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### BOOK REVIEW

#### **A treatise on the making of Gandhi the journalist**

**By Dr. Manisha Prakash**

**Coordinator, Centre for Journalism and Mass Communication, Aryabhata Knowledge University, Patna, Bihar (India)**

***Mahatma Gandhi: The Journalist*, S.N. Bhattacharyya, Asia Publishing House, India, 1965, ISBN-10: 1131226925, ISBN-13: 978-1131226927, ASIN: B006JSGVB4, 212 pages, \$64**

**(Also available for free download on internet)**

**Author Bio:** Dr. Manisha Prakash is at present Coordinator, School of Journalism and Mass Communication, Aryabhata Knowledge University, Patna with nearly 18 years of experience as teacher, journalist, media consultant and documentary film maker. She received Care-WFS Media fellowship in 2008. She is the founder-editor of [www.magnificentbihar.com](http://www.magnificentbihar.com).

**e-mail:** [manishaprakash@live.com](mailto:manishaprakash@live.com)

The book titled, “Mahatma Gandhi: The Journalist” by S.N. Bhattacharyya is about an unusual journalist in unusual times. Originally published by Asia Publishing House in 1965, it throws light on the contribution to journalism of India’s Father of the Nation, Mahatma Gandhi. It chronicles Gandhi’s work as a free-lance journalist, editor, sponsor and manager and also includes his views on advertising, media ethics, and journalistic duties among others. The

purpose of this book, in the author's own words, is to bring his contributions in this sphere to the limelight so that those working in the line could be benefitted.

The writer has taken pieces from a variety of sources and weaved for the readers the story of the making of Mahatma Gandhi: The Journalist. The journey which begun with Indian Opinion and moved on to Satyagraha and Young India and ended with Harijan finds him gaining in maturity with each passing year. He also stands up against various Government gagging orders after Gopalkrishna Gokhale, his mentor and the champion of the liberty of press dies in 1915. To Gandhi "the restoration of free speech, free association and free press is almost the whole swaraj."

Rajkumari Amrit Kaur called him the prince of journalists. The author calls the Gandhian era of writing, a golden era. Gandhi had his own concept of running a newspaper which was not only unconventional, but diametrically opposite to the usual norm so it is not surprising that even this book is not devoid of dreamy eyed praise for a great man of the country and lacks in its critical abilities.

The book begins and ends with interesting and apt quotes chosen wisely from a sea of literature available on Gandhi. The writer has packed his small treatise with meticulously picked excerpts relevant for the eight chapters that form the book. The bibliography shows that the author has done a tremendous task in consulting a huge amount of scholarly literature to come up with the story of a journalist in the making.

Although the book is a treasure trove of information on the concerned subject, it lacks in analysis and an understanding of the real character of Gandhi's journalism. But it will be wrong to dismiss it totally. The inputs herein provide fodder for imagination and give an inner view into the mind of Gandhi, the journalist. The writer has brought the horse to the water and it is up to us whether we have an enriching drink out of it. The book gives an easy reference to various sources. It can be read quickly and has enough material to understand Gandhi's association with journalism, lacking though in a homogenous structure.

Also, the Gandhi that the author portrays is infallible and above criticism. To him, he is an "Editor with a difference" Gandhi had extreme views and was critical of any move by newspapers to earn profit as he thought journalism is for service alone. It is understandable that

the journalist the author is writing about is an extraordinary person in extraordinary circumstances of fighting for the freedom of the nation. The things which would have held true in the times of Gandhi do not hold true now but the basics still remain the same. Gandhi used the press as a medium for the dissemination of his ideas of moral values in tune with the times when other eminent leaders were doing the same. He felt the journalistic purpose was “to reach the truth by a careful balancing of the fact and vigorous expression of his convictions.”

Interlaced with doses of history while establishing the context in which Gandhi’s journalistic career was based, the book is a valuable read and it cannot be ignored. The book begins with a quote by Gandhi himself which proclaims the objective of journalism being that of service. It also quotes Othello: “Speak of me as I am; nothing extenuate Nor set down aught in malice.” Shakespeare’s words are well chosen as they are not only reflective of sound journalistic principles but also suggest what the author has set about as his task. The author simply states what has already been written and said earlier but he has culled it in one place for the reader to come to their own conclusion.

The writer himself accepts his limitations saying there are many books on Gandhi and the more he plunged into the background materials, the more conscious he became of the vastness of the subject and his obvious limitations. He spent seven years researching for the book. It is true that there is no dearth of literature on Gandhi, who has himself left a great body of work. Most of the content here can be found scattered in other works.

Scholars have criticized the author for his adulation of Gandhi. At the outset the writer declares – “His (Gandhi) minute care for details and clear thinking regarding the ultimate objective - good of the people - made all his projects successful. And, his role as a journalist was no exception.” The author was Director (Basic Literature) in the Ministry of Community Development. Back then, it is no surprise that he approaches his subject as a form of worship. Throughout the book the Mahatma is referred to as ‘Gandhiji’.

The result can be said to be contrary to what Gandhi would have wanted for himself – an objective and factual analysis of his contribution. Gandhi himself clears the air. He is quoted as proclaiming how he “remained a dunce to the last.”

The book has eight chapters. An entire chapter devoted to curse of advertisement. It begins with a chapter detailing Mahatma Gandhi's role as "A Free-Lance Journalist". He begins with shocking his readers by informing them that the man who made massive contribution to the field of journalism first read a newspaper at the age of nineteen on his arrival in London in September, 1888 to study law.

He mentions how Gandhiji, eager to see his name in print, begun contributing for "The Vegetarian", an organ of the London Vegetarian Society, the nine articles that he wrote for it on Indian culture, diet, etc., are his earliest writings on record. He also offers glimpses of Gandhi's literary abilities by quoting from a travelogue that Gandhi wrote about his way home to India from England. Carrying forward Gandhi's journey, he explains how South Africa, where Gandhi went next, made "an out-and-out journalist of him as well". The writer explains how the political situation in South Africa chiseled Gandhi into a conscientious journalist. Early on in 1896, Gandhiji realized that "Publicity is our best and perhaps the only weapon of defense".

There is information on how Gandhi acquired inside knowledge of the working of papers and was emboldened enough to start a journal in South Africa. Gandhi even worked as the Durban, Johannesburg and South African correspondent of India, the journal of Dadabhai Naoroji.

Few would know that Gandhi joined the band of early war correspondents in company with Winston Churchill as a freelance journalist in October 1899 when the Boer War broke out and Gandhi served as a volunteer. Also that he was the first to make an introduction of the human interest story.

The next chapter in the book titled Sponsor or Editor gives the situations leading to the launch of the weekly "Indian Opinion" in South Africa. It is said publicity was in Gandhi's blood and he had a knack for it. In Gandhi's own words the power of the newspaper is expressed as a most useful and potent weapon in his struggle.

The reader also gets to sample Gandhi's writings in form of several excerpts. There are other things to gain like Gandhi's understanding of the working of the press, its importance, main items in papers, his handling of newspapers, technology in use then, his hits and misses, viewpapers, his defiance in publishing *Satyagraha* against the Rowlatt Bill, policy and objective of the journals with which Gandhi was associated, his focus on truth, his reading list, his

solidarity with other newspapers, pressure imposed on press by the British, his disappointment with twentieth century journalism, his liking and then dislike for the London Times, hatred for false and exaggerated reports and discourtesy in writing, concern over speculation and fabrication of news, introduction of reporters to villages, his contribution to Gujarat through an unostentatious Navajivan which 'never screamed a headline and never published an advertisement', his management skills, his views on copyright, his take on obscenity, liberty of the press, his criticism of papers which were indulging in political kite-flying, sensationalism, back door journalism and his belief in the power of the readers.

An interesting discovery in the book is the kinds of headlines Gandhi used which were neither catchy nor providing lead and never breath-taking. Sample this: "How to stop obscene advertisements?", "Spurious Medicines". We find in the book that Gandhi mostly used two-three word headlines which are way different from how headlines are used in the press today.

Each of the page opens up to Gandhi's effort to make newspapers an instrument of education and a vehicle to transmit his ideas. At times, it is irksome to find whole passages lifted from somewhere and included in an incohesive manner.

Notable facts like Gandhi's suggestion to Nehru to take up the honourable profession of journalism, the humble Gandhi who accepted his limitations while telling journalists he had "no false notions about the efficacy of his writings", Gandhi who on many occasions thought "reporters, a nuisance", often so that his anger against them got the better, for a moment, of his non-violence incite interest. It is eye opening to know that even back then Gandhiji worried about the commercial implications of technological improvement which had completely revolutionized newspaper and was also fighting fake news and indecent cartoons and slanders. One cannot but question: What Gandhi would have thought of fake news, trolls and bombardment of information today?

Gandhi knew the power of the press very well. He knew it could make or mar a case. If used judiciously, a paper could do immense good to the people and in the hands of irresponsible people, it would work havoc. Anyone wanting to learn and study Gandhi's contribution to journalism cannot ignore this work. High standards of journalism which was one of Gandhi's incomparable contribution to public life is brought forth in this book which could be revisited in

the present time when the media is facing a huge struggle in journalism and its credibility is in question. Gandhi says: "It is my certain conviction that no man loses his freedom except through his own weakness." May be the journalists can draw a leaf from this book now.