Chapter II

The Pied Piper of Porbandar

Joseph Lelyveld’s impartial and meticulous work on Gandhi, Great Soul: Mahatma Gandhi and his Struggle with India, portrays Gandhi’s popularity among the masses; the ordinary Indians giving Gandhi the accolades due to a god or a sage. An incident is mentioned in the work which occurred in February 1921, and is narrated in Mahadev Desai’s diary. Gandhi was on one of his train journeys, this time between Gorakhpur and Benares. At each rural station a crowd had been waiting to see him, even blocking the tracks. It was the last of these stops, and as usual a huge crowd had gathered outside Gandhi’s third class carriage and their cries, saluting Gandhi, filled the air. Gandhi, who was trying to sleep after a tiring day became really furious. The narrative continues:

Once again, a clamorous mob made up of supposed followers is hanging from the footboards of the train, preventing it from moving on. The apostle of nonviolence later admitted that he felt an urge to beat someone at that moment; instead of lashing out verbally, he beats and smacks his own forehead in full view of the crowd. Again he does it, then a third time. “The people
got frightened,” he wrote. “They asked me to forgive them, became quiet and requested me to go to sleep.” (142)

According to Mahadev Desai the particular incident reflects “the people’s love- mad insolence” (Lelyveld 142). The crowd’s adulation was so irritating that Gandhi had to beat himself to drive them away.

In another part of the work Lelyveld presents Gandhi’s campaign against untouchability from November 1933 to August 1934, which also witnessed similar idolatrous responses from the masses. A British official notes that “at several places people were seen carrying away dust that had been touched by his feet” (246). Lelyveld narrates an incident noted down by the British official and which establishes Gandhi’s appeal to the ordinary people. A sweeper’s wife donated her last two bangles to Gandhi, with tears flowing down her cheeks and Gandhi, without hesitation accepted the trinkets as “sacrificial offering.” Lelyweld comments: “The official offers no comment; he simply describes what he has seen, leaving a sense that he has seen a communion he doesn’t understand but can’t get out of his mind” (246).

We see Gandhi’s aura working wonders among the masses, and it is this aura that permeates the atmosphere of Kanthapura. First published in 1938, it presents the arrival of Gandhism into a small, remote South Indian village. The village, which was stratified into different segregated areas according to caste and class, awakened to Gandhian principles and values
through the intervention of an urbanized villager and Gandhian, Moorthy. He was a representative of the nationalist students who went back to their native villages in the 1920s and 1930s and strove to reform the social life of the villages and build miniature nationalist groups to resist the foreign government. Gandhi became a beacon of hope for Indian peasants with his call for social reforms and self-sufficiency and there were rumours endowing Gandhi with miraculous powers. Claude Markovits observes that many expected Gandhi to establish kingdom of justice, his Ramraj. Markovits confirms:

Such hopes expressed themselves fully during non-cooperation, and, even after its abandonment, they remained linked in the minds of many to the person of Gandhi. They continued to burst forth sporadically during the 1920s, taking the form of localized agitations led by charismatic leaders who were seen as little Gandhis. (142)

Moorthy was such a ‘little Gandhi’ who, inspired by Gandhian programme, was able to transform the mindset of a village. The monikers Big Mountain and Small Mountain for Gandhi and Moorthy, given by the villagers, are suggestive of the link between them.

Gandhi’s mobilizations during the Civil Disobedience and Noncooperation campaigns had convinced such young people like Moorthy
that religion and tradition held no barrier to political and nationalist movements; in fact, as they understood, traditions and rituals could be invoked to mobilize the peasants and to facilitate social reform. In the novel we find religion serving as a link between urban nationalism and the life and thoughts of the peasants. It was only appropriate that Gandhi was introduced as a larger than life image, with the depth of influence he had over the masses and the decisive role he played in incorporating the peasants into the nationalist movement and in transforming the village life.

Raja Rao’s biography of Mahatma Gandhi, The Great Indian Way: A Life of Mahatma Gandhi, begins with the particular statement: “Every man’s life is a fable” (11). Further on he declares: “The great man is one whose life is a legend” (11). True to these statements Raja Rao’s text presents Gandhi in the midst of the stories of Rama and Krishna, making Gandhi a modern day legend (432). A similar treatment can be discerned in Rao’s Kanthapura too, where Harikatha is employed to introduce Gandhi thereby fixing Gandhi within the mythical narrative.

The text The Great Indian Way highlights the character and career of some of the distinguished ancestors of Gandhi, and traces some of Gandhi’s extraordinary attitudes back to them. Mahatma Gandhi’s great grandfather Ota Gandhi’s remarkable loyalty is brought out in an episode with the Nawab of Junagadh. When the Nawab welcomed him, Ota offered only his left hand in
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greeting explaining that his right hand was pledged to Porbandar (29). Moreover Ota was intensely devoted to God, especially to Sri Rama. Rao presents an event in the career of Karamchand Gandhi, Gandhi’s father, which throws light on Gandhi’s predilection for fasting. When the Rana of Venkaner interfered in the affairs of the state against its best interests violating his promise to Karamchand Gandhi, his prime minister, Karamchand went on a fast (32). For him what mattered were the people and the Truth. “What matters are the people and the Truth. So I go back where best I can serve the people and the Truth” (32). Rao comments that the Gandhis were scrupulous with other people’s money, but they themselves never cared for money. Raja Rao’s acknowledgement of Gandhi’s uniqueness is very much evident in *The Great Indian Way* and the same admiration is echoed in his work *Kanthapura*. Despite his settling down in France, Rao was a an Indian at heart, a fact made evident in his portrayal of Gandhi which belongs to the category of “reverential idolatory” (Sethi 87). By describing Gandhi along the lines of myth and ‘puranas’ his spiritual appeal is highlighted.

In the foreword to the novel Raja Rao indicates that the Mahatma had become a part of the ‘sthala-purana’ of the village; just like Rama or Sita had been incorporated into the legendary histories of Indian villages, only because they had passed by these villages.
The fact that the Mahatma, even without his physical presence in the village, had become such a mythical figure, and was given a status similar to that of gods and goddesses, establishes his aura. When the carts brought goods to the village fair at Kanthapura pictures of the Mahatma were mixed with that of Rama, Krishna and Sankara, testifying to the divine status given to Gandhi in these villages. In fact the novel exemplifies how the nationalist movement used traditional rituals and patterns of religious belief to serve political interests.

When Moorthy was very young he had a vision of God Hari and that holy vision got merged with the one he had of Gandhi. It was a magical and reconstructing experience for him:

and the Mahatma patted him on the back, and through that touch was revealed to him as the day is revealed to the night the sheathless being of his soul; and Moorty drew away, and as it were with shut eyes groped his way through the crowd to the bank of the river. And he wandered about the fields and the lanes and the canals and when he came back to the college that evening, he threw his foreign clothes and his foreign books into the bonfire, and walked out, a Gandhi’s man. (39)

The emphasis is on the effect of Mahatma’s words and gesture, his very presence, on the viewer and listener, Moorthy. The focal point here is the
Mahatma’s aura which transforms Moorthy, and later reconstructs the village life. The change that the village undergoes is mirrored in the narrator, Achakka, who slowly transforms from an orthodox, naive Brahmin grandmother to a secular and open-minded narrator who can easily connect with her readers, even when her belief in Kenchamma remains unwavering. The religious landscape is appropriate, in view of Gandhi’s commitment to religious reforms, forging a link between religion and the progressive mobilization of the peasants. The peasant women, irrespective of their class and caste, are inspired by the Mahatma’s political call. They venture into hitherto un-travelled areas of political and social struggles, to rewrite their own destinies, all the while allowing themselves to be governed by their personal religious beliefs.

The novel’s narrative is paralleled by several historical incidents and movements, almost all of them inspired by Gandhi and some involving Gandhi and the nationalist movement. Gandhi’s concept of ‘sarvodaya’ finds its repercussions in the attempts to include the pariah community into the mainstream, introduction of spinning wheel and the rejection of foreign clothes. Gandhi’s much acclaimed Dandi March against the new salt law and the subsequent Civil Disobedience movement are the main historical events which parallel the many incidents in the novel. The women in the novel, including Rangamma and Ratna, represent the newly awakened Indian rural
women, inspired by nationalist fervour, gathering under Gandhian banner. Gandhi himself asserts that “non-violence is the inherent quality of women” (qtd. in Pyarelal 77) He further says that as women are familiar with making sacrifices for the family they can learn to make sacrifices for the country. Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay, one of the leaders of Gandhi’s Salt Satyagraha, insists in her work *Inner Recesses, Outer Spaces* that it was Gandhi who was responsible in awakening the women in Uttar Kanara to political consciousness:

Since Gandhiji’s call reached them, they had become aware of their own inadequacies, that they did not live as humans, in dignity, in self-respect. . . . They wanted freedom, not only for them, but all who were today in bondage like themselves. As the great leader had called upon every one of them to get free they must refuse to be in bondage. Now they were free for did they not prefer going to jail rather than be content to be slaves? ‘Had they seen the Mahatma?’ I asked. No, but they brushed that aside-- never mind-- his call had reached them. It needed much more punya (merit) to have his Darshan. . . . The Mahatma has made us free so we are not afraid. His care for us gives us respect. We are asked to serve, not slave. (175)
Even though they had never met Gandhi, a similar awakening transformed the women of Kanthapura too, and it was the result of Gandhi’s own charisma working through Moorthy. When Rangamma talked to the women about becoming volunteers and fighting for the Mahatma, their initial response was that they were not men to fight. These same women were the first to follow Moorthy when the ‘Don’t–Touch-the—Government’ campaign began. Together they left the village to picket Boranna’s toddy grove; men, women and children, Brahmins and pariahs, marching shoulder to shoulder and rushing to the toddy grove to the cries of “Mahatma Gandhi ki jai,” ignoring the threats of the police. The women find a sudden energy and exhilaration coursing through their veins:

And Rangamma cries out, ‘Now, sisters, forward!’ and we all cry out, ‘Mahatma Gandhi ki jai! Mahatma Gandhi ki jai! And we deafen ourselves before the onslaught, and we rush and we crawl, and swaying and bending and crouching and rising, we move on and on, and the lathis rain on us . . . we feel a new force in us and we say we shall enter the toddy grove and tear out at least a toddy branch and break at least a toddy-pot. And there are shrieks and shouts and cries and sobs, and the more we are beaten, the more we get used to it and we say, ‘After all it is not bad--after all it is not so bad,’ and our bangles break
and our saris tear and yet we huddle and move on. . . And when the calm had flowed back to our hearts, we touched our bones and our knuckles and our joints, feeling the wounds fresh as burns, and when we saw all the people gathered to see us, there was something in us that said, ‘You’ve done something big,’ and we felt as though we had walked the holy fire at the Harvest Festival. . . . (149)

Gandhi gave the women in Kanthapura and many other similar villages, courage to break free from the bondage of age old orthodoxy and superstitions and transform themselves into “something that the urban intellectual can easily understand and empathize with” (Shingavi 95). As Kamaladevi says in her interview:

At first they had a dreaded thought they would all be molested by the police. How could they survive such shame? A few knowledgeable women were not daunted. They stoutly scorned such fears which they affirmed arose from the age old superstition that women were weak. . . . They did a million jobs as it were. They took long solitary journeys through the hoary forests, carrying messages, doing propaganda to rouse women in other villages . . . calling out women to action. The whole
atmosphere became surcharged and all life in the region seemed to become enveloped in a conflagration. (177)

In the novel the women were found risking their own and even their children’s lives in answering the call of Gandhi. With the awakening of the nationalist spirit women grew in confidence and courage and began to participate actively in religious education too, heralding series of changes in the religious system too.

Madhu Kishar, in his article “Gandhi on Women,” suggests how Khadi unified women from different sections of the society. He writes: “While for the mass of women it meant spinning and weaving, the well-to-do women were exhorted not only to give up their foreign finery but also to don khadi, which purified both the body and soul” (282). As Kishar remarks, the significance given to the use of charkha and wearing of khadi by Gandhi was instrumental in evoking the spirit of nationalism and freedom in every home and in every village (282-283). Kanthapura was one such village and the women from different walks of life, brought under the influence of the Mahatma’s aura, their nationalist spirit kindled through stories and Harikatha and through khadi and spinning wheel, jumped into the fray.

With the social life of the village undergoing transformation we find the untouchables being integrated into its political life with the pariahs getting actively involved in the nationalist movement. It was Moorthy, inspired by
Gandhian ideals, who was responsible for this miraculous achievement. In fact Gandhi’s mass appeal, his aura, was responsible for bringing together people from different sections of the society to act under the nationalist banner. Only Gandhi could perform such a miracle, he was, as Nehru would comment, “the idealized personification” (266) of millions of ordinary people, especially peasants. Gandhi’s magnetic influence over the peasants would force Nehru to compare him with great ascetics, endowing him with a mythical aura. As Nehru avers in his autobiography:

> Indian mythology is full of stories of great ascetics, who, by the rigour of their sacrifices and self-imposed penance, built up a ‘mountain of merit’ which threatened the dominion of some lesser gods and upset the established order. These myths have often come to my mind when I have watched the amazing energy and inner power of Gandhiji, coming out of some inexhaustible spiritual reservoir. He was obviously not of the world’s ordinary coinage; he was minted of a different and rare variety, and often the unknown stared at us through his eyes. (267)

These words of Nehru would explain the influence of Gandhi over the social and political life of Kanthapura. It was as if Gandhi, endowed with superhuman powers, would fight the British and win freedom. The name of
Mahatma Gandhi would instill in them self-confidence and courage and tempt them to test hitherto un-trodden paths.

Gandhi’s intervention in the nationalist politics monopolized by urban elite, 'the moment of manoeuvre,' was important to incorporate the peasants into the national movement. This integration would give a new face to the movement, a sense of whole scale participation, which would help in the negotiations with the British. In Kanthapura this ‘moment of manoeuvre’ is highlighted, with the political mobilization of peasants, women and untouchables, utilizing the name and leadership of Gandhi. The indolent and stratified village society got a rude shock and underwent a drastic change with the arrival of Gandhism in their midst. The villagers could not remain naive and inactive after that and their life could not remain the same because now they had a movement to participate, a leader to follow and a mission to accomplish. The change was spontaneous and total, especially with women. As the narrator reveals:

But how can we be like we used to be? Now we hear this story and that story, and we say we too shall organize a foreign cloth boycott like at Sholapur, we too, shall go picketing cigarette shops and toddy shops, and we say our Kanthapura, too, shall fight for the Mother. (123)
What Shahid Amin says about the Mahatma’s influence among peasants in Gorakhpur, which Gandhi visited only for a short while, can be applied to the people of Kanthapura too, which Gandhi did not even visit. “Gandhi, the person, was in this particular locality for less than a day, but the ‘Mahatma’ as an ‘idea’ was thought out and reworked in popular imagination in subsequent months” (“Gandhi as Mahatma” 289).

Even when the Mahatma had become their acknowledged leader they had not yet seen him in person but only experienced him through the person of Moorthy. So the events that happened in the village after they had decided to jump into the fray of the freedom struggle had the political dimensions of the ‘events’ of the ‘multitude’, as envisaged by Hardt and Negri. These events were spontaneous and natural, triggered without any compulsion from an outside agency. The words of Moorthy inadvertently suggest the element of ‘event’ in their struggle:

Now . . . we are out for action. A cock does not make a morning, nor a single man a revolution, but we’ll build a thousand-pilled temple, a temple more firm than any that hath yet been builded, and each one of you be ye pillars in it, and when the temple is built, stone by stone, and man by man, and the bell hung to the roof and the Eagle tower shaped and planned, we
shall invoke the Mother to reside with us in dream and in life. India then will live in a temple of our making. (137)

The voluntary and spontaneous participation of villagers in the national movement and also the individualised character of its participants are highlighted here. The image of the temple also evokes Gandhi’s engagement with religion. M. N. Roy would criticise Gandhism: “It quickened the political consciousness of the masses by interpreting policies in terms of religion” (4: 196-97). Hardt and Negri, while discussing the nature of the multitude, mention how “the common antagonism” triggers “common conduct, habits, and performativity” (212-13). In Kanthapura common manners of dress and modes of communicating get associated with the nationalist movement, again and again giving the multitude a political coherence and identity.

Even without the direct involvement of Gandhi in their society villagers began to be engaged. There was a supervising factor in the person of Moorthy, but with or without him the transformation was inevitable. Spinning wheels were given to many families, with the exhortation to spin a certain amount of yarn per day. A Congress Panchayat Committee was formed, with the members initially including Brahmins, a Patel, a pariah and a woman, establishing the magnitude of the change in the rigidly stratified community. There were individual protests against the authorities, including that of Seetharam who would not submit to his employer at Skeffington Coffee Estate
and had to forfeit his life. Women also organised a volunteer corps, called Sevika Sangha, and their involvement with this organization had to overcome the displeasure of their husbands. Pariahs, Sudras, Brahmins and women had begun to commit themselves, but without losing their individual character and class identity, even the participation in a nationalist movement not dissolving their faith in religious rites and practices.

In the novel *Harikatha* became the medium through which people became initiated to Gandhi and to the concept of the nation as well. The slavery of the nation and the need to free her together with Gandhi and his ideas were the themes of *Harikatha*. Gandhi’s birth was conveyed as especially connected to the liberation of ‘Bharatha,’ the beloved daughter of Brahma, establishing the link between Gandhi and India. Bharatha was conceived as the “goddess of wisdom and well-being,” (12) reiterating the urgency of liberating India on which depended the ‘well-being’ of her people. Thus forging the bond between Gandhi and the nation, *Harikatha* became successful in evoking nationalist consciousness in the people and made them feel the need to participate in the national movement, inspired by the teachings of Gandhi. The concept of the Mahatma as encoded in *Harikatha* was that of a saint and a wise man:

He is a saint, the Mahatma, a wise man and a soft man, and a saint. You know how he fasts and prays. And even his enemies
fall at his feet. You know once there was an ignorant Pathan who thought the Mahatma was a covetous man and wanted to kill him. He had a sword beneath his shirt as he stood waiting in the dark for the Mahatma to come out of a lecture hall. The Mahatma comes and the man lifts up his sword. But the Mahatma puts his hands on the wicked man’s shoulders and says, ‘Brother, what do you want of me?’ And the man falls at the feet of the Mahatma and kisses them, and from that day onwards there was never a soul more devoted than he. (14)

In his article “Gandhi as Mahatma: Gorakhpur District, Eastern UP, 1921-2,” Shahid Amin quotes D.G.Tendulkar as commending on Gandhi’s tour of 1921:

Remarkable scenes were witnessed. In a Bihar village when Gandhi and his party were stranded in the train, an old woman came seeking out Gandhi. ‘Sire, I am now hundred and four’, she said, ‘and my sight has grown dim. I have visited the various holy places. In my own home I have dedicated two temples. Just as we had Rama and Krishna as avatars, so also Mahatma Gandhi has appeared as an avatar, I hear. Until I have seen him death will not appear’. This simple faith moved India’s millions who greeted him everywhere with the cry,
‘Mahatma Gandhi- ki-jai’. Prostitutes of Barisal, the Marwari merchants of Calcutta, Oriya coolies, railway strikers, Santals eager to present khadi *chaddars*, all claimed his attention. . . . Wherever he went he had to endure the tyranny of love.

(290-291)

Shahid Amin refers to Jacques Pouchepadass’ observation in his analysis of Gandhi’s influence in Champaram. Pouhepadass asserts how “the name of god was frequently used to denominate Gandhi” (82), and the “obstinate quest for his *darshan* gives further evidence about the deification of the Mahatma” (85) in the district. Shahid Amin proceeds to analyse the various stories associated with Gandhi establishing the divine and supernatural powers of the Mahatma. He explains Gandhi’s far reaching impact on the people of Gorakhpur, which had proved to be relevant in the case of many other villages too.

The enthusiasm Gandhi generated, the expectations he aroused and the attack he launched on British authority had all combined to initiate the very first moments of a process which, given other factors, could help the peasant to conceptualize the turning of his world upside down. This was an incipient political consciousness called upon, for the very first time, to reflect . . . on the possibility of an inversion of many of those power relations deemed inviolable until then, such as
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British/Indian, landlord/peasant, high-caste/low-caste, etc.

(312)

What happens in fictional Kanthapura is also not different because for the people of Kanthapura, irrespective of their class, caste and social status, the world has turned upside down. A return to their earlier way of life is impossible now that the village is destroyed and the goddess is deserted. The novel reflects the initial stages of the disruption of Brahminical hierarchy and the upcoming challenges to the empire.

As Benedict Anderson has argued, the text, more definitely the novel, has enabled the community to imagine itself as a nation. The commonplace village of Kanthapura, to which the action is by and large confined, becomes a microcosm of the nation when it opens itself to the activities of nationalist movement. The important incidents, which form the focal points of the novel, are inspired by ‘events’, which are part of the freedom struggle. A transition from a parochial identity to a national one is the result of this exposure to the national movement. The villagers’ gradual conversion to Gandhian tenets corresponds to their growing involvement in the national movement; the internalization of the Mahatma and their sense of nationalism become intertwined.

For the Indian masses Gandhi is not merely a political leader, he is their social reformer, a visionary and most of all a legend who is believed to
be divinely ordained to deliver India. A writer has to resort to history, myth and tradition to bring out all these dimensions of Gandhi’s persona, which explains the mix of myth and reality in the narratives. In *Kanthapura* this mythical pattern is very much present in the narrative with the concepts of the Mahatma and nationalism undergoing mythification in the process. They are incorporated into Puranas and myths as in the *Harikatha* performed by Jayaramachar where he compares the country to Parvathy and Swaraj to Siva with, self-purification, Hindu-Muslim unity and khaddar becoming his three eyes. The country becomes Bharatha, the daughter of Brahma and her liberation becomes the duty of the Mahatma, who is the incarnation of Siva. Mahatma is compared to ‘Krishna the flute-player’ and the foreign rule to the serpent killed by Krishna (12-13). This interweaving of the Mahatma and the nation makes the nationalist movement closely aligned with the political activities of Gandhi. Gandhi’s deification was essential for the decolonization of the Indian mind. Rao himself understood its significance since he considered India as a concept and not as a real country. As an exponent of “cultural nationalism” (Sethi 86), Rao in *Kanthapura* highlights people’s emotional involvement with Gandhi so that national politics acquires religious overtones. The events of the national movement, like Salt March and Round Table Conference, attain religious aura in the novel. The narrator refers to the Round Table Conference:
They say the Mahatma will go to the Red-man’s country and he will get us Swaraj. He will bring us Swaraj, the Mahatma. And we shall all be happy. And Rama will come back from exile, and Sita will be with him, for Ravana will be slain and Sita freed, and he will come back with Sita on his right in a chariot of the air, and brother Bharatha will go to meet them with the worshipped sandal of the Master on his head. And as they enter Ayodhya there will be a rain of flowers. (211)

The national movement acquires epic proportions and the Mahatma becomes the heroic and saintly deliverer. Raja Rao, the cultural nationalist, foregrounds Gandhi’s mythical stature to bring in the surge of nationalist spirit in the minds of the rural people.

India, with its age old wisdom and tradition, gets identified with the Mahatma; unified in his persona is the diverse, heterogeneous traditions and identities of India. In opposition to cultural modernity, represented by the west, this image puts forward the idea of a composite nation which is an essential platform for the decolonization project. In *Kanthapura* Sankar favoured Hindi over Kannada, which was his mother tongue, and began to speak even to his mother in Hindi; speaking English was anathema to him. He would wear only Khadi and forced others to wear Khadi too. And when Moorthy was arrested the narrator thought of him as “wearing a Gandhi-cap
on his head and a Northern shirt flowing down his waist to his knees” (107). The Gandhi-cap, khadi, the ‘northern shirt’ and Hindi put forward a unified nationalist discourse, and a national identity, so as to emotionally bond the people of the nation and to ensure their involvement in the national movement. The ability of a community to imagine itself as part of a nation beyond racial and communal differences is the high point in the homogenising effect of nationalism which is highlighted when Gandhi maidan is swarmed with volunteers wearing Gandhi-cap and khadi kurta. The insistence on ‘swadeshi’ and the rejection of all things foreign represent a fall back on the European model of the nation state, which expects it to have a monolithic, homogenized structure, with Sankar’s insistence on speaking Hindi adding the element of linguistic uniformity.

The spinning wheel symbolizes self-reliance, and a revolt against the exploitation by the destructive and monopolistic empire, and in the novel we find Moorthy distributing spinning wheels to all the villagers, even to the untouchables, stressing Gandhian concepts of unity and equality. Gandhi was convinced that ‘charkha’ was the way to swaraj and wanted congress members to spin daily instead of paying the membership fee. As Peter Gonsalves explains:

that every Congress member would have to commit himself to spinning yarn daily for a certain period of time, instead of
paying the stipulated sum. The idea was that labour, in
symbolic solidarity with the common man, and not capital,
should be made the qualification of franchise within the
Congress. (68)

Gandhi believed that ‘charkha’ would ensure sincere commitment and
involvement on the part of even remote villagers and would generate
economic equality and development as well.

Jawaharlal Nehru, in his An Autobiography presents the change in
Congress with the Calcutta Special Congress. Nehru writes:

This Special Session at Calcutta began the Gandhi era in
Congress politics. . . . The whole look of the Congress changed;
European clothes vanished and soon only Khadi was to be seen;
a new class of delegate, chiefly drawn from the lower middle
classes became the type of Congressman; the language used
became increasingly Hindustani . . . and a new life and
enthusiasm and earnestness became evident in Congress
gatherings. (72)

It is suggested that change in the Congress party was manifested in the change
in the appearance of its members. Khadi reflected this change, and Khadi to
Gandhi was “the symbol of unity of Indian humanity, of its economic freedom
and equality” (qtd. in Gonsalves 101).
The novel is historically veracious in its presentation of the consequences of the capitalization of rural economy. But its representation of the political landscape of a South Indian village is not historically accurate. According to Anshuman A. Mondal, there were no events associated with Civil Disobedience Movement of 1930s reported around that time in Mysore state in which Kanthapura is supposedly located. There was substantial sympathy among various city groups, including students, for the nationalist movement, but there was no active participation until Quit India Movement of 1942 (107). Moreover, its representation of Congress organisation in Mysore during that period is also unrealistic. Contrary to the impression that the novel conveys, the organization in South Indian states was not inclusive, was anti-peasant, and was under the control of upper caste landlords. Even as the novel is far from historically accurate, it has an ideological purpose to serve; the dissemination of Gandhian ideology. Kanthapura is a typical South Indian village which should have been comparatively negligent of Civil Disobedience movement, but Rao wants it to represent Indian villages which have wholeheartedly welcomed Gandhian and nationalist ideologies. The novel becomes the medium through which the two discourses are constructed. Kanthapura, is fictionalized as a typical Indian village which comes under the influence of the Gandian version of nationalism with Gandhi caps, khadi clothes, Moorthy’s satyagraha, and marches against toddy plantations. The
The novel attempts to reveal the power of Gandhian ideals on the rural peasantry and their sensibility.

How the novel serves to constitute the imagined nation is revealed in the beginning itself, with the narrator defining the national space by emphasizing the colonial exploitation it faces. The narrator comments: “There, on the blue waters, they say, our carted cardamoms and coffee get into the ships the Red-men bring, and, so they say, they go across the seven ocean into the countries where our rulers live” (1). And Moorthy points to the idea of the building of a nation when he explains how the country is economically exploited by the coloniser. “But they buy foreign yarn, and foreign yarn is bought with our money, and all this money goes across the oceans. Our gold should be in our country. And our cotton should be in our country” (19). This imagined nation and the Mahatma are merged when the cries of ‘Mahatma Gandhi ki jai’ and ‘Vande Materam’ blend together and fill the air of the Gandhi maidan later in the novel. The Mahatma and his simple philosophy make the people conscious of their status as Indians, even as they are under the British yoke, the national identity intact overarching the differences in class, caste, religion and gender. As Jayaramachar’s Harikatha attests, the Mahatma and the nation merge into one: “And Parvathy in penance becomes the country and Siva becomes heaven knows what! ‘Siva is the three-eyed,’ he says, ‘and Swaraj too is three eyed: Self-purification, Hindu-Moslem unity, Khadder’” (11). The construction of
the Mahatma and the imagining of the nation go hand in hand and Gandhi becomes the unifying force in the campaign against an alien government and this united movement furthers the passion for a free nation. As Shingavi asserts, “After all, more so than any other figure in the nationalist pantheon, Gandhi comes to represent what is authentically Indian, what is genuinely populist and what – drawing out masses everywhere he goes – no novelist or other politician was ever able to do in the 1930s” (5). The novel corroborates Benedict Anderson’s thesis that the written narratives, fictional or factual, enable the notion of the nation state to take shape.

In the text the village is the microcosm of India, a rounded space, in which the national movement, which incorporates all the diverse elements, is acted out. As Gandhi conceives it, the village is the foundation of Indian society. Narrating the village and the national movement along the lines conceived by Gandhi, the novel contributes to the construction of nation as imagined community. The projection of a common language, Hindi, caters to the evolution of a homogenized community. Incorporation of the elements of Indian mythology and stories of purana, emphasis on Harikatha and the concept of ‘sthalapurana,’ underline the efforts to forge a unified community along the lines of the practices and rituals of the dominant religious community. The narrative strategy, which employs the traditional grandmother narrator, creates an ambience of oral narration, evoking the rich
tradition and antiquity, and continuity of the community in Kanthapura. The build up of a timeless past, by extension, facilitates the construction of an imagined community of the present.

Similar to what happens in the national scenario, in the novel too the Mahatma becomes the dominant discourse and all other narratives become subservient to it. This undermining of a host of other issues, like the exploitation of the lower caste community by the upper caste community represented by Bhatta and the sufferings of the coolies in Skeffington Coffee estate, is secondary in the face of the larger issue, the awakening of nationalist consciousness. A sense of unity, even though forced, is vital in the negotiation with the British, and the novel reflects what happens in the national level with the intervention of the Mahatma. As Partha Chatterjee argues in Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World, that Gandhian intervention was imperative in the mobilization of the peasantry and that the nationalist movement had foreseen this:

To control and direct the peasantry within an organized nationwide movement, it was of course necessary to constantly keep in the foreground of one’s rational political understanding the importance of agrarian issues for a comprehensive programme of mobilization. But this mobilization could never be achieved by a rational programme alone. It required the intervention of a
political genius: it required the ‘spellbinding’ of a Gandhi.

(150)

Gandhi’s influence over the different sections of the society grew through his ‘open conversation’ with the nation, through his own journals and the very efficient and effective Congress information channels. As the image of the Mahatma grew in significance, the concepts related to him and the associations allied with him too grew in relevance. Even the ideological opposition within the nationalist movement worked in relation with him as the Mahatma was the only platform from which their activities could be launched. Shahid Amin analyses the myths and stories surrounding the figure of the Mahatma circulating among the peasants in the northern villages. In the particular context of Gorakhpur Amin says: “a series of ‘extraordinary occurrences’ in the villages of Gorakhpur were being read in a familiar way, that is according to the conventions of reading the episodes in a sacred text but with their religiosity over determined by an incipient political consciousness” (317). Gandhi’s aura and his inexplicable sway over the nation, fashioned him into a polysemic text, generating variegated and independent interpretations, especially so among the marginalized sections. As Amin says; “the Mahatma’s image takes form within pre-existing patterns of popular belief, and ritual action corresponding to these” (331). He goes on to confirm how these rumours and myths appeared in the newspaper Swadesh under the title
strange happenings’ and occasional write ups in defence of the peasant’s belief in such fables. Amin quotes:

In every age and country, every now and then, such things have happened. Even in the time of Buddha, Mohammed and Christ such miracles were supposed to have taken place. Then we see no reason why miracles (chamatkar) should not be associated with Mahatma Gandhi whose name is perhaps even better known in India than that of Ram and Sita. (337)

This statement of the editor of Swadesh is not just a defence of the peasants who believes in miracles, it also establishes the extent of the Mahatma’s reach and popularity. Sometimes Gandhian directions were invoked and misinterpreted to justify subversive programmes not necessarily approved by him, “such as . . . demands for the abolition of zamindari, reduction of rents or enforcement of just price at the bazaars . . .” (337). Similarly in Chauri Chaura the accused were frequently referring to Gandhi and Swaraj. As Shahid Amin quotes in Event, Metaphor, Memory:

how this name of “Swaraj” was linked, in the minds of the peasantry of Gorakhpur, with the name of Mr. Gandhi. Everywhere in the evidence and in the statements made . . . by various accused persons,’ they found that ‘it was “Gandhiji’s
Swaraj”, or the “Mahatmai’s Swaraj” for which they [i.e. the peasants] were looking. (195)

According to an eye witness of the riot the demonstrators were shouting that “Until the thana has been burnt and the police have been killed, there will not be Gandhiji’s swaraj” (196). Shahid Amin interprets the Chauri Chaura incident:

First, several analyses of contemporary voluntary activity in other parts of north India suggest that peasant nationalists were invoking the Mahtma to rough up opponents, punish waverers, and attack bazaars and police stations. Second . . . the issue of violence apart, the Mahatma of the peasants was not as he really was but as they had thought him up. (197)

Shahid Amin suggests that the Mahatma is not an isolated phenomenon, but a construct, a reflection of the collective desires of the masses. Their urge for freedom and social reform were transferred to the image of the Mahatma giving him a mythical persona.

Rao’s cultural and religious prejudices are revealed when he presents upper caste Brahmins like Moorothy and Rangamma as the leaders of nationalist movement in the village and makes the sole Muslim character, Bade Khan, an undesirable one—which undermines the Gandhian ideal of Hindu Muslim solidarity. And when Moorothy hesitates to enter the pariah hut
and fears himself to be polluted after accepting pariah hospitality (85), we are reminded of Gandhi’s own statement regarding caste system and inter-dining:

Caste is another name for control. Caste puts a limit on enjoyment. Caste does not allow a person to transgress caste limits in pursuit of his enjoyment. That is the meaning of such caste restrictions as inter-dining and inter-marriage... These being my views I am opposed to all those who are out to destroy the Caste System. (qtd. in Roy 41)

Parallel to the change in Gandhi’s perspective regarding caste system, Moorthy too has an emotional and intellectual transformation and finds no difficulty in mingling with the pariahs.

While the discourse of the Mahatma dominates the text from the beginning itself, a subtle change is perceptible towards the end when Moorthy, the self-acclaimed Gandhian and responsible for the Gandhian transformation of Kanthapura, shows an inclination towards Nehruvian socialism. Moorthy writes in his letter to Ratna:

the Mahatma is a noble person, a saint, but the English will know how to cheat him and he will let himself be cheated. Have faith in your enemy, he says, have faith in him and convert him. But the world of men is hard to move, and once in motion it is wrong to stop till the goal is reached. And yet, what
is the goal? Independence? Swaraj? Is there not Swaraj in our States, and is there not misery and corruption and cruelty there?

. . . as long as there will be iron gates and barbed wires round the Skeffington Coffee Estate, and city cars that can roll up the Bebbur mound, and gas lights and coolie cars, there will always be Pariahs and poverty. Ratna, things must change. Jawaharlal will change it. (211)

Priorities have changed for Moorthy. The concept of an independent nation-state gets subordinated to the issue of stratifications and marginalisations within the nation which have lead to poverty and oppression. A free nation should guarantee the freedom of all its people. He does not reject Gandhi, but he has more faith in Nehru. “You know Jawaharlal is like a Bharatha to the Mahatma, and he, too, is for non-violence and he, too, is a Satyagrahi, but he says in Swaraj there shall be neither the rich nor the poor. And he calls himself an ‘equal distributionist’, and I am with him and his men” (211). As long as nationalist consciousness was uppermost in Moorthy’s mind he considered himself as Gandhi’s man, but an augmented social consciousness compelled him to change his perspective. But this change from Gandhism to Socialism is not the final stance of the novel. Still faithful to Moorthy, the women participants of the nationalist movement, including the narrator Achakka,
Rangamma and even the Pariah women, profess their unwavering faith in the Mahatma. The narrator confirms:

They say Rangamma is all for the Mahatma. We are all for the Mahatma. Pariah Rachanna’s wife, Rachi, and Seethamma and Timmamma are all for the Mahatma. They say there are men in Bombay and men in Punjab, and men and women in Bombay and Bengal and Punjab, who are all for the Mahatma. They say the Mahatma will go to the Red-man’s country and he will get us Swaraj. He will bring us Swaraj, the Mahatma. (211)

The novel’s dominant Gandhian position is reasserted despite the free floating suggestion of the possibility of an alternative programme. The nation can never be de-aligned from the Mahatma as long as the foregrounding of the idea of a unified nation is the urgency of the hour. The subversive insight generated by the text in the form of socialism which has the potential to realize the ideal of an egalitarian society is contained in the text itself with Gandhism regaining its hegemony.

Centered round the inspiration of the mahatma, whose ideal of a future independent nation is epitomized in the concept of Ramarajya, it is no wonder that Raja Rao’s Kanthapura idolizes Gandhi and presents the national movement along the lines of a Hindu myth. Writing between 1929 and 1933, in the afterglow of non-co-operation movement and in the midst of the epochal
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salt satyagraha, Rao cannot but be influenced by the aura of the Mahatma and his role in drawing the diverse sections of Indian society into the freedom struggle, thus giving an appearance of unity to the movement. Raja Rao himself writes about the Mahatma’s magic in his note on the novel’s reception: “Thus was the magic of Mahatma Gandhi, the Pied Piper of non-violence and love, drawn to wheresoever it was burgeoning. It was all a part of Gandhi Purana. . . . History is full of miracles” (214). Kanthapura too has become Gandhipurana.

The aura of the Mahatma is incontrovertible in Raja Rao’s short stories, “Narsiga” and “The Cow of the Barricades,” but perceived in different ways. These two stories taken together can be considered as the forerunner of Kanthapura, with their accentuation on the construction of the Mahatma among the peasants. Narsiga, the orphan boy is impressed by the master’s delineation of the Mahatma as “a bewitching man, a saint” (11). The whole village considers Mahatma as God’s incarnation. As the aunt tells the boy: “He is a great man. They say he is an incarnation of God; that is why everybody touches his feet, even Brahmins, my son. . . . When you touch his feet you feel as though the body has sunk to the earth, and you are nothing but a mere ant before an elephant” (11). These words echo the words of Nanjamma in Kanthapura when she compares the Mahatma to a mountain. “I do not imagine the Mahatma like a man or a god, but like the Sahyadri
Mountains, blue, high, wide. . . . High and yet seeable, firm and yet blue with dusk . . . .” (142). Fantasies related to Gandhi also serve the emergence of national imaginings of identity. Narsa is so enthralled that even without seeing Gandhi he begins to love him. His abstract attachment to Gandhi naturally leads him to the thoughts of the mother who he is taught to identify with the motherland. A deliberate construction of the nation, the Motherland, is made through further images and once again the concepts of the Mahatma and the nation merge in Rao’s fiction. A national identity emerges in the conversation between the master and the boy, especially in opposition to the colonial master. “Country is the one we live in. This is our country. . . . The country is big, a million million times as big as this ashram. But it is no more ours. The Red-man rules us. He takes away all our gold, and all our food. . . . He has put the Mother into prison” (16). During the phase of nation building, this appeal to the motherland is relevant as it easily and effectively strikes a chord within the peasants’ minds. When the master says that like the Mother the Mahatma is also in the prison the coalescence between the two is underlined. The Mahatma, like Rama, will come to the rescue of the country. The mix of myth and reality serves the purpose of forging a unified national identity, which is necessary to evoke nationalist consciousness. The merger of myth and reality, politics and religion, facilitates the construction of a homogenous nationalist discourse. Fevered by his love for Gandhi and the nation and filled with hatred
for the ‘Red-man,’ Narsa one day threw stones aiming at the train which carried the Red-men, the consequence of which was that he fell ill with fear and guilt. He prayed to Gandhi and promised him that he would never hate the Red-man as Gandhi had taught them. The incident proves the sway that Gandhian principles had over peasant sensibility.

In Rao’s short story “The Cow at the Barricades,” which is a unique blend of symbolism and reality, also testifies to the influence of the Mahatma. The cow, which is a powerful symbol of Mother India, becomes the embodiment of the spirit of self-sacrifice and non-violence. While the master whole heartedly and the people to a certain extent remained loyal to the Gandhian ideal of non-violence, the workmen from the mills and factories were on a war path. They did not pay heed to the master’s exhortation for non-violence. “It is not with, ‘I love you, I love you,’ you can change the grinding heart of this government” (87). But Gauri was all for sacrifice and non-violence and seeing her, the labourers soon forgot their intention to fight and began worshipping her. Even the Red-men’s army became tame and saluted the Mahatma. The story does not lay total faith in Gandhian ideas in the political fight, but admits Gandhi’s ethical stature. “The Mahatma may be all wrong about politics, but he is right about the fullness of love in all the creatures—the speechful and the mute” (90).
The short stories underline Partha Chatterjee’s assessment of Gandhian intervention in Indian politics as the moment of manoeuvre, the process of mobilizing the peasantry into the national movement. The project of winning self-government required the incorporation of the masses and for that Nehru and others pinned their hopes on Gandhi. Gandhi’s aura, his unique capability of captivating the masses, would ensure the peasants’ participation and its consequences could be appropriated later, in the process of creating a new and progressive nation state. In Nehru’s opinion Gandhi was a “philosophical anarchist” (532), and as such was an expert in awakening the masses, but to guide the nation forward his ideals would prove to be inefficient and impractical. Nehru confirms in his An Autobiography:

He was superb in his special field of Satyagrahic direct action, and his instinct unerringly led him to take the right steps. He was also very good in working himself and making others work quietly for social reform among the masses. He could understand absolute war or absolute peace. Anything in between he did not appreciate. (136)

Nehru expresses his confusion regarding Gandhi: “In spite of the closest association with him for many years I am not clear in my own mind about his objective. I doubt if he is clear himself. One step enough for me, he says, and he does not try to peep into the future or to have a clearly conceived end
before him” (526). This same sentiment is expressed towards the end of the story; the Mahatma’s ideals are not feasible in practical politics and nation building. When the workmen build barricades and reject the advice of the master they reflect this attitude of Nehru and the leftist intellectuals in the national movement. As Snehal Shingavi argues:

The story grates against Gandhian techniques for liberation, especially since the nonviolence of the cow cannot, as the workers predict, pierce the heart of the ‘red man’ even if it can unite all Indians against British colonial rule. Gandhi is at best, then, when he is like Gauri, a symbol rather than an actual participant, a rallying cry rather an ethical arbiter or political leader. Rather than being the source of nationalist struggle against the British, the Mahatma is transformed into a spiritual being, whose sacrifices allow the people to continue struggling.

(2)  
The ability of the Mahatma to mobilize the people, his aura, remains unchallenged, but differences with Gandhian vision also find their space in the story.

When the workmen from the mills and factories build barricades to resist colonial repression, their action has the element of ‘event’ as envisaged by Hardt and Negri in their conception of Multitude. They act instinctively,
without any outward compulsion, and these workers join the peasants and they
act from a natural instinct, “coming across communal divisions behind the
metonym of Gandhi” (Shingavi 2). Later the vision of Gauri prompts even the
soldiers to join the peasants and the workmen in their sloganeering, creating
the ‘event.’ Even when the peasants and the workmen act in unison, their
attitudes and nature of involvement help them to maintain their separate
identities, making the label of ‘event’ appropriate for their resistance.

Raja Rao’s gravitation towards socialism is inadvertently revealed in
Kanthapura when Moorthy expresses doubt in Gandhism and endorses
Nehruvian socialism; but this is only a temporary phase, only to be reverted to
Gandhian faith immediately. In “The Cow of the Barricades” Gandhi is made
into a sage whose moral teachings and sacrifices are considered
inspirational while the political aspect of his ideology is sidelined. As
Shingavi opines:

The hope of many leftist intellectuals was that their ability to
offer more radical demands to the people – land redistribution,
abolition of caste, freedom for minorities and women – would
clarify the limits of Gandhian strategies and provide
opportunities for the masses to go beyond the paternalistic and
limited package of reforms that Gandhi offered. There are more
traces of that sentiment in this story than there are of a natural
fealty to Gandhian methods of discipline, asceticism, quietude and patience. (2)

But according to Shingavi the story’s post-Gandhian attitude is ignored by majority of Rao’s critics in favour of his repudiation as a Gandhian writer in the nationalist canon which is established by his novel *Kantapura* and his story “Narsiga.”

Rao’s foregrounding of Gandhi in *Kantapura* was the consequence of the engagement with contemporary history; his text became the product of power relations within the society. *Kantapura* was written in 1930s when Civil Disobedience Movement had stirred the country to its roots and before that, in 1920s, Non-cooperation Movement had launched Gandhi to the forefront of the national movement. As the urgency of the moment was political independence it was imperative to unite the masses of the country. Gandhi’s aura was essential to mobilize these masses by forging a unified national identity and in the novel it is an upper-class Hindu one. A selective revival of mythical past and a glorification of rural India, attempted by Gandhi himself, were requisite to arouse a cultural nationalism central to nationalist consciousness and to erase differences within the nation. *Kantapura* became the medium of Gandhian ideology which dominated the age while all other discourses were subjugated to it so that a sense of national unity would be created.
When Gandhi travelled outside North India, there would be a huge turnout of people to see him even though they could not understand what he was saying. Joseph Lelyweld writes: “It seems not to matter; the crowds keep swelling. The peculiarly Indian point of the commotion he inspires is, after all, not to hear but to view him: to gain or experience darshan, the merit or uplift that accrues to those who enter the spiritual force field of a rishi or sage” (141). What Lelyweld emphasizes here is the unique impression that the Mahatma creates, and the aura that is intrinsic to him and also as something perceived by his audience. The people could not understand his words, but were captivated by his vision.

Gandhi’s aura or charisma is unmistakable in Mulk Raj Anand’s Untouchable too, as Bakha evinced when he hurried to get a glimpse of Gandhi: “The word ‘Mahatma’ was like a magical magnet to which he, like all the other people about him, rushed blindly” (126). And later Bakha was really impressed when he saw Gandhi for the first time. “But withal there was something beautiful and saintly in the face, whether it was the well-oiled scalp that glistened round the little tuft of hair on the top, or the aura of the astral self that shone like an aureole about him” (133). Bakha, the untouchable, was among the crowd hurrying to see and hear the Mahatma, and he was exhilarated like the rest. They hoped that Gandhi would show them a way out of their oppression. Anand presents their eagerness and expectations vividly:
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It was as if the crowd had determined to crush everything, however ancient or beautiful, that lay in the way of their achievement of all that Gandhi stood for. It was as if they knew, by an instinct surer than that of conscious knowledge, that the things of the old civilization must be destroyed in order to make room for those of the new. It seemed as if, in trampling on the blades of green grass, they were deliberately, brutally trampling on a part of themselves which they had begun to abhor, and from which they wanted to escape, to Gandhi. (127)

The Mahatma would bring in a new dawn to them, and rescue them from their state of indolence and subjection. But Bakha’s excitement did not last long because he felt that his caste separated him from other people, put “an insuperable barrier between himself and the crowd” (128). The Mahatma was the only common factor which made the crowd one. Anand presents Bakha’s dilemma and his expectation too:

He was in the midst of a humanity which included him in its folds and yet debarred him from entering into a sentient, living, quivering contact with it. Gandhi alone united him with them, in the mind, because Gandhi was in everybody’s mind, including Bakha’s. Gandhi might unite them really. Bakha waited for Gandhi. (128)
As revealed in the discussion on *Kanthapura*, the Mahatma is the rallying cry for the masses, the unifying factor for the different sections in the society, including the oppressed and the marginalised. As Chatterjee has interpreted Gandhi’s intervention as the moment of manoeuvre in the episode of the freedom struggle, here too Gandhi has the mission to gather and incorporate the masses. Gandhi’s aura is expected to enthral the people and ensure their participation in the national movement.

In Mulkraj Anand’s autobiographical novel *The Bubble: A Novel*, the narrator Krishan Chandra Azad, the alter ego of Anand, describes his reaction to the story of Uka, the sweeper boy who was brought to Sabarmati Ashram, narrated in *Young India*. The narrator confesses:

This simple tale has shaken me. I had near tears in my eyes. I can imagine the whole drama of the conversion of the men and women of caste into accepting the outcaste Uka. I wonder if the superior people were really converted. Certainly my own love for Bakha had been intensified and confirmed by the love given by the Mahatma to the sweeper boy. (525)

The narration of this episode evinces Anand’s admiration for the Mahatma, especially with regard to Gandhi’s attitude to the Dalits.
The text constructs and echoes the concept of the Mahatma according to the prevailing, dominant beliefs around Gandhi among the common people and which are analysed by Shahid Amin in his article “Gandhi as Mahatma.”

People said he was a saint, that he was an *avatar* (incarnation) of the gods Vishnu and Krishna. Only recently he had heard that a spider had woven a web in the house of the *Lat Sahib* (Viceroy) at *Dilli* (Delhi), making a portrait of the sage, and writing his name under it in English. That was said to be a warning to the sahibs to depart from Hindustan, since God Almighty Himself had sent a message to a little insect that Gandhi was to be the Maharaja of the whole of Hindustan. That the spider’s web appeared in the *Lat Sahib’s Kothi* (Viceroy’s residence) was surely significant. And they said that no sword could cut his body, no bullet could pierce his skin, no fire could scorch him! (*Untouchable* 128)

To these masses Gandhi “has the *shakti* (power) to change the whole world” (129). They considered him as “a legend, a tradition, an oracle” (129), all in keeping with the current tradition about the Mahatma at that time. There are references to the Gandhian ideals of rural uplift and village self-sufficiency in matters of economy and administration. A sense of national pride is awakened
by evoking a glorious past in opposition to the oppressive colonial administration.

But, as Rosemary Marangoly George comments, it is interesting to see that Anand did not use the term Harijan for his title, despite the term being associated with Gandhi (111). In this context it is relevant to consider the ambiguities associated with the Mahatma’s own professed attitude to caste system and the political vision of Anand himself. Introducing Anand, Rosemary Marangoly George writes:

A narrative that glosses over certain problematic details, erasures, exaggerations, and gaps could present Mulk Raj Anand as a man of many worlds -- a contributor to an international socialist literary movement in the 1930s, a participant in European modernism, an anti-fascist participant in the Spanish Civil War, a founding member of the Indian Progressive Writers’ Association (PWA), an anti-imperialist intellectual committed to Indian Independence from the British, an advocate for the most down-trodden and disempowered sectors of Indian society, a prominent writer of Indian fiction in English, a humanist (with a clearly articulated definition of what that meant to him), a champion and preserver of art and culture in post-independence India, a secular and vocal public
intellectual in an increasingly communal South Asia, a facilitator between African and Indian writers and artists, and a Gandhian. (92)

This description of Anand highlights his outlook and activities which also explains his position with respect to untouchability and to Gandhi too. Anand is a socialist whose characters feel the urgency for reform and are impatient with the conservative and impractical views of Gandhi. Rumina Sethi avers that Anand has genuine admiration for Gandhi as a political liberator unlike some of his characters but, “he seems to have little patience with the Gandhian scheme of reform which involves prayers and hopes rather than enforcement” (88). At the same time, as an anti-imperialist who longs for the freedom of his country, he cannot escape the Mahatma’s aura or ignore his role in awakening the nation. The narrator emphasises in *The Bubble*: “But if I lost faith in the Mahatma, would I not be alienated from everyone at home–from the freedom movement itself? Gandhi was still my anchor. He had shown such a spirit of self-sacrifice, facing the Sarkar in campaign after campaign” (428). But ultimately, for Anand, it is not self-sacrifice and non-violence which are relevant in bringing about change, but “organized revolution” (Sethi 88).

There is ambivalence in Anand’s treatment of the Mahatma in *Untouchable* since Anand himself is indecisive regarding the relevance of Gandhism. This uncertainty is evident in *The Bubble* in which the narrator
Krishan expresses disparate opinions regarding Gandhi. He feels that Gandhi is no more relevant:

Gandhi had certainly touched off the feeling for devotion in people, even if he had done it by making the docile cowards, beaten for generations, not to hit back, but be proud of accepting punishment. The weakest child could boast of being highly moral. And yet all the campaigns of the Mahatma had failed so far. (307)

But towards the end of the text he feels the importance in following the Mahatma to become a better human being. He says: “I feel that working with the Mahatma may help me to be a person, give me sincerity, the will to work, and faith in something bigger than myself” (586). To understand this ambivalence Gandhi’s attitude to the issue of caste system has to be analysed, since caste is the chief concern of the novel Untouchable.

Gandhi was one of the fifty six delegates from India for the Round Table Conference of 1931 and in a session titled the Minorities Committee, there was an argument between Gandhi and Ambedkar over the issue of untouchables. Ambedkar questioned Gandhi’s claim to represent the untouchables: “The Mahatma has always been saying that the Congress stands for the Depressed Classes, and that the Congress represents the Depressed Classes more than I or my colleagues can do. To that claim I can only say that
it is one of the many false claims which irresponsible people keep on making” (What Congress and Gandhi 92). Gandhi was hurt to the core by this statement. He had no other option than to assert himself: “I claim myself in my own person to represent the vast mass of the untouchables,” he said. “Here I speak not merely on behalf of the Congress, but I speak on my own behalf, and I claim that I would get, if there was a referendum of the untouchables, their vote, and I would top the poll” (qtd in What Congress and Gandhi 96).

Gandhi opposed the idea of separate electorates for the untouchables, as it would only prolong the existence of untouchability. “Will untouchables remain untouchables in perpetuity? I would far rather that Hinduism died than that untouchability lived” (96).

Ambedkar did not believe that Gandhi was sincere in his attack against untouchability. “How could they accept the earnestness of a man who contents himself with saying that he will not go into a temple if it is not open to the Untouchables when what is required of him is to adopt every means to get the temples thrown open to the Untouchables?” (What Congress and Gandhi 313)

He realises that Gandhi’s loyalty to upper caste Hindus makes him ambivalent. “Obviously, he would like to uplift the Untouchables if he can but not by offending the Hindus” (324). Lelyveld tries to define the differences between Gandhi and Ambedkar:
Ambedkar had ceased to think of untouchables as Hindus; Gandhi had not. The basic question was whether they’d be better off in the India of the future as a segregated minority and interest group battling for its rights or as a tolerated adjunct to the majority with recognized rights, an issue, it’s fair to say, that remains unresolved after nearly eight decades. (240)

Ambedkar later became less concerned about the entry into temples, he stressed social equality, and a change in the mentality of upper caste Hindus. But Gandhi wanted the untouchables to remain within the fold of Hinduism and maintained that Hinduism should undergo reformation leading to the abolition of the caste system. Gandhi says in Untouchable that the outcastes should not blame their religion for their oppressed condition. He suggests: “If, therefore, the Hindus oppress them, they should understand that the fault does not lie in the Hindu religion, but in those who profess it” (139). According to Arundhati Roy, through re-baptising the untouchables and by giving them a new name, ‘Harijans,’ meaning ‘children of God’, Gandhi “anchored untouchables firmly to the Hindu faith” (129).

Even though Ambedkar signed the Poona Pact, in order to save the life of the Mahatma, he had lost his faith in the Mahatma. (What Congress and Gandhi 142-43) The Mahatma had opposed separate electorates for the untouchables claiming that it would only ensure their perpetual bondage.
Gandhi asserted that what was important was the total destruction of untouchability. Moreover he feared that separate electorates would only create divisions within Hindu community. In a speech he defended his position on separate electorates, which Ambedkar found disparaging, to the untouchables: “Muslims and Sikhs are well organized. The ‘Untouchables’ are not. There is very little political consciousness among them and they are so horribly treated that I want to save them against themselves” (98). When Gandhi campaigned for the temple entry of the untouchables, Ambedkar could not relate to it because he did not consider temple entry as the ultimate goal of the untouchables. He believed in higher education and employment as the most certain ways for their elevation in the society. Moreover Ambedkar did not want to do anything with a religion which ignored social equality. He thought that Gandhi was a reactionary, a sanatani Hindu, who opposed only untouchability and would not condemn caste. Ambedkar refers to Gandhi’s statement in Nava Jivan, a Gujarati journal, in 1921-22. Gandhi states that Hindu society has been able to survive only because “it is founded on caste system.” He further claims: “The seeds of Swaraj are to be found in the caste system” (335). Gandhi considers caste system as a natural order of the society (336). Ambedkar concludes that “if there is an ‘ism’ which has made made full use of religion as an opium to lull the people into false beliefs and false security, it is Gandhism” (355).
Even though Gandhi, later in his life, rejected caste as a social evil, Ambedkar and the ‘Depressed Classes’ could not appreciate the gesture because of the orthodox views he had earlier. Ambedkar did not believe that the Mahatma and the Congress were sincere in their attempts to remove untouchability and elevate the status of the depressed classes. He asserts: “There have been many Mahatmas in India whose sole object was to remove untouchability and to elevate and absorb the Depressed Classes, but every one of them has failed in his mission. Mahatmas have come and Mahatmas have gone, but the Untouchables have remained as untouchables” (384).

The inconsistencies in Gandhi’s attitude towards untouchables make the European educated ‘Muhammadan’ in Untouchable to condemn Gandhi as a hypocrite, a sentiment shared by Ambedkar. The same inconsistencies make Bakha confused when he listens to the Mahatma, only one step away from Krishan’s judgement in The Bubble that the Mahatma is a failure. It is his socialist leanings and his early association with Bloomsburry group that compels Anand to pass this judgement on the Mahatma. Rosemary George confirms: “Anand’s hope for a socialist future takes over the narrative and is coupled with a very clear authorial distancing from the Gandhian position on caste” (97). Despite the ambiguities involved in the Mahatma’s perspective regarding caste, Anand finds it impossible to ignore the Mahatma’s aura, or his involvement in the national movement.
Bakha, representative of a community suffering under an oppressive and discriminative system for years, had misgivings regarding succumbing to the system. On that particular day he was feeling especially despondent as a result of the humiliating encounters with upper caste people. It was with great happiness and expectation that he heard the news of Gandhi’s imminent arrival especially because “he had heard that Gandhi was very keen on uplifting the Untouchables” (131). Gandhi began by clarifying his position regarding what he called “the policy of divide and rule” (136) of the British Government, the decision to grant separate electorates to the depressed classes. The Mahatma condemned the injustice shown to the untouchables and claimed that if he were to be reborn he would desire it to be as an outcaste. Bakha was thrilled to hear that the Mahatma loved scavenging. “He loved the man. He felt he could put his life in his hands and ask him to do what he liked with it” (138). But he was perplexed when the Mahatma began to blame them for their lack of cleanliness and evil habits. He was touched when Gandhi began to relate the issue of the untouchables with swaraj. “Two of the strongest desires that keep me in the flesh are the emancipation of the Untouchables and the protection of the cow. When these two desires are fulfilled there is swaraj, and therein lies my soul’s deliverance” (140). Gandhi believed that the removal of untouchability was conducive to a healthy and just society. He makes his stance very clear in this quote in Arundhati Roy: “I
therefore make bold to state without any manner of hesitation or doubt that not
till the invidious distinction between Brahmin and Bhangi is removed will our
society enjoy health, prosperity and peace and be happy” (132).

Even though the influence of Gandhi’s physical presence and the
magic of his words are unmistakable, there are dissenters. A London educated
barrister is among the audience who finds fault with Gandhi’s words and
attitude. He accuses Gandhi of hypocrisy:

Gandhi is a humbug. . . . He is a fool. He is a hypocrite. In one
breath he says he wants to abolish untouchability, in the other
he asserts that he is an orthodox Hindu. He is running counter
to the spirit of our age, which is democracy. He is in the fourth
century B.C. with his swadeshi and his spinning-wheel” (141).

Even Bakha, who was definitely enchanted by Gandhi and could find some
comfort in his words, was not able to decipher his words clearly. It was as if
Gandhi did not have a definite answer to his soul’s anguish:

Then the last words of the Mahatma’s speech seemed to
resound in his ears: ‘May God give you the strength to work
out your soul’s salvation to the end.’ ‘What did that mean?’
Bakha asked himself. The Mahatma’s face appeared before him
enigmatic, ubiquitous. There was no answer to be found in it.
Yet there was a queer kind of strength to be derived from it.
Bakha recollected the words of his speech. It all seemed to stand out in his mind, every bit of it... The Mahatma had talked of a Brahmin who did the scavenging in his *ashram*.

‘Did he mean, then, that I should go on scavenging?’ Bakha asked himself. (147)

Bakha felt that there was no escape from scavenging. Arundhati Roy quotes Gandhi: “The Brahmin’s duty is to look after the sanitation of the soul, the Bhangi’s that of the body of society” (132). It is significant that Gandhi makes this statement in an essay titled “The Ideal Bhangi.” The Mahatma’s words in the novel are ambivalent regarding the issue; he abhors untouchability while defending Hindu orthodoxy. Gandhi wanted to see the end of the evil practice, but without using force, and resorting to ‘peaceful persuasion.’ Bakha’s confusion can be attributed to the contradictions in Gandhi’s words. Shingal interprets, “the Mahatma is not interested in the abolition of caste as such, simply the elimination of the stigma associated with caste” (30). Bakha’s longing for freedom ran counter to Gandhi’s perception of *varna* system. In the narrator’s words Bakha could not find a definite answer to the problem that was close to his heart even when the Mahatma could soothe his mind. “He was calm as he walked along, though the conflict in his soul was not over, though he was torn between his enthusiasm for Gandhi and the difficulties in
his own awkward, naive self’ (147). As Snehal Shingavi comments Gandhi could not be rejected outright as he might show the way for the outcaste:

But Bakha cannot reject Gandhi, either, in part because of the trials of his day, which are condensed renderings of a geographically vast and historically long legacy of untouchable oppression . . . lack of access to education and wells, restrictions on temple entry, payment in spoiled food, fraud by merchants, urban mob violence, sexual abuse, niggardly responses to acts of heroism, denial of medical treatment, unsanitary living conditions, verbal humiliation and the threat of conversion to a benign but irrelevant Christianity. . . . What Gandhi can do . . . is make Bakha aware that untouchability is not a permanent affliction; even though ‘there was no answer to be found’ in Gandhi’s face, Gandhi can open up possibilities.

(29-30)

Bakha could not get away from Gandhi because he gave him a new confidence to face the world. As Nehru opines, “A demoralized, backward, and broken-up people suddenly straightened their backs and lifted their heads . . .” (82).

Bakha was also interested in the flush system which, another character, a poet, had mentioned as a solution to untouchability. A movement
towards technology could open the doors to freedom. Gandhi’s distrust of
technology and industrialization has already been discussed in this project.
What is highlighted here is the nationalist elite’s modernist outlook and
Anand’s own faith in technology as a tool for national reform. As Anand
himself expresses in Letters on India: “If a National government is formed in
India it would certainly give the greatest stimulus to the Industrialization of
India” (77). And what is ironic here is Gandhi, who contemned
industrialization, is juxtaposed with a symbol of technology, the flush system.
There could be a tacit suggestion that technology is a more viable option than
Gandhism in restoring dignity to the depressed classes. The novel testifies to
the unique charm exerted by Gandhi which would attract people from all
walks of life and ensure the participation of even the subaltern sections of the
society in the freedom struggle. Gandhi is appraised in the novel: “This
strange man seemed to have the genius that could, by a single dramatic act,
rally multicoloured, multi-tongued India to himself” (134). Even the
differences in religion get evaporated before Gandhi’s charisma as averred by
a person in the audience, “He has made Hindu and Mussalman one” (134).
The people did not hesitate to throw away the foreign clothes they were
wearing obeying Gandhi’s exhortation. It is Untouchable, more than
Kanthapura, which presents the sway Gandhi’s physical presence has over the
masses. Nehru admits in his Autobiography:
It was remarkable how Gandhiji seemed to cast a spell on all classes and groups of people and drew them into one motley crowd struggling in one direction. He became, indeed (to use a phrase which has been applied to another leader), “a symbolic expression of the confused desires of the people.” (81)

But true to Partha Chatterjee’s interpretation of the attitude of the elite nationalists including Nehru towards Gandhi’s mediation, the text raises doubts regarding the efficacy and relevance of Gandhian ideals in practical politics. Nehru always had misgivings about Gandhi’s emphasis on the mingling of religion and politics. “Even some of Gandhiji’s phrases sometimes jarred upon me—thus his frequent reference to *Rama Raj* as a golden age which was to return” (79). There were occasions when Nehru could not understand him and many of his “fads and peculiarities” (79) Nehru found intolerable. Nehru expresses his confusion regarding Gandhi in his *Autobiography*:

All this shows that we were by no means clear or certain in our minds. Always we had the feeling that while we might be more logical, Gandhi knew India far better than we did, and a man who could command such tremendous devotion and loyalty must have something in him that corresponded to the needs and aspirations of the masses. If we could convince him, we felt
that we could convert these masses. And it seemed possible to
convince him for, in spite of his peasant outlook, he was the
born rebel, a revolutionary out for big changes, whom no fear
of consequences could stop. (268)

They needed this revolutionary Gandhi with a peasant’s mind, who could
enchant the masses and secure their co-operation in the freedom struggle. As
long as they were negotiating with the British they needed Gandhi’s
mediation, and his engagement with the masses. Since he had no definite
objective and was influenced by “metaphysical and mystical” (Nehru 523)
concerns, Gandhi would not be of much use in the building of the new
national state which was possible only “in the domain of rational politics”
(Chatterjee, 156). The portrayal of the Mahatma in the novel brings together
the power relations in the Indian society of the time and is in tune with the
repudiation of Gandhian political and economic policies in an independent
India by Nehru and his colleagues. The dominant discourse of the time was
elite nationalism and the leaders of the nationalist movement comprised
mainly of educated, privileged, caste Hindus. Untouchability was not a major
concern for them, and if Gandhi considered it as a grave issue, they just
professed to go along with him.

Mulk Raj Anand was undoubtedly influenced by Gandhi as he himself
had admitted. Gandhi’s untouchability programme and Anand’s meetings with
him had sowed the seeds of the text in his mind (Shingavi 34). The political moment of this text is Gandhi’s campaign against untouchability following his release from the jail under the condition that he would abandon civil disobedience and restrict himself to the work of Harijan reform. His fast in Yervada jail against separate electorates for the untouchables had occurred in 1932 and his clash with Ambedkar at Round Table Conference, in 1931. A majority of the Congress was also against separate electorates, as it would divide Hindu votes and make national unification and negotiation with the British more difficult. Anand also shared this outlook. “These communal or separate electorates were the most vicious thing in the election procedure and were deeply resented by the government of India” (Letters on India 135). According to him Congress as the national party had the right to represent each and every group in the society. “Congress is one of the largest political parties in the world, certainly the largest in India and based not on religious, sectional, caste or class interests, but on a united stand of the people of India behind the demand for national freedom” (3-4). According to Anand any attempt to weaken the national party would only undermine national unity and consequently India’s attempt at decolonization would be negatively affected. So the incorporation of the minorities and outcastes into the national movement was necessary to create a sense of unified India even at the expense of their interests and demands. Anand’s text tentatively offers the solution of
technology to the problem of untouchability, but presupposes a liberated nation. National liberation was of primary importance as Gandhi himself had emphasized: “Full and final removal of untouchability . . . is utterly impossible without Swaraj . . .” (Collected Works 61: 166). The relevance of Gandhi is unquestionable, in the creation of a sense of unity which would result in national liberation. The introduction of Gandhi serves this purpose in the novel. As Shingavi opines:

His presence here enables the possibility of a real merger between untouchables and the middle class, not only because of his political personality but because of Anand’s association of Gandhi with the authentic masses of India. Anand’s own feelings about Gandhi are interesting in this respect; despite their disagreements on politics, Anand felt that Gandhi was necessary if one was to have any serious engagement with India. . . . But Gandhi also represents something symbolic and important, and for that reason he can act as a focus of contemplation that unites disparate individuals in their simultaneous consideration of him. (55)

Thus the Mahatma, even with his oddities and contradictions regarding the issues of untouchables and minorities, remained the sole unifying force, with his unique ability to reach out to the masses. Anand’s portrayal of Gandhi
is true to the perception of the Mahatma of the time and Anand himself was
influenced by the general attitude towards Gandhi and Gandhi’s outlook
regarding the issue of the untouchables. The voice of Ambedkar is perceptibly
absent from the novel and instead we get the perspectives of the elite
nationalists concerning the outcastes. Shingavi avers:

Untouchables do not speak for themselves in the novel, and as a
result, the conclusion cannot be seen as the fulfilment of the
untouchable demand for freedom. It appears, at every instant, to
be the self-satisfied Congress member’s view: that nationalism
is sufficient to solve the problems of all, eventually. (49)

It is the Mahatma’s voice that remains dominant in Bakha’s mind even though
mixed with other inflections, and other options. The Mahatma remains the
dominant image and his voice, too has emerged as the dominant one.

Waiting for the Mahatma, written by R.K.Narayan and published in
1955, is a fictional text in which Gandhi appears as a character and furthers
the development of the plot. Compared to Raja Rao and Mulk Raj Anand,
R.K.Narayan is a writer who has tried to remain politically uninvolved,
confining himself to the life in the serene, ordinary, South Indian town
Malgudi. Unsurprisingly Waiting for the Mahatma is also set in Malgudi, but
the normally sedate world of Malgudi encounters turmoil and disorder with
the arrival of the Mahatma. The transformation that Sriram undergoes is a
manifestation of this turbulence which is indicative of the profound changes that happen nationwide once the national pride is awakened through the encounter with Gandhi.

In the novel Gandhi is portrayed as a generous, affectionate person, concerned about the lives of the people around him and influencing them in their attitude towards life. The person projected to us is a true Mahatma, a spiritual leader and a social reformer rather than a political leader. Narayan presents the exposure of remote villages of South India to Gandhian ideals through the minor events that happen in the life of Sriram. At the same time into these personal incidents are incorporated events of national significance like Gandhi’s activities in the social and political fields, Quit India Movement and the Mahatma’s assassination.

Sriram is jolted out of his lethargic complacency through his exposure to Gandhi. As Meenakshi Mukherjee comments: “In the familiar setting of Malgudi Sriram sleeps and eats, sits in his arm-chair, and walks smugly in his circumscribed universe, until suddenly he wakes up in a different world when the Mahatma and his followers come to his town” (48). His life changes, reminding us of the transformation underwent by the community of Kanthapura under the impact of Gandhi. But here the account of the transformation is confined to that of a single individual rather than that of a whole village.
In *Waiting for the Mahatma*, like in *Kanthapura*, we perceive the national movement through the perspective of a single character. In *Kanthapura* this character is not significant in herself, but only in relation with the movement. But in Narayan’s work the national movement serves the interest of the protagonist; Gandhi is a means to fulfil Sriram’s dream of marrying Bharati. This apparently corroborates Narayan’s own apolitical nature, his lack of interest in the larger issues that affected the nation. Writing years after India gained independence Narayan may be dispassionate and detached, but since the novel is placed in the context of the freedom movement the writer cannot escape the aura of the Mahatma. Narayan’s satirical humour pervades the narrative. When the Municipal Chairman made elaborate rearrangements in his house for Gandhi’s stay, Narayan’s comment is interesting: “No film decorator sought to create atmosphere with greater deliberation” (33). The writer tries to convey the impression that the change is superficial and that there is no genuine transformation, in a very gentle ironic tone. Even Independence is criticised in the sense that it has not brought about any real change. Sriram observes when he walks to the town after leaving the prison: “What was the sign that it was independent? He looked about him. The trees were as usual, the road was not in the least improved, the policemen still rode on the footboard of highway buses” (172).
Chapter II

There is a large gathering to see and hear the Mahatma, his reputation has surely preceded him. Even though the people are definitely eager to see him one fails to find the expectancy as in the crowd in *Untouchable*, nor the existential angst of Bakha. The people are in a frivolous mood, cracking jokes and criticising local leaders like their municipal chairman. Sriram is in the crowd because of Bharati, even though he can definitely feel the aura of Gandhi. The people fall silent when the Mahatma raises his hands, but are half-hearted when he asks them to clap their hands. The Mahatma here is not an aloof teacher or leader, but a person aware of his surroundings, who notices those who do not join in the clapping. We get a glimpse of the jovial nature of the Mahatma in his interaction with Sriram. The “unaffected graciousness in his tone” (51) soon dispels Sriram’s fear and hesitation. The Mahatma’s unpretentious and amenable disposition which puts everyone at ease is emphasized here. The Mahatma in the text, with his aura and extensive influence, is the person familiar to his friends and relatives, the person who is concerned about even insignificant matters. As Sriram notices:

Mahatmaji himself as always was doing several things at the same time. While his hands were spinning, his eyes perused a letter held before him by another, and he found it possible too to put in a word of welcome to Sriram. Through the backdoor
of the hut many others were coming in and passing out. For each one of them Mahatmaji had something to say. (51)

There is little attempt here to give a mythical dimension to the Mahatma as in *Kanthapura* or *Untouchable*, instead he is an ordinary person in the novel, with extraordinary concerns and sympathies. It is even possible to feel pity for him as Sriram does vis-a-vis his grandmother’s negative opinion of the Mahatma. Gandhi asks Sriram to get the permission of his grandmother to accompany him. It is interesting to note Sriram’s reaction: “He felt a great pity for the Mahatma, so innocent that he could not dream of anyone talking ill of him” (62). Gandhi’s ‘innocence’ highlights his human, rather than divine, quality. For Bharati, Bapu is such a simple soul that it is never difficult to understand what he is saying. Even though there are references to the British rule and attainment of freedom through the practice of truth and non-violence, the Mahatma focuses his attention on the transformation of the hearts of the people. “I want you really to make sure of a change in your hearts before you ever think of asking the British to leave the shores of India. . . . I want you to clear your hearts and minds and make certain that only love resides there, and there is no residue of bitterness for past history” (23). The Mahatma is more of a spiritual ‘guru’ and a social reformer, cleaning the cobwebs away from people’s minds and the society itself before political changes can take place. There are no detailed discussions on politics; instead the focus is on the
humane qualities of the Mahatma which have captivated the minds of the common people. Gandhi’s Mahatmahood is perceptible in the deep concern he shows for the common people than in the political actions he engenders regarding the nation’s fortunes. He finds time and patience to talk even to small children and make them laugh. The impact of the Mahatma’s presence is felt even in the sweepers’ colony. The name of the Mahatma affects the hardcore criminal too.

When Gandhi asks the people to clap their hands in unison he emphasizes the desired unity of their minds, and through that the unity of the nation. The Mahatma is expected to create a sense of unity in the national movement:

> It must be like the drumbeats of the non-violent soldiers marching on to cut the chains that bind Mother India. I want to hear the great beat. I want to see all arms upraised, and clapping. . . . I want to see unity in it. I want you all to do it with a single mind.” And at once, every man, woman, and child, raised their arms and clapped over their heads. (18)

To welcome the Mahatma almost everyone is wearing khadi caps, and this has made them “unrecognizable” (18), according to Sriram. This again points to the oneness which, the Mahatma, through his words and actions, is supposed to evoke.
The historical moment of the novel is the time around Quit India Movement, moving through India’s Independence and partition to Gandhi’s assassination in 1948. Even in the midst of all this uproar, and with Gandhi as one of its principal characters, it is surprising that the novel is not steeped in the political events of the day. May be Narayan’s ambivalent attitude to the presence of the British in India and a traditional Indian way of life is suggested here. Moreover he is more concerned about the cloistered existence of Sriram and the changes wrought in his life by Gandhi’s presence. Sriram’s small world is juxtaposed with the vast canvas of Gandhian nationalism. Sriram encounters the larger outside world during a train journey to New Delhi, on his way to meet Bharati. He is surprised to meet so many different people, speaking different languages, representing different cultures, and for the first time in his life gets an idea of the extent of the nation and its diversity. That crowded, congested compartment becomes a miniature of the nation and Sriram is not particularly thrilled by his experience. What Narayan seems to suggest is that an awareness of the nation is not always an exhilarating experience. A slightly ironic, bantering tone underlies the whole text, but Narayan is serious when he deals with Sriram’s longing for Bharati or his transformation to Gandhian methods. As Priyamvada Gopal opines: “Though it rarely relinquishes its bantering tone, the novel does take the question of personal transformation seriously as its protagonist attempts to evolve from
Malgudi delinquent to Gandhi-man and, eventually, dedicated citizen of independent India” (56).

Sriram is incited by selfish motives when he shows interest in Gandhi in the beginning. But soon, like many others, he too is captivated by Gandhi’s aura and is unhappy when Gandhi leaves his village. “The thought of having to live a mundane existence without Mahatmaji appalled him. Not even the proximity of Bharati seemed to mitigate his misery” (72). This proves the Mahatma’s unique ability to reach into the hearts of the people and transform them, even an ‘idler’ like Sriram.

The Mahatma, with his loin cloth, spinning wheel and spirituality, evinces an old world charm and a penchant for traditional values. But in the novel, with his emphasis on cleanliness, advocacy of egalitarian values and in particular, the attempts to reinstate the untouchables, Gandhi is given a modern demeanour, especially in comparison with old, tradition bound people like Sriram’s grandmother. For her “the Mahatma was one who preached dangerously, who tried to bring untouchables into the temples, and who involved people in difficulties with the police” (48). Familial relations are more important than the demands of the nation and she concedes no special value to Gandhian soul-force and fasts. Her leaving Malgudi for Benares signifies the crumbling of traditional society, an inevitable change with the advent of Gandhism.
From another perspective it is not very surprising that the novel does not focus on political events or the Mahatma’s involvement with the national movement. But the violence raging outside as a result of Hindu-Muslim riot is suggested in the appearance of orphaned children who are taken care of by Bharati under the Mahatma’s instructions. The novel was published in 1955 and the historical moment is the 1940s, when freedom was in the horizon, and Quit India movement was forcing the hands of the British. Gandhi’s honey moon period with the Congress was over; he had a series of disagreements with the party which resulted in his frequent withdrawal from the leadership of the movement and frequent reinstatements. As Joseph Lelyveld presents:

In the months and years following the viceroy’s declaration of war on behalf of an India he never bothered to consult, Gandhi’s comings and goings get to be like the old stage routine of a performer holding up one end of a very long ladder while exiting stage left, only to re-enter stage right an instant later, hoisting the other end. (285)

The Mahatma’s mission as envisaged by the Congress was completed, the formation of a national consciousness and incorporation of the masses in the national movement through his aura creating an advantageous situation to make the negotiations with the British had been made easier. But now the nationalist leaders had their misgivings. As Nehru argued, “there are basic
differences between Gandhiji’s ideals and the socialist objective” (269). They especially found it difficult to sympathize with his tendency to associate religion with politics. Nehru, a socialist at heart, could not accept this and promised himself that when the country got swaraj they would not encourage his oddities. Nehru expressed his dislike of many of Gandhi’s acts and ideals especially his fasting against awarding separate electorates to the Depressed Classes. “I felt angry with him at his religious and sentimental approach to a political question, and his frequent references to God in connection with it. He even seemed to suggest that God had indicated the very date of the fast. What a terrible example to set” (386).

In 1939 the Congress rejected a resolution Gandhi drafted, a first in twenty years. Gandhi’s draft promised support to the British war effort by nonviolent means. The Congress made its promise to support the British on the condition of Indian Independence. Lelyveld recounts:

Implying the bargain it imagines, it soft-pedals Gandhi’s emphasis on non-violence. Ten months later, in June 1940, it formally votes at Gandhi’s request ‘to absolve him from responsibility for program and activity which the Congress has to pursue’ in order to free him ‘to pursue his great ideal in his own way’. (286)
The rift between the Congress and Gandhi is explicit here. Now they had reached negotiation terms with the British they wanted to get away from the shadow of the Mahatma. Even though three months later he would return to Congress leadership, his unquestionable power over the national movement had declined. This is clearly evident in the way Gandhi’s spinning wheel was removed from the flag of independent India. As Collins and Lapierre reiterate:

Now, with independence at hand, voices in the ranks of Congress contested the right of what they called ‘Gandhiji’s toy’ to occupy the central place in what was about to become their national flag. To a growing number of party militants his spinning-wheel was a symbol of the past, a woman’s thing, the hallmark of an archaic India turned inwards upon herself.

At their insistence the place of honour on the national flag was assigned to another wheel, the martial sign the conquering warriors of Ashoka, founder of the Hindu empire, had borne upon their shields. Framed by a pair of lions for force and courage, Ashoka’s proud symbol of strength and authority, his dharma chakra, the wheel of the cosmic order, became the symbol of a new India. (303)

The irony is obvious in the sense that the spinning wheel, “the humble instrument he had proposed to the masses of India as the instrument of their
non-violent redemption” (303), is removed from the flag of a nation which is reputed for its non-violent method of freedom struggle, and replaced with a sign of conquering warriors.

Gandhi’s relevance in Indian freedom struggle and its politics was deliberately masked by the nationalist leaders in the new political atmosphere. They wanted freedom and power at any cost, even at the risk of partition, and it was better for them if Gandhi confined himself to his social and spiritual activities. The power relations had changed and the hegemony of the Mahatma had been replaced by the hegemony of the bourgeois elite in the nationalist movement. Another shift was evident in the economic field, with Gandhi’s concept on economy with its emphasis on self-reliance and village centered development bypassed by the emerging vanguards of the national movement. While Gandhi prioritized village uplift as the reliable method for self reliance, the new leaders and decision makers of Congress considered swift industrialization as the most effective way to the aforesaid self-reliance. Thus a movement away from Gandhism was visible in 1940s in both the economic and the political fields. And it is very evident that R.K. Narayan wrote Waiting for the Mahatma against this background and that he was influenced by the change in the socio-political mood even though the political events are not detailed.
Even in these shifting times the aura of the Mahatma is recognizable in the novel, with people coming from all over the village, wearing khadi caps, to attend his meeting. The people in the village, including the influential rich, vie with each other to welcome him and give him accommodation. Nehru’s words with reference to Gandhi’s retirement from the Congress are relevant in this context:

His retirement from the Congress . . . and outwardly it marked the end of a great chapter in Congress and Indian history. But, essentially, its significance was not great for he cannot rid himself, even if he wanted to, of his dominating position. He did not owe that position to any office or other tangible tie. The Congress today reflects almost as much his view-point as it has ever done before, and even if it should wander away from his path, Gandhiji, even unconsciously, would continue to influence it and the country to a very great extent. He cannot divest himself of that burden and responsibility. In considering the objective conditions prevailing in India his personality forces itself on one’s attention and cannot be ignored. (593)

According to Nehru, Gandhi’s aura had not declined and he would continue to hold his sway over the masses. Narayan’s Waiting for the Mahatma attests to
the fact that Gandhi, with all the doubts regarding his relevance in the politics of the new found nation, could not be ignored outrightly.

Gandhi welcomed women into the national movement “as a life-preserving and humanizing force” (Kishwar 289), and Bharati’s presence in the novel attests to that. Gandhi’s insistence on ‘purity’ and ‘honour’ of women also finds its way into the novel. He was not in favour of women working outside home as it would negatively affect moral standards. Gandhi says:

If women go out to work, our social life will be ruined and moral standards will decline. . . . I feel convinced that for men and women to go out for work together will mean the fall of both. Do not, therefore, send your women out to work, protect their honour, if you have any manliness in you, it is for you to see that no one casts an evil eye on them. (Collected Works 17: 47-51)

When Bharati expressed her desire to accompany the Mahatma when he visited the riot ridden villages, he was hesitant at first. But he relented and Bharati followed the Mahatma from one burning village to another. The only thing Gandhi insisted on was their honour. Bharati says: “but Mahatmaji had advised women as a last resort to take their lives with their own hands than
surrender their honour . . . if any unexpected thing happened, I was always prepared to end my life” (192).

Many of the events of the national movement had the nature of the event as conceived by Hardt and Negri and this is confirmed through the many references in the novel:

The Mahatma had in his famous resolution of August 1942 said: ‘Britain must quit India’, and the phrase had the potency of a mantra or a magic formula. Throughout the length and breadth of the land, people cried ‘Quit India’. . . . After the Mahatma uttered the phrase, he was put in prison; but the phrase took life and flourished, and did ultimately produce enough power to send the British away. There was not a blank wall in the whole country which did not carry the message. Wherever one turned one saw ‘Quit India.’ (79)

The spontaneity of the Quit India Movement and the various ancillary events associated with it had the stamp of the ‘event’ though with the undeniable presence of the Mahatma as the inspiration. The khadi caps the people wore when they gathered to meet the Mahatma also evoked the image of the multitude, a common mode of dress against a common enemy, even though the Mahatma had no use for the word enemy, especially with regard to the English.
Situated in the 40s the text reveals the hegemony of Gandhian politics, though its reception by the society is shown to be varied. There is ignorance, understanding, acceptance and involvement, acceptance both opportunistic and genuine, but there is no equivocation about the dominance of Gandhism. The movement led by Subhash Chandra Bose is represented in the novel, manifested in the activities of Jagdish, and in that of Sriram too, but its relevance is questioned in the novel itself.

Narayan’s realistic touches and his sense of comedy make Gandhi a real person, not a larger than life character. The keen sense of humour and Narayan’s preference for sketching simple, uncomplicated lives, make the Mahatma the fatherly soul that he is in the novel. Even when the novel enters into explicit political encounters, the Mahatma in the text is presented as a humane person and becomes a politician only later. The affection and playfulness that he displays when dealing with children, the fatherly concern that he shows to Bharati and to Sriram, the love and consideration that he genuinely feels for everyone, renew his aura. Even the presence of Nehru and Patel, which reminds one of Gandhi’s national significance, does not make Gandhi trivialise the personal problems of Sriram and Bharati. He is genuinely happy when Sriram tells him that he wants to marry Bharati. Narayan’s own preference of the personal over the political and his predilections can be easily perceived here.
Narayan’s intention in the text is not to analyse or put in to question the nature of the national movement or Gandhi’s relevance. He presents the average Indian’s, one who is not ideologically or altruistically committed, perception of freedom struggle. His vision is coloured by his fascination for a girl, and that too affects his understanding of politics. Narain and Kaushik refer to such perception as “affective orientation to politics” (210), and such an affective understanding is the dominant mood of the text. Concurrent to the shift in the ideological and intellectual understanding of Gandhism and the national movement from the political to a visceral, the Mahatma too gets transformed, and is cut down to a life sized image in his relationship with the major characters of the novel. A socially and personally sensitive Gandhi is foregrounded instead of the political Gandhi.

The chief thrust of the novel is the human rather than the political and Narayan also allows his comic irony to play upon people and events. Gandhi is perceived in relation to an ordinary young man from an ordinary village who has ulterior motives in following the Mahatma. With the very realistic presentation of events and people, the image of the Mahatma which emerges is more humane and authentic. The writer is less concerned with Gandhi’s political activities; his relevance as a political leader is not a major focus of the novel and his ‘mahatmahood’ is established more in personal relationships.
In *Waiting for the Mahatma* the national movement is not sketched on a wide canvas. Instead it is represented through minor events and situations and from the perspective of an ordinary person caught in very particular and personal situations. In *Kanthapura* too, the national movement is perceived through the eyes of a particular individual, but she is significant only as an indicator of the change in the village under the impact of Gandhism. In *Waiting for the Mahatma*, the nation and the Mahatma become secondary to the individual and moral development of the protagonist.

Akeel Bilgrami refers to the sharp variations regarding the perceptions of Gandhi: “It has been common for some decades now to swing from a sentimental perception of him as a ‘Mahatma’ to a cooler assessment of Gandhi as the shrewd politician” (249). This shrewd politician is highlighted in Sashi Tharoor’s *The Great Indian Novel*, which does not make a myth out of the Mahatma, but gives a balanced sketch of Gandhi. Gangagi or Bhishma, the fictional character parallel to Gandhiji is presented as an intelligent and duty bound person and a very practical politician unlike the mythical persona whom the earlier hagiographers had put on a pedestal. The novel, unlike the other fictional texts discussed in the study, is not written at a time when the Mahatma is a contemporary or his influence is very much alive. Tharoor, not susceptible to the urgency of national liberation, can dispassionately approach the Mahatma and analyse his activities. Writing decades after the gaining of
Independence, in 1989, the writer is not placed within the context of the freedom struggle and is situated in a historically objective position to analyse and judge both the national movement and the Mahatma’s relevance. In this era of mass reproductions of the Mahatma in various forms his aura gets diminished and Tharoor’s perception of Gandhi is a testimony to the influence of current innovations and power structures.

Ved Mehta’s in *Mahatma Gandhi and his Apostles*, narrates an incident during his visit to Sabarmati Ashram where he meets an old man on the veranda of Gandhi’s hut, wearing only khaki trunks and brown rimmed spectacles. The director of the ashram prompts him to say something about Gandhi and he shouts out, “Truth and nonviolence are as old as hills! But nobody listens!” (37). In the same work Ved Mehta interviews Abdul Ghaffar Khan, a Pathan and a staunch Gandhian who has become famous as Frontier Gandhi, and asks him about the future of Gandhism. His reply is very relevant in this context:

> In India, Gandhism is dead. Gandhi is completely forgotten. It’s the story of Buddha all over again. . . . Why do you not honour your own prophets? Your government does all the things that Gandhi opposed the British for doing—arms itself to the teeth, neglects the villages and the poor, supports a huge, uncaring, remote bureaucracy. The Gandhians among you, with a few
notable exceptions, either put all their emphasis on the spinning wheel, as if that were his entire message, or trade on his name for personal aggrandizement. (277-78)

The words of Badshah Khan find reverberation in the observation made by the narrator of *The Great Indian Novel*, V.V., “It was only two decades after Gangagi’s death, but they were already unable to relate him to their lives. He might as well have been a character from the *Mahabharata*, Ganapathi, so completely had they consigned him to the mists and myths of historical legend” (47). Despite all the texts written on him and the things taught about him and the texts he himself has written, V.V. says, “how little we remember, how little we understand, how little we care” (46). V.V.’s assessment is that it is easier for us to forget him: “Let us be honest: Gangaji was the kind of person it is more convenient to forget. The principles he stood for and the way in which he asserted them were always easier to admire than to follow. While he was alive, he was impossible to ignore; once he had gone, he was impossible to imitate” (47).

In his non-fictional work *India: From Midnight to the Millennium and Beyond*, Shashi Tharoor makes a similar statement when he tries to assess Gandhi’s relevance in today’s world in the chapter titled “A Myth and an Idea.” It is interesting to note what he writes about Gandhi, which makes Gandhi and Ganga Dutt one and the same person (17). In another work
published in 2015, eighteen years later, entitled *India Shastra: Reflections on the Nation in our Time*, Tharoor repeats his statement about Gandhi’s status in the contemporary scenario, in the essay titled “The Legacy of Mahatma Gandhi” (106). Tharoor that Gandhism has potential only against opponents who are concerned about the loss of their moral authority and are worried about public opinion. Tharoor suggests: “Gandhism is viable at its simplest and most profound in the service of a transcendent principle like independence from foreign rule” (*From Midnight to Millenium* 20). He further says: “Gandhism without moral authority is like Marxism without a proletariat. Yet few who wish to use his methods have his personal integrity or moral stature” (21). Even when Gandhi was able to wrest freedom for India from the British through the unique method of non-violence, Tharoor observes, Gandhi’s teachings and his victory for India did not bring about an enduring transformation in the world. “It is, sadly, a matter of doubt whether he triumphed at all” (*India: From Midnight* 22).

The same sense of failure pervades the concluding scene of Gangaji’s story in *The Great Indian Novel*. Against the background of bloodshed and violence of partition Gangaji is presented as sitting in despair, hearing only the cries of the victims instead of the cheers of celebration of Indian independence. V. V. laments, “He had preached brotherhood, and love, and comradeship in struggle, the strength of non-violence and the power of soul-
force. Yet it was as if he had never lived at all, never preached a word” (231). Gangaji’s teachings had won freedom for the people, but it was as if these teachings were of no avail at the crucial moment. Tharoor observes: “the staying power of organized violence is almost always greater than that of nonviolence” (*India: From Midnight* 20).

Towards the end of his life, especially when India is approaching Independence, there is a suggestion that the Mahaguru/the Mahatma is losing his influence within the party. When Gangaji opposes the partition of the country in the meeting convened by Viscount Drewpad the Congress leaders consider it easy to bypass him. Dhritarashtra tells Gangaji:

Gangaji, we understand how you feel,” Dhritarashtra said. “We have fought by your side for our freedom, all these years. We have imbibed your principles and convictions. You have led us to the brink of victory.” He paused and his voice became softer. “But now the time has come for us to apply our principles in the face of the acid test of reality. . . . Might it not be better to agree in advance to a – the words stick in my throat, Gangaji – civilized Partition, than to resist and risk destroying everything? (223)

Even when Gangaji staunchly stood against Partition, Dhridharashtra and others unanimously decided to yield to the demands of Karna. What they
needed was peace and freedom to build the India of their dreams. The Mahaguru’s opinion regarding Partition was not wise and it would only lead to more confusion. V.V. says: “It was the first time we had ever gone against the expressed wishes of Gangaji. His era was over” (223).

Partition occurred against Gandhi’s wishes and that ultimately led to Gandhi’s own death. Paranjape says: “He thwarted and stopped the calculus of endless violence by offering his life in return” (Death and Afterlife 285). In the novel Amba/Shikhandin appears before the dejected Gangaji and declares that he has been a failure. Shikhandin blames him for the country’s condition and instills death wish in his mind. He expresses his contempt for Gangaji:

You make me sick, Bhishma. Your life has been a waste, unproductive, barren. You are nothing but an impotent old walrus sucking other reptiles’ eggs, an infertile old fool seeking solace like a calf from the udders of foreign cows, a man who is less than a woman. The tragedy of this country springs from you – as nothing else could after that stupid oath of which you are so pathetically proud. Bhishma, the pyre has already been lit for you in the flames that are burning your country. You have lived long enough! (232)

It is significant that Gangaji dies muttering the words “I . . . have . . . failed” collaborating Tharoor’s assessment of the status of Gandhism in their violent
world. The narrator of the novel V.V. tenders the same idea when he discusses the factors responsible for Gandhi’s murder:

I will not ask whether Amba/Shikhandin was truly responsible for the Mahaguru’s death, or whether it was not India collectively that ended Gangaji’s life by tearing itself apart. Nor will I ask you, Ganapathi, to reflect on whether Ganga Dutta might in fact have been the victim of an overwhelming death-wish, a desire to end a life that he saw starkly as having served no purpose, a desire buried deep in the urge that had led him, all those years earlier, to create and nurture his own executioner. (234)

Shashi Tharoor presents Gandhi as a man ultimately defeated by his own people, a great soul whose moral integrity enabled him to wield nonviolence as a successful political weapon, but was unable to prevent partition, even though his influence with the common people had not waned. Gangaji was unable to fetch lasting peace to a country torn by partition and communal violence. He walked from one riot ridden place to another, but could not put out the conflagration. The narrator observes:

But the old magic was gone. Where he was effective it was in very specific areas for very limited periods of time; against the scale and magnitude of the carnage that was sweeping across
the country, he was broadly ineffectual. It was almost as if the Mahaguru and his message had only touched a corner of the national consciousness, a corner reserved for the higher attributes of conscience and historical memory, but one unrelated to the dictates of reality or the needs and constraints of the present. (211)

This has to be read against what Gandhi despairingly uttered in 1947 at a prayer meeting: “There was a time when India listened to me. Today I am a back number” (Gandhi Reader 279). Makarand R. Paranjape quotes Gandhi in his work The Death and Afterlife of Mahatma Gandhi:

I know that today I irritate everyone. How can I believe that I alone am right and all others are wrong? What irks me is that people deceive me. They should tell me frankly that I have become old, that I am no longer of any use and that I should not be in their way. If they thus openly repudiate me I shall not be pained in the least. (9)

Gandhi felt that he had been bypassed and marginalized by Congress leaders and the violence and carnage in the wake of partition depressed him more. Gandhi further says, “Seeing all this, people like you should take pity on an old man like me and pray to God to take me away.” (Collected Works 98: 72)

Gandhi expressed this death wish many times during this period. As Ashis
Nandy suggests in “Final Encounter,” the unimaginable violence that had been unleashed in pre and post independent India had wrecked Gandhi’s desire to live for 125 years, the desire he had expressed in his letter to Miss Schlesin (Pyarelal 153). Nandy comments that Gandhi held himself responsible for what was happening and longed for a violent death (62). The Mahatma’s grand niece Manu in her memoir Bapu-My Mother remembers his dispirited words to the people who had come to greet him on his birthday in 1947:

Now I have no desire to do anything. I am longing to disappear from the world, quietly with Ramanama on my lips... Today I am in a potter’s kiln with flames all around me... but personally, my only desire now is either not to be alive on my next birthday so that I may not have to see this fire, or to see a changed India. So please pray for what I wish instead for my long life. (41)

Manu again quotes Gandhi: “I have no desire now to live for 125 years... People try to kill their own brothers nowadays. I don’t want to live to see this fratricidal war” (42). As Tridip Suhrud observes, Gandhi’s murder was “iccha mrityu – a death he had hoped for and willed in the last years of his life” (17). In The Great Indian Novel Gangaji would die only if he desired so. Robert Payne observes that for many Gandhi had become too meddlesome. He remarks:
In the eyes of too many officials, he was an old man who had outlived his usefulness: he had become expendable. By negligence, by indifference, by deliberate desire on the part of many faceless people, the assassination had been accomplished. It was a new kind of murder – the permissive assassination, and there may be many more in the future. (572)

Gandhi had always stood for Hindu – Muslim unity and had declared that India would be divided only over his dead body. He reiterated during one of his prayer meetings: “So long as I am alive, I will never agree to the partition of India” (Collins and Lapierre 142). But now Gandhi was forced to agree to the partition of India on the basis of religious differences. Among the national leaders only Gandhi was against the partition and Lord Mountbatten knew that he had the support of the other Congress leaders. “I had the most curious feeling,” Mountbatten declared, recalling that period, “… that they were all behind me, in a way, against Gandhi. They were encouraging me to challenge him, in a sense, on their behalf” (Collins and Lapierre 243). Gandhi himself understood that they would not agree to him regarding the question of partition. “I know India is not with me,” he told Louis Fischer “I have not convinced enough Indians of the wisdom of nonviolence” (527). Even Pyrelal understood that they did not give importance to Gandhi now: “In that hour of decision they had no use for Bapu” (1: 239). When Gandhi decided to fast to
put an end to the violence in Calcutta, he already knew that the people had changed. They did not want peace, they desired only revenge. As Manohar Malgonkar confirms, “The truth was that Gandhi’s non-violence had lost out to violence; no one else believed in his ahimsa any longer, inside or outside the Congress” (33). Now Gandhi realized that many of his supposed followers had not been his true disciples, especially with regard to his four pillars of swaraj. As Lelyweld demonstrates:

Now with the eruption of another world war, he was forced to recognize that “Congressmen, barring individual exceptions, do not believe in nonviolence.” It would be his lot “to plough a lonely furrow,” for it seemed he had “no co-sharer in the out-and-out belief in nonviolence.” (283)

In this context it is interesting to note what Nathuram Godse had to say about the destiny of Gandhi’s pillars of swaraj. Godse’s argument, in his appeal to the Punjab High Court, is relevant here:

So long as Gandhian method was in the ascendance, frustration was the only inevitable result. He had throughout opposed every spiritual reactionary, radical and vigorous individual or group, and constantly boosted his charkha, non-violence and truth. The charkha after 34 years of the best efforts of Gandhiji, had only led to the expansion of the machine-run textile
industry by over 200 percent. It is unable even now to clothe even one percent of the nation. As regards non-violence, it was absurd to expect 40 crores of people to regulate their lives on such a lofty plane and it broke down most conspicuously in 1942. As regards truth the least I can say is that the truthfulness of the average Congressman is by no means of a higher order than that of the man in the street and that very often it is untruth in reality masked by a thin veneer of pretended truthfulness. (95)

There were not many who thought like Godse; even then it was pertinent to note that there were people like Godse who considered Gandhi as dangerous to the development of India.

Tushar Gandhi, Gandhi’s grandson, observes that some members of Congress government were “fed up of the interventions of the meddlesome old man” (xviii). Tushar Gandhi goes on to elaborate the ‘crimes’ of Gandhi:

He had suggested that the Congress be disbanded. He had threatened to go to Pakistan to reverse the process of Partition. He forced them to cancel politically motivated short term measures in his pursuit of establishing an ideal society. He threatened to launch a social reform movement. He opposed the move to rapidly industrialise India preferring the slow
gramudyog model. He wanted the ministers to live as servants of the people and to convert their opulent bungalows into shelters for the homeless refugees. He had asked Mountbatten to vacate the Viceregal Palace and convert it into a hospital for refugees. (xviii)

There were many who should be held responsible for the murder of the Mahatma; and many who wanted him out of the way. As the protagonist of the film Maine Gandhi Ko Nahin Mara, an intelligent, middleclass, upper caste Professor feels, we are all responsible for the assassination of Gandhi, we are all Gandhi killers. Nehru himself asserts that “we are all responsible for this unprecedented tragedy” (qtd. in Paranjape, Death and After Life 11). As Tridip Suhrud comments, the murder of the Mahatma stunned the nation into silence and resulted in the termination of violence. Suhrud opines: ‘His often-repeated remark that Partition would be accomplished over his dead body came to be true, by a strange act of fate” (17). The work that Gandhi was expected to do, the incorporation of the peasants and common people in the national movement, and give the movement a sense of unity, was successfully completed. India was free now, and the Mahatma’s philosophy could be discarded as impossible and unreasonable and the Mahatma himself could be sidelined as a “philosophical anarchist” (Nehru 532).
Despite the ambivalence regarding the viability of Gandhism, especially with regard to non-violence as a successful weapon to fight injustice, the text *The Great Indian Novel* expresses no incertitude regarding Gandhi’s aura, his influence over the masses and his role in the national movement. The narrator emphasises Gangaji’s aura when he elaborates on the incident of Gangaji overcoming the resistance of the watchman of the Planters’ Club in Motihari, (Champaram in history) with a penetrating gaze. “He simply looked at the offender: one look was enough; the watchman dropped his hand, instantly ashamed, eyes downcast, and Ganga walked quietly down the steps” (50). The protest campaign led by Gangaji in Motihari excited and inspired the peasants as nothing had done before. The peasants felt, for the first time in their pathetic lives, there was someone to listen to their problems and do something about them. V.V. ingeniously captures the situation:

Even we who were with him then were conscious of the dawn of a new epoch. Students left their classes in the city colleges to flock to Gangaji’s side; small-town lawyers abandoned the security of their regular fees at the assizes to volunteer for the cause; journalists left the empty debating halls of the nominated council chambers to discover the real heart of the new politics.
A nation was rising, with a small, balding, semi-clad saint at its head. (51)

Gangaji had become a “star” (52), and his influence was so complete that the crowd outside the courtroom, where Gangaji was being tried for violating the law, would not flinch even when they were beaten by the police. V.V. proudly narrates the scene:

So we stand, and the blows rain down upon us, on our shoulders, our bodies, our heads, but we take them unflinchingly; blood flows but we stand there; bones break but we stand there; lathis make the dull sound of wood pulping flesh and still we stand there, till the policemen . . . realize that something is happening they have never faced before. (52)

_The Great Indian Novel_ presents Gangaji as a great soul who gained a moral advantage in his struggle with the British by wielding non-violence as the weapon and by accepting the punishment the law imposed on him. His appeal to the masses was acknowledged even by Sir Richard, the British resident of Hastinapur. In Budge Budge, as he took up the workers’ cause and led their strike against the masters, Gangaji’s sway over the workers was unmistakable. What the narrator observes here evidently defines Gangaji’s aura:
It almost did not matter what he said, for he rarely raised his voice to harangue them and the words never carried to the farthest ranks of his audience. It is doubtful many would have understood him if they had. But it was as if, in simply being there and attempting to communicate with them, he was transmitting a message more powerful than words. His presence carried its own impulses to the people assembled before him, a wave of strength, and inspiration, and conviction, that sustained the workers in their hungry defiance. (97)

Gangaji’s aura is so resonating that others fade in his presence. V.V. affirms: “As long as he is around it will be impossible for us to concentrate on other people . . .” (134). In the workers’ strike demanding increased wages in coalescence with the national awakening Gandhi’s aura was easily perceptible, with both the movements shaping up unquestionably under Gandhi’s control.

The text traces how the spirit of nationalism was awakened among the common people through Gangaji’s involvement in the nationalist politics. It was he who sought and won the support and involvement of the “the Indian poor and the lower middle class, that section of the people whom Indian nationalism had so completely ignored until Ganga came and gave their place in the sun” (103). Gangaji’s first fast in the public sphere, in Budge Budge in support of the jute-factory workers, was successful, not from the point of view
of material benefit, but as a moral triumph. As V.V. would confirm, “it shone for us as a beacon of hope and strength in the darkness of our subjugation. It was an affirmation of purpose, of spirit, of faith. What happened at Budge Budge confirmed the force of the non-violent revolution that Gangaji had launched” (105). His willingness to die for the cause of the nation and the common people instilled new life and vigour into the national movement. The narrator depicts the impact of Gangaji’s fasts:

It captured the imagination of India in a way that no speech, no prayer, no bomb had ever done. Gangaji’s fasts slowed the heartbeat of the nation; hungry students pushed their plates away knowing the Great Teacher was not eating; entire villages refused to touch a flame to their wicks in order to share the darkness with him. (105)

Gangaji, through his principles of egalitarianism and nonviolence and ultimately through his fasts, ensured the involvement of people from all sections of the society in the anti-colonial movement. The narrator confirms, “Gangaji’s methods stoked the fires of true nationalism among those who had recoiled from violence and lawlessness” (111).

Gangaji’s ingenuity is nowhere more apparent than in the planning and the implementation of the Great Mango March, against the mango tax imposed by the colonial government. Gangaji’s sense of the theatrical is evident in the
decision to pluck the mangoes from a grove two hundred and eighty eight miles away from the ashram. Gangaji knew that his ‘march’ would make greater impact on the public, the media and the government than the actual violation of the mango laws. V.V. asserts the cleverness and innovativeness of Gangaji: “Don’t ever forget, young man, that we were not led by a saint with his head in the clouds, but by a master tactician with his feet on the ground” (122). Shashi Tharoor acknowledges Gangaji’s success with regard to Mango March, but it is his shrewdness and sense of the theatrical that he underlines when he presents the event. The long mile march gave the event and the national movement the much needed publicity and the forecast of imminent arrest kept the reporters on their toes. But Gangaji knew that he would not be arrested during the march as he had not yet broken any law. Reaching the mango grove Gangaji once again resorted to artifice to generate maximum impact. V.V. gives a clear picture, his narration tinged with humour and mild satire:

But once again artifice came to the aid of Truth. The landlord’s workers had erected a little platform for Gangaji, to be ascended by seven simple wooden steps. As silence settled expectantly around him, the Mahaguru, his little rimless spectacles firmly on his nose, his staff in his right hand, slowly, deliberately, mounted each step. At the top of the rough-hewn
ladder, standing squarely on the little platform, he paused. Then, with a decisive gesture, he reached out a bony hand toward a ripe, luscious Langda mango dangling from the branch nearest him and wrenched it from its stalk. As the crowd erupted in a crescendo of cheering, he turned to them, his hand upraised, the golden red symbol of his defiance blazing its message of triumph.

What poetry there was in that moment, Ganapathi! In that fruit, Ganga seemed to be holding the forces of nature in his hands, recalling the fertile strength of the Indian soil from which had sprung the Indian soul, reaffirming the fullness of the nation’s past and the seed of the people’s future. The cameras clicked, and whirred, and flashed, and Ganga stood alone, the sun glinting off his glasses, his hand raised for freedom. (123)

Jad Adams in the introduction to his work *Gandhi: Naked Ambition* refers to the Salt Satyagraha organized and lead by Gandhi, and comments upon the ‘iconic image’ of Gandhi defying the salt law. Jad Adams points to the newspaper reports of the time:

Accounts report how he cleansed himself in the sea, pictures of the time showing the tiny white-clad individual against the
The Pied Piper of Porbandar

pure-white salt flats, a symbol of purity challenging the greatest empire the world had known. As he held up the white crystals for all to see, the nationalist poet Sarojini Naidu cried out, to the acclamation of the crowds: ‘Hail deliverer!’ (1)

Adams suggests that the iconic image is “a fake, a concoction of journalists, film-makers and adulatory biographers” (1). Adams agrees that Gandhi had conducted salt march to Dandi, but the reports and images of it were carefully manipulated. The famous picture shows Gandhi, not in Dandi, but at Bhimrad, twenty five miles from Dandi. “The great photographic moment was a re-enactment for the cameras of the event that had taken place on a muddy beach where the salt was not visible and the act therefore less apparently symbolic” (1). There are obvious parallels between Adams’ and Tharoor’s accounts, both Gandhi and Gangaji portrayed as clever and equipped with a sense of the theatrical. Tharoor published his novel in 1989 and Adams his book in 2010. Both were far removed from the influence of the Mahatma’s aura and hence his actions could be viewed unemotionally and with a critical detachment.

Gangaji was a very practical politician, his actions planned and calculated to reap the maximum benefits, but in compliance with his principles of truth and nonviolence. Gangaji’s action triggered a nationwide protest against the Mango Act, and also exposed to ridicule many of the ludicrous imperial laws. But when Gangaji heard about the murder of policemen by the
volunteers of the movement in Chaurasta, he called off the civil disobedience much to the chagrin of other Kaurava leaders. Gangaji was disappointed that his people had not understood him properly. Even in the midst of triumph Gangaji could never forego his principles.

Benedict Anderson’s concept of the awakening of national consciousness through print forms is attested by the outcome of the Mango March. Gangaji’s careful planning and organization of the March generated maximum interest in the reporters and their reports gave the March great publicity and breathed new life into the national movement. In the beginning Kaurava Party leaders could not understand what Gangaji was trying to do and a disconcerted Pandu requested him not to “trivialize our great cause like this” (118). But, for Gangaji, “no endeavour was too trivial . . .” (118). His diligent preparation and clever campaigning made the March a grand success. V.V. comments on Gangaji’s cleverness: “I marvelled once more at how wrong Pandu could be. Trivialze the cause? Gangaji could dramatize and ennoble the most significant of causes when he chose to” (121). It was as if a whole nation was awakened to the urgency of national unity and the demand for ‘swaraj.’ The leadership of Gangaji and his various campaigns gave the people, in spite of their differences, a sense of the solidity of a single community, generating nationalist aspirations. The importance of print media in arousing nationalist consciousness was admitted even by Sir Richard. He states to Heaslop, his
personal attendant: “Any time there’s trouble, you can put it down to books. Too many of the wrong ideas getting into the heads of the wrong sorts of people. If ever the Empire comes to ruin, Heaslop, mark my words, the British publisher will be to blame” (38). Gangaji’s transformation from a loyal subject to an advocate of self-rule was also attributed to books. As Heaslop says: “They say he reads widely” (38).

Gangaji’s various campaigns, including Motihari and Great Mango March, testify to his ability to act at the most crucial moment with psychological precision and his unique capability to reach out to the masses. His intervention had served to bridge the gap between the elite, represented by Dhritarashtra, Pandu and other leaders of the Kaurava party, and the common people. Gangaji’s moral and spiritual strength and his wonderful skill for understanding the peasants and in forming a rapport with them ensured their participation in the national movement. The peasants and the workers, submitting themselves to the exhortations of Gangaji, got rid of their fear of the government’s retaliation and allowed themselves to be mobilized in the resistance movement. It was peasant mobilization which gave the appearance of unity and solidity to the freedom struggle. Bourgeois rationality would not have been successful in reaching peasant consciousness and it was the mediation of a political genius like Gangaji, which would ensure their incorporation. For many leaders the obsession with the trivial would seem
strange, but an instinctual perception of the multitude’s mind made Gangaji realise its potential to captivate the minds of the common people and inspire them to get involved. Till the advent of Gangaji and other Hastinapuris, Karava Party had been ineffectual in voicing the demands of the colonized or expressing their resistance to unjust laws. V.V. observes: “When Gangaji turned to politics the Kaurava Party had been in existence for thirty years and the British had not taken thirty steps toward Indian self-rule. With the advent of my Hastinapuris all this changed” (110). It was Gangaji’s “unorthodox successes” (111) that ensured the involvement of people belonging to disparate sections of the society. Through his various nonviolent campaigns, “Gangaji demonstrated that you did not have to be a hooligan to be effective. Non-violence, voluntary courting of arrest, even fasting – these were more acceptable to offspring of respectable families” (111).

The people who joined Gangaji and the Kaurava Party in the resistance against the Empire belonged to different sections of the society, different classes, religions and castes. Without being reduced to a single identity, and all the while maintaining their internal differences, they were able to act in common, under the influence of Gangaji. He instilled in them a desire for swaraj and intolerance for injustices, thus finding a common against the Empire and transforming them into a multitude. Their resistance against the Empire triggered real events like Motihari and the Great Mango March which
forced the hands of the authorities to take decisive decisions and effect real changes. The picture of the march as sketched by V.V. based on the newsreels testifies to its identification with the resistance of the multitude. The picture is vivid and evocative:

There is Gangaji himself at the head of the procession, bald, more or less toothless, holding a stave taller than himself, his bony legs and shoulders barely covered by his habitual undress, looking far too old and frail for this kind of thing, yet marching with a firm and confident stride... and behind them the rest of us, in homespun khadi and cheap leather chappals, showing no sign of fear or fatigue. Indeed there is nothing grim about our procession, none of the earnest tragedy that marks the efforts of doomed idealists. Instead, Gangaji’s grinning waves of bенедiction, the banners of welcome strung across the roads at every village through which we pass, the scenes of smiling women in gaily coloured saris emerging in the blazing heat to sprinkle water on our dusty paths, the cameos of little children shyly thrusting bunches of marigolds into our hands, the waves of fresh volunteers joining us at every stop to swell our tide of marchers into a flood, all this speaks of the joyousness of our spirit as we march on. (122-23)
The common manners of dress and gestures and a common sense of purpose together with an overwhelming air of spontaneity and voluntariness among the satyagrahis evoke the struggle of the multitude.

Hardt and Negri refer to one of the most widely disseminated but wrong political philosophies in *Multitude*: “only the one can rule, be it the monarch, the party, the people, or the individual; social subjects that are not unified and remain multiple cannot rule and instead must be ruled” (100). Karna echoes this skewed outlook when he criticises Gangaji’s method of resistance and his mediation with the masses:

> We cannot hope to rule ourselves by leading mobs of people who are ignorant of the desideratum of self-rule. Populism and demagoguery do not move parliaments, my friends. . . . In no country in the world do the ‘masses’ rule: every nation is run by its leaders, whose learning and intelligence are the best guarantee of its success. . . . leave the masses to themselves. Let us not abdicate our responsibility to the party and cause by placing at our head those unfit to lead us. (138)

But the multitude has always defied this ‘accepted’ political wisdom. Hardt and Negri assert: “The multitude, although it remains multiple and internally different, is able to act in common and thus rule itself” (101). Gandhi himself was against centralization of power in the hands of the state after gaining
independence. Gandhi’s intention was to launch a decentralization programme with village as the basic unit, with self-sufficiency in matters of administration, defence and economy (Chatterjee 121). The multitude, with its capability for resistance and self-rule, can be identified with Gangaji/Gandhiji’s co-resisters and the millions who participated in the freedom struggle. They had common desires and common methods of resistance, moulded under Gangaji/Gandhiji’s patronage, which turned the freedom struggle into the movement of the multitude as envisaged by Hardt and Negri.

Tharoor has attempted an ‘objective’ fictional presentation of the national movement, foregrounding the Mahatma, laced with his innate wit and humour. It is Shashi Tharoor’s own sense of humour which is reflected in the witty responses of Gangaji. Gangaji’s response to Sir Richard when he tried to make Gangaji comfortable by enquiring after his convenience, while waiting for the Viceroy, is a case in point. Gangaji was offered a chair while Sara-behn was not offered one. Gangaji assures Sir Richard:

“Me? No, no, oh dear, at all inconvenienced,” he chortled. “I am sitting in this comfortable chair, in this comfortable room, large enough to accommodate a small train, with an eminent representative of His Majesty’s government – you, Sir Richard – offering me tea. Why should I be inconvenienced?” He
paused, waving a casual hand at his companion. “Now she, Sarah-behn, she is not sitting in a comfortable chair. Perhaps if you asked her she might give you a different answer.” (128)

The text, which has a mythical framework, reclaims history from a subjective perspective, underlining the textuality of history. The dominant figures from contemporary history are paralleled with epic characters. As Taapan K. Ghosh observes, “history is transformed into myth and the epic characters become figures of contemporary history” (47). The subjective and affective nature of history is asserted by Tharoor with the suggestion that truth is relative and inconstant and reality, multidimensional. As the narrator tells his scribe: “It is, after all, my story, the story of Ved Vyas . . . yet it is also the story of India, your country and mine” (46). Blurring the distinction between history and myth, the text also takes away the boundary between the real and the unreal, the factual and the fictional. V.V. asserts: “It is my truth, Ganapathi, just as the crusade to drive out the British reflected Gangaji’s truth, and the fight to be rid of both the British and the Hindu was Karna’s truth. Which philosopher would dare to establish a hierarchy among such verities?” (164).

The dominant, colonial version of Indian history is subverted by a counter discourse which tracks the problems faced by Independent India in the aftermath of divisive rule of the British. V.V. emphasizes: “No, Ganapath,
religion had never had much to do with our national politics. It was the British civil serpent who made our people collectively bite the apple of discord” (134). Higher officials of the colonial government are satirized by the witty narrative. Viscount Drewpad, the fictional counterpart of Lord Mountbatten is presented as a dandy who “wore his lack of learning lightly” (211). The British administrative system is exposed with V.V.’s comment, “It helped, of course, that in their ruling classes the British valued height more than depth” (212). The minds of the school children, “are being filled in the bastard educational institutions the British sired on us” (47). Shashi Tharoor creates a counter history through the subversion of the hegemonic, imperial history and by attenuating the officials and institutions linked to colonial government.

The history of the freedom struggle, viewed as parallel to the story of Mahabharata, enables it to be disassociated from the perspective of the British empire. An epic which lies close to Indian psyche becomes the re-reading of the history of the national movement evoking national identity and a sense of community, not in relation with the empire, but with itself. The incitement of national sentiment is imperative for the construction of an independent nation.

Even the hegemony of Gandhism is undermined in the text with Gangaji presented as a failed man towards the end of his life. Gangaji is no longer the pure soul, the holy man, as characterised in the other novels. He is a great soul, more than an average person, but a practical politician, very shrewd
and stubborn in his ways. The methods he uses to ensure Dhritarashtra’s succession to the leadership of Kaurava Party to the exclusion of Pandu testifies to his acumen. Gangaji’s moral integrity is at question here. V.V. perceives Gnapathy’s bewilderment.

You seem disturbed, my dear Ganapathi. Anxiety creases your brows and narrows your eyes. Never mind, I know what is troubling you. The idea of saintly Gangaji, paragon of Truth, ruthlessly squeezing an insubordinate ward out of power sits ill with you. How could the Maghaguru, you ask yourself, the Great Teacher, a man of vaulting vision and pristine principle, conduct himself like a Tammany Hall politician? You are disappointed. (174)

V.V.’s justification of Gangaji adds another dimension to his character and also emphasizes the perception that truth is relative. Sincerity of purpose alone does not make a man great. V.V. observes: “If Gangaji believed in Truth, it was his Truth he believed in; and by extension the actions he undertook were founded on the same belief” (175). Pandu was unwilling to accept Dhritarashtra, Gangaji’s choice for Kaurava Party leadership. His disagreement with Gangaji posed a challenge to Gangaji’s quest for ‘Truth’ and to him Pandu had chosen the path of untruth. Indian traditions demand rigor and intransigence when dealing with such disaccord. But V.V. admits
that Gangaji’s pursuit of ‘Truth’ caused intense mental torture for Pandu. “No violence done, no blood spilled – but oh, Ganapathi, what hurt and humiliation, what sadness and suffering can be caused in the defence of Truth” (175).

The text attests to Gangaji/Gandhiji’s success as a national leader during freedom movement when his mediation was needed for the mobilization of the peasants. His aura, derived from his unique presence and inimitable philosophy in the specific context of freedom struggle, diminishes with the perspectival changes in the course of time. This transition in his reception is underlined in the novel which traces his life and activities, from a position of glory as Kaurava/ Congress Party leader and the saviour of the masses to a lonely old man longing for death in the wake of the partition. Thus the accession of the Mahaguru/ the Mahatma relies on the nature of the historical context he is part of. Gangaji/Gandhiji’s hegemonic position in the Indian political scene undergoes gradual dissolution with both slowly getting relegated to the periphery along with his ideas on industrialization and sarvodaya, branded as unsuitable for a developing nation, by the new leaders of the nation. A dialectical circuit exists between Gangaji/Gandhiji and the historic context in which the both takes their roots. Testifying to the historicity of texts the novel successfully establishes, through the parallels between
characters and historical personages and between the fictional and historical incidents, the textuality of history.