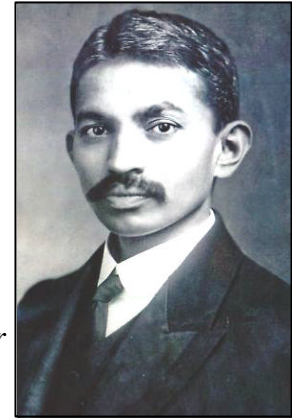




## Mahatma Gandhi : The Editor & Journalist



*Souribandhu Kar*

Lord Linlithgow, the Viceroy at New Delhi once said, “Gandhi is the biggest thing in India”.

Yes, Gandhi is unique.

He first came across a newspaper in London, when he went there to study law. He could hardly think at that time that he will be associated with the newspaper world throughout his life.

His first article was published in the issue of February 7, 1903 under the caption “Indian Vegetarian” in *The Vegetarian* the organ of Vegetarian Society. He contributed nine articles to this magazine depicting the diet, customs and festivals etc. of India.

South Africa where he was thrown in to the whirlpool of politics shaped him as a Journalist. In a letter to the Editor of the Times of India he wrote, “Publicity is our best and perhaps the only weapons of defence”.

In October 1899, the Boer war broke out. Gandhi participated in it with Indian volunteers to serve the sick and wounded. He shared his experience in the Bombay edition of Times of India.

To safeguard the Indian interest in South Africa, Gandhi thought of a weekly because he wanted publicity to arouse the public opinion among the Indians staying there.

He recorded later :

I believe that a struggle which chiefly relies upon internal strength cannot be wholly carried on without a newspaper — it is also my experience that we could not perhaps have educated the local Indian community, not kept Indians all over the world in touch with the course of events in South Africa in any other way, with the same ease and success as through the Indian opinion, which, therefore, was certainly a most useful and potent weapon in our struggle. Indian opinion was reflected in the publication on 4 June, 1903. The first editorial “ourselves” was written by Gandhi. The language was very simple and the content therein directly appealed the people.

He wrote, “We need offer no apology for making an appearance. The Indian community in South Africa is a recognized factor in the body politics, and a newspaper, voicing its feelings and specially devoted to its cause, would hardly be considered out of place : Indeed we think, it will supply a long felt want”.

The Indian opinion was the foolscap sized, three column journal started publishing South African Indian news and views. Through the columns of the Indian opinion, he was reproducing the biographies of great men and women of the World, to inspire his fellow countrymen.



Gandhiji was writing incessantly boosting upon the morale of civil register. He said, “during 10 years, that is until 1914, excepting the intervals of my enforced rest in prison, there was hardly an issue of Indian opinion without an article from me.”

The Satyagraha struggle continued till 1914 and it could not have successful without the Indian opinion. It awakened the Indians to their rights and privileges.

Gandhi started newspaper in India where his ideas-social, political or economic as well as the plan of action to achieve those, were published. The papers may be called as views paper. As he wrote, “newspaper, if otherwise well edited, can become a most powerful vehicle for transmitting pure ideas in a concise manner”.

Margarita Barns wrote in his book “the Indian Press” as such : “In India, from Raja Ram Mohan Ray to Keshab Chander Sen, Gokhale, Tilak, Feroze Shah Mehta, Dadabhai Naroji, Surendranath Banerjee, C.Y. Chintamani, M. K. Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru, there is a distinguished line of public men who have used, and are using, the press as a medium for the dissemination of their ideas of moral values.”

Gandhi arrived in India on January 9, 1913. Journalism did not establish as a profession. Advertisement was not playing that important part as of today. Gandhiji was not only connected with Indian opinion, he started contributing articles to other newspapers. In an article to Gujarati Daily, “Hindustan” his views on the newspaper is noteworthy.

He wrote, “In my humble opinion, it is wrong to use a newspaper as a means of earning a living. There are certain spheres of work, which are of such consequences and have such bearing on public welfare that to undertake them for earning one’s livelihood will defeat the primary aim behind them. When further, a newspaper is treated as a means of making profit, the result is

likely to be serious malpractices. It is not necessary to prove to those who have some experience of journalism that such malpractices do prevail on a large scale.

“Newspaper are meant primarily to educate people. They make the letter familiar with contemporary history. This is a work of no mean responsibility. It is a fact, however, that renders cannot always trust newspapers. Often, facts are found to be quite the opposite of what has been reported.

If newspapers realized that it was their duty to educate people, they could not but wait to check a report before publishing it. x x x the reporting of the speeches in Indian newspapers is generally defective. It is often observed that newspapers publish any matter that they have just to fill in space. x x x These newspapers cannot escape criticism merely because they save the people, on the whole, it would be seen that the existence of newspapers promotes good and evil in equal measure.”

Under the editorship of Gandhi an unregistered newspaper called the “Satyagrahi” was published from April 7, 1919 protesting against the Rowlatt Bill. Subsequently, a band of young Gujaratis started an English Weekly, Young India. The editorship of the Young India was offered to Gandhi, which he gladly accepted. The Gujarati monthly the “Navajivan”, under the same management, was also placed at his disposal. The Navajivan first appeared on October 7, 1919. The Young India was published after a day of the Navajivan.

While editing Navajiban he wrote, “The editing of Navajivan has been a perfect revelation to me. Whilest Young India has little more than 1200 subscribers, Navajivan has 12000. The number would leap to 20000, if it would but get printer to print that number. It shows that a vernacular newspaper is a felt want. I am proud to think that I have numerous readers among



farmers and workers. They make India ..... The English journals touch but the fringe of the ocean of India's population."

On the demise of Lokamanya Tilak on August 1, 1920, Gandhi wrote an obituary in the Young India.

It reads, "A giant among men has fallen. The voice of the lion is hushed ..... His patriotism was a passion with him. He knew no religion, but love of his Country .... His courage never failed him. His optimism was irrepressible .... In the battle of freedom, he gave no quarter and asked for more."

Gandhi was not only a journalist par excellence, as an editor he used to advise other editors and journalists. He gave advice to his son Manilal, who was editing the Indian opinion that "The editor has to be patient and seek for the truth only".

After his release in April 1924, he wrote a series of articles in the Young India giving details of his prison life. When friends asked him to take a few months rest, he said, "editorial job would be for him rather a kind of mental recreation than a task". He was writing on all subjects not merely politics.

He believed in the liberty of the Press, when the Bombay Chronicle had to pay a fine for a defamation suit, Gandhi wrote an article in Young India, "Below the Belt". He wrote on August 7, 1924 : "The Press Law is gone only to be replaced by new activities under the law of Sedition and libel ....."

The next paper Gandhi associated was "Harijan". The paper Harijan first appeared on February 11, 1933. Shri R. V. Shastry was editor. Explaining the term "Harijan", Gandhi wrote, "It is not a name of my own coining. Some years ago, several "untouchable" correspondents complained that I used the word "asprishya" in the pages of the Navajivan. "Asprishya" means literary untouchables. I then invited them to suggest a better name and one of the untouchable

correspondents suggested the adoption of the name "Harijan", on the strength of its having been used by the first poet saint of Gujarat."

Why Gandhi has taken up journalism and editorial ? Gandhi wrote in the Young India of July 2, 1925. "I have taken the journalism not for its sake but merely as an aid to what I have conceived to be my mission in life." So he was convinced that the aim of journalism was service.

Gandhi was not only a journalist, editor but a great writer. No one has used the staff of words on a massive scale than Gandhi. The uniqueness of Gandhi is beyond all questions, and is deliberate and at the same time fundamentally effortless merging of himself with the people of India, in the modern Indian context, amazing.

Let us conclude with the great homage paid by no other than one of the great creators Rabindranath Tagore, once said about him.

"He (Gandhi) stopped at the thresholds of the huts of the thousands of the dispossessed, dressed like one of their own. He spoke to them in their own language, whereas living truth at last, and not quotations from books. For this reason the "Mahatma" the name given to him by the people of India, is his real name, who else has felt like him that all Indians are his own flesh and blood? In direct contact with truth, the crushed forces of the soul rise again, when love came to the door of India that door was opened wide. At Gandhi's call India blossomed forth to new greatness, just as once before in earlier times, when Buddha proclaimed the truth of fellow- feeling and comparison among all living creatures."

As Mr. Louis Fischer commented, "He was an editor leading his readers to the righteous path. He was "Bapu" or father of all. He did not like to be called "Mahatma" and with his frank sincerity declared the mission of his life."

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