AN ASSESSMENT

The variations in these writings are obvious. The question is what holds them together? Of course, their historical significance. Apart from this, the authors, particularly Indian, are emotionally involved in the national cause and share to some degree the sentimental attachment to the man who is fighting for the cause. The one selflessman fighting the imperial apparatus to remove the common grievances.

A look at the sources - the plastic material or tools - used by the contemporaries of Gandhi establishes that they more or less draw upon memory and the works are mainly descriptions of their own participation and experiences. D.G. Tandulkar, is an exception in this regard.

The works published during the Birth Centenary of Gandhi or later have common sources, with a slight variation according to the emphasis. The data used by them comes from the same sources but the interpretation varies. For example details about boycott of schools and colleges to join national institutions is considered a proof of the success of the programme by some of the writers, on the other hand Judith Brown would compare it to the total population of India, and the conclusion that the percentage of drop outs was insignificant. Similarly, in the details about Quit India movement the same data is differently interpreted by Hutchins and Brown.

These widely acknowledged historians the world over have honoured the data without any twist. Interpretation is the historian prerogative and also the interesting part. However, there seems to be a glaring confusion amongst the writers on two facts during the salt Satyagraha (i) number of followers in Dandi March and (ii) the distance between Sabarmati and Dandi.

A notable aspect of the use of sources is that their background has influenced writers in the selection of sources e.g. an India reports of Home Political files are also
consulted. Judith Brown basically depends on Government of India reports and Home Political files. Whilst a biographer does not find much use for official reports and completely depends upon biographies and autobiography and correspondence and writings of their actor. But while describing the Dharsana raid incident of 1930, all of them depend on Webb Miller's account.

The style of Sitarammayya's narrative establishes him as an annalist, thus providing the student of modern Indian history with sound facts chronologically arranged.

Tendulkar's monumental work, appearing after Gandhi's death in simple narration, is the history of the events of almost fifty years with Gandhi in the forefront. Tendulkar has scrupulously avoided moralization or dramatization of these exciting times and faithfully reproduces in Gandhi's own words the history of the movement.

Nehru is a category by himself, invariably disagreeing with Gandhi yet always looking up to him for direction. Nehru's writings give us an extensive account of the Satyagraha campaigns of Gandhi. Apart from being himself keenly interested in knowing about and creating history, his unique relationship with Gandhi - one of the strongest critics and yet the greatest follower, having the advantage of watching and interacting with Gandhi most closely, eminently qualifies Nehru to inform and educate the students of modern history about Gandhi's leadership of the movement.

Besides the variation of style of the writers, there is a variation in followership. Rajendra Prasad, Sitarammayya and Pyarelal emerge as devoted followers. Lala Lajpat Rai, and Azad are those associates who in the event of differences, maintain the independence of mind. Bose appreciates Gandhi as the leader of the masses and has no use for him except while leading a movement. He has serious objections to Gandhi's programme and technique. Azad and Bose held Gandhi in great esteem without having much faith in his non-violence, perhaps they
did not have the patience that Gandhian Satyagraha demands. However, Subhas Bose had ideological differences. Azad differed with Gandhi mostly on political issues.

Although quite obvious, but as the obvious has to be stated, even amongst the associates and colleagues, Gandhi’s role in the movement is viewed according to each one’s personal priorities and interest in a particular area of Gandhi’s programme.

To the biographers individual is more important than the situation. Their narration obviously focusses on Gandhi and not so much on the then prevailing conditions. The nationalist writers have different vision of independent India. To Nehru India would be one of the leading nations of the world, proud of its cultural heritage and striving for newer achievements in industry, science and technology and agriculture. The leftist writers have basically different priorities. Truth and non-violence for them are values to be respected in their own right but not at the cost of workers right and their material progress.

The fact that of the twenty two writers included in this study, with the exception of Brown, Hutchins, Fischer Erikson and Payne, all other seventeen are Indians, indicates the maturity of India as a nation. Besides fighting against imperialists, writing of its history by Indian writers is a proof of its adulthood and independent thinking and (ii) also challenging the Britisher’s monopoly to write India’s history for Indians. Typical of imperialist oppression is that three out of these writings were proscribed by the British government. These books were M. N. Roy’s India in Transition, Subhas Bose’s The Indian Struggle and Rajni Palme Dutt’s India Today.

Undoubtedly, as pointed out by all these writers, Gandhi’s movement either generated violence or ended in violence. However, what is important to remember is Gandhi’s commitment to non-violent, which he said was the very breath of his life an attitude which bewilders all these writers including Nehru, perhaps with the exception of Rajendra Prasad and Diwakar.
It is also pointed out that time and again Gandhi was written off by the radicals and mild Congressmen as a dead weight, yet every time he had to step out of his voluntary retreat to give direction to the masses as no one else could make an impression on the millions in India of those times. Hence it is conceded that Gandhi remained indispensable for the Congress.

Thus three different trends seem to have emerged out of these writings on Gandhi: (i) eulogizing, (ii) criticizing, and (iii) as far as possible objectively assessing Gandhi.

Another factor which seems to have influenced the narrative in preceding chapters is that Gandhi was not always consistent in the use of certain terminology. He uses the phrase Civil Resistance and Civil Disobedience in the same context. Similarly civilian disobedience - offensive or defensive is neither clear to the followers nor to his inter pretators. To the popular mind civil disobedience is a synonym for suffering. The issue is further confused by Gandhi’s insistence upon disobedience to the illegitimate authority of the state being the sacred duty as well as the right of an individual.

Reservations on the part of some authors, about the role of Satyagraha, its various forms, seem to be rooted in their unfamiliarity with the sources of Gandhi’s inspiration, encouragement and conformation of his beliefs in Satyagraha. Gandhi’s insistence upon non-violent non-co-operation as the superior alternative to the unnatural and irreligious doctrine of violence was just not acceptable.

The writers have used the term ‘freedom’ generally with reference to India’s independence from the British rule, without attaching much importance to its conceptual dimension. To Gandhi, freedom is an ultimate value which has many aspects. Any student of Gandhi having read his writings carefully and in depth, will arrive at the conclusion that Gandhi refers to the concept of freedom in a variety of
ways, freedom as striving for self perfection, freedom as an acquired virtue, freedom as absence of compulsion, freedom of choice, and freedom from fear etc., at the same time advocating quest for freedom both as a duty and a right of the individual.

All of these writers, irrespective of their particular mental make-up called as national historians, Marxists or even Imperialists, have accepted the validity or legitimacy of India's fight for freedom.

Moreover, they all feel that resentment against the British was existent, sometimes expressed in religious upheaval, sometimes in the racial outburst, even before Gandhi arrived on the scene. But a climate alone cannot produce a national movement. Something else becomes necessary, this is a fact acknowledged by all these authors. What is this something? Interpretations of these writers of course differ; but they all realize that when a grave crisis visits the colonial system all rules and assumptions turn topsy-turvy. It is then that their victims lose their old fears and take a political action. That such a crisis brewed during the post-war years of 1918-21 is an accepted fact. The war had imposed unbearable burden on the empire; drained its resources. The peasantry ground under heavy taxation, soldiers arriving home to find no employment, industrial labour hard hit by the rising prices; to top it all was the amassing of wealth by the industrialists and contractors. This crisis generated radical tendencies among the people as pointed out by almost all of them. At the same time it did not leave Gandhi unaffected, infact there was a more radical change in his personal stance against the empire than the whole nation put together. The point to be noted is that the great loyal citizen of the empire becomes a 'rebel' as is indicated in many of Gandhi's biographies.

The Raj threw the entire Indian social fabric into a total chaos, to restore the confidence and self-respect in the minds of millions of illiterate and unsophisticated people, to purge the society of social evils, to determine right values.
against the incoming trends of materialism and aggressiveness, was the task that Gandhi was destined to perform, none of these writers disputes.

It appears that Gandhi accepted the facts of the situation confronting him and sought to use them to achieve the objective he had determined for himself and the nation. For example he accepted the fatalism and passivity of his countrymen yet assigned them a role by building the non-cooperation movement and transform their passivity and endurance into sources of strength.

Another significant point, common to the writings surveyed here is that Gandhi provided a leadership, by launching non-cooperation in 1920, cutting across sectarian interests and uniting the people for a common cause.

It also emerges that to these writers Gandhi outgrew party labels and soon was acclaimed a leader of the masses, rich and poor, ignorant or learned, he became a rallying point for a new generation of nationalists who grew impatient with the ageing Congress leadership. To them Gandhi presented a discourse which combined a critique of westernization and plausible alternative for social regeneration.

Some of these writers have mentioned that Gandhi ignored the cause and strength of the peasants. The evidence is to the contrary. To Gandhi the worker has been of supreme consideration always. In 'Sarvodaya' one of the three main principles is "that the life of tiller is a life worth living". In South Africa too, his Satyagraha campaigns were sustained by the workers. Indigo growers of Champaran, the Ahmedabad mill workers, Kheda peasants, 1917-18 local satyagrahas are a case in point.

All the time he was at pains to prevent a class-struggle between the peasants and zamindars or the workers and the mill owners. As a leader of the masses he drew into his movements one and all rich-poor, men and women, old and young. Similarly,
to carry on the movement he accepted money from industrialists as well as the commoner doner. Thus the label of protagonist of capitalism or bourgeois is quite unwarranted for a man who lived in abject poverty and for the service of all. Often charging Gandhi of being a hinderance, revivalist and reactionary, some of these writers commit the mistake of such categorization due to their limited perception of Gandhi's view of religion. Religion for him was not any dogmatic cult but a way of life based on commonly accepted moral values.

Nor does Gandhi consciously seek middle class support. It is doubtful if Gandhi himself is aware of the existence of such a powerful elements of the so-called middle class. Even if he was conscious of this, why blame him and absolve others. It is an established fact that most of the members of C.P.I. in 1930s were from the upper strata of our society, much so the leftists under reference.

Subhas Bose, Judith Brown, R.C. Majumdar, Rajni Palme Dutt and perhaps some others also disapprove even reject Gandhi's Constructive Programme, but they themselves have not suggested any well-chalked out alternative programme for emancipation, upliftment of deprived, exploited and oppressed millions of India.

Gandhi's genius lies in devising and implementing programmes like Charkha, Khadi, removal of untouchability and communal harmony, as the immediate alternatives to the socio-economic crisis of times.

Gandhi's thinking is rooted in history. He relies on past to improve the future. He does not depend upon the narrative, but the past in its totality-various aspects of human life. His concept of truth, Swaraj and history are all embracing, covering each dimension of human life, political, social, economic and spiritual. In the western view of history he is close to the proponents of universal history, but seems to be very close to Indian definition of history.
In 'Hind Swaraj - the Indian Home Rule', Gandhi mentions that in Gujarati history is called Itihasa, which means ‘it so happened’ or history is that narrative of the past which exemplifies the four drives of life namely Dharma (a code of conduct, duties and obligations), Artha (economic welfare), kama (biological fulfilments and cultural happiness), Moksha (liberation or salvation of human soul from the cycle of birth and death). Therefore, as we have already noticed, history according to Gandhi, is all encompassing in its scope. He believes verbatim in the definition of term Itihasa as ‘It so happened’. He thinks that history should discuss each aspect of human life and considers existing history full of stories of wars, which is a record of interruptions in the even working of soul-force and non-violent. Another aspect of Indian traditional historical thinking is the present of two parallel view of life, ‘ordinary’ and ‘extraordinary’. History takes up ‘ordinary’ whereas extraordinary goes to metaphysics. But for Gandhi it also includes extraordinary when he says, "that which is permanent, therefore, necessary eludes the historian of events. Truth transcends history."

Historians, we realize, have discussed just one dimension of India’s freedom struggle - a fight between the coloniser and the colonized. Gandhi would wish that the historians take up history of man, discussing each aspect of human life, with the individual in the centre. He remarked that whereas generally history is a chronicle of kings and their wars, the future history will be the history of man. And the recent Subaltern school seeks to reconstruct history around common men. Their treatment of individual is however quite different from that of Gandhi’s, to him man is both a part of mass of humanity and a spark of God.

His view of truth, entails the ideal as well as the practical possible. Absolute Truth is the ideal, the relative truth is the possibility - the practical. He gives due place
to interpretation of truth as perceived by one at a given moment. Referring to the history of the Mutiny of 1857, he writes "read history with my eyes".

While stressing that history is a search for truth, as realist he is conscious of human limitation in perceiving reality. Gandhi quoted the fable of six blind men and the elephant. To be nearer the truth, the search must continue as he repeatedly stressed, "I move from one truth to another". All these writings have contributed to project various facets of Gandhi and his movements, and their significance in the modern Indian history, since without a mention of Gandhi and his movements no account of modern Indian history is complete.

Here it would be befitting to quote Gandhi, "Truth is one but we see it through a glass darkly, only in part, and each according to his own light. The result is naturally a multitude of viewpoints. Where there is honest effort, what appear to be different truths will be like different leaves of the same tree. 'Viewpoint is a matter of reasoning, the mind, the intellect. It may shift from time to time without touching the heart.'