behavioral tendencies, qualities and characteristics are indeed passed down. Tendencies to smoke, suicide, overeat, as well as propensities like criminality can be found in the human genome. Even our occupational choices and the qualities to carry them out, such as

<sup>vi</sup> Gandhi, M.K. *Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*. Navajivan, Ahmedabad. 33: 206.

<sup>vii</sup> Gandhi, M.K. *Young India*, September 29, 1927. Age 57.

<sup>viii</sup> Gandhi, M.K. *Harijan*, January 12, 1934. Age 64.

entrepreneurial skills, have genetic markers. Genetic research is proving the truth of varna-dharma.

Gandhi never encouraged hardening of caste lines, nor the permanent assignment of occupation based on one's entrance to this world, nor unequal valuation of the labour provided by each section of society. He stood for varna-ashrama (different from your simplistic view of caste) from an idealistic, efficient point of view, encouraging inter-caste marriages and fluid movement between social strata (himself being born into a merchant caste, and in life assuming the traditional roles of a Brahmin – philosophy, Kshatriya – defense, Vaishya – farmer, and Shudra – service).

Universal laws are recognized universally. To give you a small example: the other day, I was at a meeting for something we are trying to start here in one part of the USA, called the 'Repair Cafe'. This is a movement, begun in Holland, to help people in consumer societies learn to repair and reuse items rather than throw them away. We had already held our first Café, for which I had glibly volunteered to sharpen knives and polish brass and copper. I had never sharpened knives, but had seen it done in India, and felt confident I could muster up the skill. Although I succeeded in sharpening about 14 knives, albeit with a somewhat scuffy reaction on the blades, I found out later I was meant to put water on the grindstone, and some other pertinent details. The committee organizer told me that the next month, a lady would come from a family that had been knife sharpeners for generations before. This statement in a land of middle classes! Varna is not deprecating in any way, when equality is a societal ethic.

Gandhi faced tremendous social difficulties when he got to India and opened his first community at Sabarmati to untouchables. Keep in mind that his own wife and relatives were not in favour of having untouchables join. Family members left him, funding was withdrawn, yet he persisted in bending the arrogance of the caste-minded into service of those whose humanity had been affected by their actions

for generations. Eventually, people who wanted to be married in his ashram had the ceremony done by an untouchable. Gandhi himself only attended marriages that were between untouchable and touchable couples. This was one man, who did all in his power and sphere of influence to spread equality, education, and awareness on behalf of the down trodden throughout India.

### **Your Ideal Bhangi**

Your comments on his article, "My Ideal Bhangi" show that you do not understand the tremendous effort Gandhi was making in every direction to eradicate caste thinking. He was stuck with his rigid peers, who saw scavenging as a caste. The elite were not about to give up power, privilege and most importantly, servants. By the way, do you have any? Its hard to live in India without 'help', although I managed. As a middle class American, the very idea of having servants is sickening.

Gandhi dealt with this particular sanitation issue his whole life. Of course, being a bhangi is not a varna of any sort. However, being a socially concerned person, concerned for the health and well being of others, may have genetic markers. A concerned person, may choose to pick up other people's shit, left by those too ignorant to handle it themselves, like Gandhi did.

### **Racist Gandhi? Where?**

Besides trying to convince people that Gandhi supported the caste system, you have declared him to be racist, based upon quotations you have taken from his early days in South Africa. You omit whom he was addressing, and why.

You expressed that you feel it is important for African Americans and South Africans to come to your view that Gandhi held them as inferior. Not only did Gandhi correspond with George Washington Carver, seeking his advice on soya in the diet, but he also sought to inform the Indian public about the conditions that African Americans were facing. This

was in part to help them extend their field of sympathy and empathy, to recognize the role that skin colour as a central issue of human equality was playing in political decisions across the board. In 1929, at age 56:

Even in the United States of America, where the principle of statutory equality has been established, a man like Booker T. Washington who has received the best Western education, is a Christian of high character and has fully assimilated Western civilisation, was not considered fit for admission to the court of President Roosevelt, and probably would not be so considered even today. The Negroes of the United States have accepted Western civilisation. They have embraced Christianity. But the black pigment of their skin constitutes their crime, and if in the Northern states they are socially despised, they are lynched in the Southern States on the slightest suspicion of wrong-doing.<sup>ix</sup>

He corresponded with President F.D. Roosevelt on the issue of racial equality in the US, suggesting that US involvement in the fight against Nazi-ism seemed more than a little hypocritical considering what was going on at home to African Americans. From the 1930's he had many meetings with African Americans who made the arduous trip to India seeking his advice on how to deal with the US racism. He was impressed with their deep spirituality, and with great foresight saw that it was through the African American that the message of Ahimsa, nonviolence, would be delivered to the western world. The African and African American contemporaries of Gandhi who met and corresponded with him did not find him to be racist, but rather, a deeply concerned human brother.

His effort to unite Indians with Africans socially was expressed also in his advices to South African

Indians to avoid creating Indian-only schools and neighborhoods, to include African children. Later, both Gandhi and Tagore jointly issued strong messages to the Indians in South Africa who were becoming pawns to the British divide and conquer policies, and just as racist to Africans as the whites were to them.

Wherever he lived, the doors were open for people of all races and religions to be part of his life and effort, and they eventually were. His communities in South Africa had former indentured laborers, and later African and Chinese inmates, mixing with with Christian, Judaic, and Moslem adherents.

Did you know that the Gandhi topee that is still popular in India was brought by Gandhi when he returned – it was the hat that the African prisoners had to wear in the South African jails. When Gandhi began Phoenix, all men in Phoenix wore the jail uniform. It was simple to make, durable, and met the requirements of rural farm life. When his community inmates questioned dressing like the Africans, he countered by asking why they would want to look differently from them.

Politically, he never saw the African cause on the same page as the Indian. Compared to Africans, Indians were few, and saw themselves as British Indians. Africans did not yet have the colonial brainwash – they did not consider themselves citizens of the British Empire. He later built his home – the 'kraal' in Johannesburg – in imitation of a traditional round South African home. To have a house designed after those of the native Africans, by a person of his position and wealth at that time, was a huge statement socially and politically. He was the first in town to see superiority and a spiritual view in the native architecture.

Did you know that Gandhi was the legal arm and lawyer for many indentured laborers in South Africa? He was the first legal representation they

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<sup>ix</sup> Gandhi, M.K. *Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*. Navajivan, Ahmedabad. 29:78.

had. The first upper-class brit-wannabe that cared about their struggles. He took on all kinds of cases, representing poor Indians for free, standing up for women, children, and against injustice towards labor of all sorts. He arranged for translators so that those who couldn't speak English or Gujarati could be heard in court. Which other Indian bothered? What made him bother?

His dawning awareness of the conditions of all Indians was what led him on sanitation drives, caused him to work in Indian "locations" (slums) when the plague was on, with no thought for himself. He urged sanitary awareness, and took it upon himself to see it through. These are not the actions or behaviour of a person afflicted with class-thinking or racism. He was a person who, throughout his life, used the advantages of his education and connections to leverage assistance for the disadvantaged.

### **South Africa war work**

When you make aspersions that Gandhi supported killing Africans because of his ambulance corp work in the 1899 Anglo-Boer war, and then again in the 1906 Bambata Rebellion (Zulu Uprising for Independence), you neglect to note that his Ambulance Corp was the only medical relief that reached the suffering and mortally injured Zulus; no European would even touch them. Gandhi's group was gratified to be able to help the Zulus. His experiences of being able to serve the suffering and disgust with the senseless bloodshed in both wars strengthened his resolve to wholly dedicate his life to service, leading to his vow of lifelong effort towards brahmacharya.

You have stated that Gandhi was regressive in his attitude and thinking on women. In South Africa itself, 1901 unveiled Gandhi's commitment to gender equality. Indian women labourers, again from the indentured classes, were paid half the salary of men, and a new Immigration Amendment Act sought to jeopardise that earning. Gandhi was found appealing to the courts on their behalf.

I can only suggest that you examine as a whole, Gandhi's work with women, and their influence upon him and his on them. He recognized that it was women, not men, who would be able to lead the way out of war madness through non-violent – *pure* – satyagraha campaigns. He credited his wife with teaching him the methods of satyagraha. He became extremely sensitive to the subtle psychological coercion of male-female relations. It is a fact that women around him felt completely at ease, they felt no subtle threat from him in any way. Of course, he was an Indian male, who received that type of pampering from the women around him. This coloured his thinking on women, another area he tried to free his mind from.

To exhaustively respond to each of the allegations and insinuations one finds from you, if I pull in all the quotations of Gandhi, show you the progression, and discuss the historical, social, cultural, psychological contexts, demonstrating how you have taken things out of context, this letter would become a volume, perhaps not to reach you for another five years. It is because I sincerely believe that you would not willingly spread misinformation, that I try to use my years of study and research on Gandhi to authoritatively inform you about some of the errors of the judgment you have meted out on him. I hope that this letter will better inform you, and inspire you to acquire the background required for a balanced and rational consideration of the man Gandhi and his deeds.

Tushar Gandhi, the great grandson of Gandhi, exasperated perhaps at your comments, has suggested you introspect on Gandhi. I don't think introspection will do; you do not know the reality of his work, nor the context of the sentences that you have attacked. Introspection deals with the interaction of knowledge and conscience. I hope that you will try to see the man more wholly than you presently are. You cannot deny his positive and intense love for humanity, his striving to know truth, and that he used his education to uplift India. Gandhi is the man who nearly died

to end the Hindu-Moslem riots, fasting unto death, scraping consciences with the unifying power of love, digging beneath personal religious identities. Taking a sentence from here or there, and lashing him with it, you do your own capacity for discernment a disservice.

At this point in time, you are an international figure. Because you are Indian, the world populace thinks you know about Gandhi. The world looks up to India because of Gandhi, and expects to learn from Indians about the great ideals that he espoused. However, the vast majority of people, if they hear you say that Gandhi was a racist, or that he supported the caste system, will not bother to do their homework, and find out if what you have said is true or not. If they hear you imply that he was a lecherous man, they will accept it as truth, because you are Indian and represent an educated and intellectually enlightened perspective of the 'global left' (if there are sides to this one muddied, bloodied, Earth). I know you are a rational person. Your writing and reasoning show that you possess that rare capability of amending your mistakes – something that Gandhi cultivated within himself to a great degree.

Actually, you are not miles apart from Gandhi. When you can take the time to truly inform yourself

of his thought and life, you may find real inspiration from him. I have seen you go fearlessly into Operation Green Hunt, face charges of sedition on Kashmir, and seek to honestly inform the public of the massive injustice in these and other issues. Seeing the violent and sick comments posted by some men to some of your articles and interviews, I fear for you. God Bless you and keep you for all the good you have to do. Please accept my words, as those of your elder sister, offered to help you understand Gandhi.

At this point in my life, I am taking the philosophy of one of our American folk singers, Pete Seeger to heart, when he said, "Us and our little teaspoons over thousands of years."<sup>x</sup> Gandhi's views, when examined rigorously, have so much to offer for the real 'greater common good'. I feel it is important, whilst the world around us continues its nuclear meltdown, destruction of the oceans, whilst the last trees are being pulped, and babies born deformed, earth bombed, families torn, war ever looming over us in one way or another, I somehow feel, that the ideals that Gandhi tried to serve should be clarified, and presented to our minds again. Thoughts are another type of food, and our food, both mental and physical, determines our health, as individuals and as a society.

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<sup>x</sup> Whitehead, J.W. (May 9, 2006) Legendary Folk Singer Pete Seeger: A Teaspoon at a Time: in The Chatfield News. <http://news.google.com/newspapers?nid=1400&dat=20060509&id=IPQyAAAAIIBAJ&sjid=Xg8GAAAAIIBAJ&pg=1855,903130> As seen March 12, 2014.