



Dennis Dalton's *Mahatma Gandhi: Nonviolent Power in Action* (Columbia University Press, 1993), \$29.50.

As the millennium draws to a close, a stock-taking of this century's assessment will be necessary. It is most likely that the singular figure of Gandhi will represent both the Indian struggle for freedom from colonialism and the Indian nation in its current state. Gandhi has been a darling of Western thinkers for a number of reasons. He just looks different and yet appropriately non-Western. His blending of metaphysics, ethics and politics brings with it a certain mysticism so appealing to the Western public which is comforted by simplicity, especially in its stereotyped versions. Nearly a decade ago, the film *Gandhi* sparked interest and fed into that hunger for simplistic narratives so well cultivated by Hollywood and its accomplices.

When something substantive and serious comes along in this glut of nothingness, it attracts attention all the more because it ful-

fills several functions at the same time. For the serious mind, it provides historical thought and complexity and for others, a chance to affirm their faith in something other than the vapid depthlessness of existence. On all these counts, Dennis Dalton's *Mahatma Gandhi: Nonviolent Power in Action* is an important event. It is a serious book defying simplicity and yet maintaining a higher purpose of bringing Gandhi toward a global political understanding relevant anywhere, including, and especially, in the West.

This is not a biography, it is not a psychological profile of a charismatic leader of this century. It is a sustained analysis of Gandhi's political philosophy as it developed throughout his life. It is not an uncritical celebration of a political figure whose methods were as unusual as his attire. It is a strong endorsement of a politics that has a sense of purpose, especially in the era when nothing else seems to.

Dalton traces the development of two central ideas in Gandhi's political philosophy: *swaraj* and *satyagraha*. With these two fundamental tenets, Gandhi combined an ethic and a political program, a feat as yet not achieved by most leaders in contemporary life. With *swaraj*, Gandhi found a way of seeing a future with freedom, responsibility and self-restraint. With *satyagraha*, he invented a politics of means and ends that could keep the conscience clear, healthy and strong for a fight against oppression. Dalton's central argument in the book revolves around the salt *satyagraha* and the Calcutta fast for Hindu-Muslim unity and harmony. Dalton says, quite convincingly, that Gandhi set himself up for the most difficult tests of his strategies and in the process provided a philosophy of resistance against oppression and intolerance.

For readers already familiar with Indian history, this will be a refreshing look that provides a new respect for events that go beyond that drama of particular successes.

Dalton is sympathetic to some extent to Gandhi's critics, especially to Rabindranath Tagore, who thought Gandhi was on a misguided and misplaced track of nationalism in which the people were being transformed into generic masses. The now well-known (and over-simplified) fight amongst Indian leaders about the choice between independence (*swaraj* for Gandhi) and social reform (which for Gandhi was embodied in *swaraj*, but was to be achieved slowly at the grass-roots in India) is examined here in a deft analysis of political philosophies of and interaction between Tagore and M. N. Roy (the once Marxist leader from Bengal). Dalton's vote is cast already in Gandhi's favor, but he provides enough material for anyone to suspect that Tagore and Roy may have been more correct and enduring for the country, had it not been for an absence of a sustained program of resistance like Gandhi's in their favor.

The most revealing and interesting chapter of the book is about a comparison between Gandhi, Martin Luther King and Malcolm X. In popular opinion, Gandhi and King are always aligned together for their obvious similarities in nonviolent action and mass civil disobedience. Dalton says, with good evidence, that King's political philosophy was not as well developed, or as matured as Gandhi's. King's use of Gandhi was more generic, entirely simple at the time of the Montgomery movement and not that sophisticated later in his life. Yet Indian leaders who met King (Jayaprakash Narayan and Vinoba Bhave) in India in the mid-1960's were said to be impressed



with his grasp on Gandhian matters.

King did not develop, at least overtly and as extensively an ethic of everyday life as Gandhi. His was primarily a political program, with very specific objectives to mobilize the masses and to challenge a racist culture. Gandhi turned to Hinduism to build bridges between the conduct of everyday life and political objectives, while King always used Christianity to articulate a vision of moral conduct. What is interesting is that both found in their *religions* a justification for developing moral consciousness appropriate for political action. Historical effectiveness and enduring influence of these remarkable leaders may be found in their *peculiar* use of religion.

Malcolm X is another story. Popularly associated with justification for necessary violence, Malcolm was in fact a much dif-

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ferent person later in his life. He came to hate the sin and not the sinner, but maintained the necessity of achieving *swaraj* for blacks in this country. In a rather surprising and extremely persuasive

exposition, Dalton finds an affinity between these two unlikely co-travellers of freedom. This may be the book's most challenging and interesting part. Malcom embodies *swaraj* and King embodies *satyagraha*, Dalton says, while no American (and Western?) leader are able to combine the two in a single life of greatness. The relative limitations on the black leaders may lie in this explanation. It is important to remind ourselves that the three leaders were facing entirely different circumstances, different followers (and very similar enemies). Politics is the art of the possible, and these three leaders brought possibility into practical realm.

In the current flood of nonsense bestsellers, Dalton's *Gandhi* is one of the best reads. It has an enduring value for those familiar with the leader and for new starters as well. —Shekhar Deshpande