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An Elegy for Gandhi's Un-Gandhian India

By: Sudhir Chandra

When you retrace Gandhi's steps to Dandi you get to understand what 'vikas' means and what it does not mean for Gujarat and for all of India today. A most unusual book about a most unusual journey.

Gandhi's writings excepted, I do not remember when a book offered the transparency, integrity, and self-reflexivity that Harmony Siganporia's *Walking from Dandi: In Search of Vikas* is suffused with. What, further, stands out about this book is its genre-defying character. Unshackled by received discursive protocols, she follows her own instinct and method. That, to borrow her own poetic expression, engages the researcher in 'a dance between archive and contemporary ethnographic practice; between what was and what is.' (xv) Besides, knowing that no research is innocent of the researcher, she also makes her search unapologetically autoethnographic (xvi).

Why Gandhi today?

Siganporia tells us that she was compelled to undertake this walk in search of vikas by an overpowering fear of 'what is.' The fear, articulated in the form of a question, was: What can Gandhi possibly mean in a neoliberal world in which the ultimate and real arbiter is the totalitarian market? In a world where 'we are forced into ever more atomised and reified existences' (272)?

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Why Gandhi? Because he has shown us the right path, and collective calamity lies in straying from that way. Despite having come of age in the heyday of reform and liberalisation, Siganporia affirms her uncompromising faith in Gandhi's oft-repeated dying testament:

Whenever you are in doubt, or when the self becomes too much with you, apply the following test. Recall the face of the poorest and the weakest man whom you may have seen, and ask yourself, if the step you contemplate is going to be of any use to him. Will he gain anything by it? Will it restore him to a control over his own life and destiny? In other words, will it lead to swaraj for the hungry and spiritually starving millions? (181)

Only in this, and in no other, way will Siganporia judge vikas. Does what passes for vikas lead to swaraj for the hungry and spiritually starving millions?

Vikas is only a means. It is not, and must never be, an end in itself.

A book such as this, no matter how brilliant, cannot but come across as quixotic in our day. But Siganporia is happy to appear quixotic. As was Gandhi, that self-professed *sheikhchilli*. And, lurking in the book is the fond hope that the others too – for their own sake and the sake of human survival – will realise the value and urgency of Gandhi's kind of quixotry.

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Siganporia is an Amdavadi who has witnessed the sinister post-Godhra drama which, having been fine-tuned during the first twelve years of its run in Gujarat (2002-2014), is now being played out across the length and breadth of the country. That makes her feel personally responsible, indeed culpable. This, too, is reminiscent of Gandhi. Towards the end of 1946, when Bihar was under Congress rule, violence broke out against the Muslims of the province. Gandhi, who was then on his peace mission in Noakhali in Bengal, was confident that the Congress government would promptly crush the violence. That did not happen and Gandhi was forced to rush to save the Muslims in Bihar. There was something unsettlingly profound he said at that time. Siganporia has internalised what Gandhi said about the anti-Muslim violence, and we owe it to the humanity within us to reflect on that. Gandhi said:

'The Hindus have done this. That means I have done this.'

Gujarat post-Godhra was a laboratory for an experiment. The country found the experiment unacceptable, even reprehensible, and yet in a matter of mere 12 years embraced it. The country emulating Gujarat makes us all complicit, at least those who understand Gandhi's guilt over Bihar and Siganporia's over Gujarat. The logic of this self-implication goes farther, but that does not concern us here.

Ingenious plan

Be that as it may, Siganporia's sense of guilt stung her into action. Since vikas has been integral to the experiment in Gujarat and its pan-Indian acceptance, she decided to closely examine its veracity. She came up with an ingenious plan to do this. She decided, in 2019, to retrace the 'Dandi Path' that Gandhi and his select band of followers had traversed to break the Salt Law in 1930.

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When Gandhi announced it, his decision to make the Salt Law the instrument of the country's struggle for 'Purna Swaraj' had struck the best of his colleagues as quixotic. But it had struck an immediate chord with the starving millions. Gandhi had made their well-being central to the struggle for Swaraj. They could believe that the struggle they were throwing themselves into was for their freedom. Siganporia decided to walk the same 'Dandi Path' 89 years after the event and 72 years after independence to see the reality of vikas and swaraj.

If, many might demur, this is one's view of vikas and swaraj, the entire exercise is pointless. Don't we know that, except for ceremony and rhetoric, Gandhi was jettisoned right in the very moment of Independence? What retracing the Dandi Path would yield is already known. Why take the trouble? Yet again, Gandhi comes to mind. Recall his going to Champaran to obtain justice for the peasants who were forced into indigo cultivation. The whole world, including the European planters themselves, knew that the system was patently iniquitous. Yet, before launching an agitation against the system, Gandhi set up a quasi-judicial enquiry of his own to get to the truth. The enquiry, in the course of which thousands of peasants offered their testimonies, was open and rigorous. The peasants were cross-examined, their testimonies were read out to them before they gave their thumb-print. The proceedings were open to government officials and to the European planters and their agents.

The same ethical imperative lay behind Siganporia's walk. In the event, the walk also led to a powerful narrative that will defy its readers to reflect on. Not least, the walk was its own reward; it possessed the magic of continuing even after the actual walk was over, and of transforming the walker.

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So Siganporia walked the Dandi Path. But she reversed the direction of her walk. Unlike Gandhi and his associates, who had walked from Ahmedabad to Dandi, she – tracing the upward graph of vikas – walked from Dandi to Ahmedabad. She was accompanied by two dear friends, cultural researcher Chirag Mediratta, and medical doctor Sushmit Prabhudas. Another daring move, a young woman walking nearly 400 kms over 25 days in the company of two unrelated males.

Commencing with coastal Dandi, the walk took the three co-walkers through three regions of Gujarat. Distinguished by the primacy of their crops – sugarcane, cotton, and tobacco – and their attendant agro-industries, the three regions have contributed enormously to the state's 'vikas'. They had not finished walking through the first, the sugarcane region, when, to borrow the subtitle of chapter 4, they realised that 'Something is Rotten in the State of Gujarat.' The realisation progressively deepened as they walked along.

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Gandhi would often preface his usually brief remarks with the adage: 'A word to the wise.' In the same vein, by way of indicating the kind of details you would find in *Walking from Dandi*, I am tempted to quote the following from a conversation between young Siganporia and 81-year old Kantibhai of village Sandhier who, having grown up on stories of Gandhi's visit to the village during the Salt March, believes they are his own memories:

I [Siganporia] say we've gone from thinking about Swaraj to talking about Vikas. He [Kantibhai] is visibly overcome, saying 'this is true', and tries to touch my feet. I am

flabbergasted... He says people only think about themselves; about getting ahead in life. That's Vikas for you. (101)

Add to that Gandhi's lament during the five-and-a-half months that he breathed in independent India – 'If everyone thinks of himself, who will think of Hindustan?' – and you know the truth of both swaraj and vikas.

A microcosm of India

Siganporia claims that her narrative of a narrow strip of less than 400 km is true of the whole of Gujarat. She is right. She does not explicitly say so, but she could justifiably claim that the narrow strip is a veritable microcosm of the whole of India.

In fact, she talks only occasionally of the whole of India. That usually happens in relation to Gandhi. There is an instance in which, after mentioning that Gandhi was asked about the number of seats the Muslims would have in the legislatures under swaraj, she goes on to write:

To this, Gandhi's reply is, 'if I were Viceroy of India I should say to the Mussalmans, Sikha, Christians, Parsis, etc. "Take what you like, the balance will go to the Hindus." (CWMG 43 1967: 127). The rest of his reply is so affective – and speaks to the present moment, charged as it is with some of the most potent mass protests India has seen in decades, as large sections of the population rally against the intensely discriminatory Citizenship (Amendment) Act (CAA, 2019) and proposed National Register of Citizens (NRC), as to be eerily prophetic, it is cited in full: 'It is true that Sanatani Hindus will never let me become Viceroy. The fact is that I am unfit to do such accounting. But it should be sufficient to know that the Congress has pledged itself not to accept any communal solution that does not satisfy the parties concerned. I am bound by that pledge. For the Congress all are one. No more can be expected by any community. Civil resistance will merely give the power to the nation to assert her will. But when the time comes for its assertion, the document embodying the will will have to be sealed by all the communities. Thus without the co-operation of all communities, there is no Independence...' (157-58)

Given that this is a work written against the backdrop of the Dandi March, Gandhi is quoted numerous and extensively. And, given that so much has since remained the same, virtually every time he is quoted, Gandhi sounds eerily prophetic and speaks straight to us. I should like to conclude with just one of these numerous quotations. Explaining why he changed from being a loyalist to an opponent of British rule, Gandhi said:

Finally, however, the scales fell from my eyes, and the spell broke. I realized that the Empire did not deserve loyalty. I felt that it deserved sedition. Hence I have made sedition my dharma, to be loyal is a sin. To be loyal to this Government, that is to say to wish it well, is as good as wishing ill of the crores of people of India... To approve the policy of this Government is to commit treason against the poor. (216)

As you hear Gandhi say this, keep in mind that the rulers' colour or their nationality was irrelevant in his conception of swaraj. Between sedition and treason to the poor, he knew what he would choose.

A degree of scepticism?

In speaking to us, Gandhi does make us wonder at times as to what he would have done if he were with us. Not surprisingly, then, Sigantoria feels obliged at one point to write:

It is pretty obvious how the old man would have felt about Gujarat's neo-bonded labour epidemic (hint: it could not possibly have come to pass, this sort of structural oppression, under his watch. One can hypothesize that, had the spectre of this deeply exploitative state-sanctioned agro-industrial model reared its head within Gandhi's lifetime, Satyagraha would have been offered to dismember it, no matter who comprised Government.) (76)

My understanding of Gandhi's place in the making of contemporary India would suggest a degree of scepticism about the efficacy of his 'watch.' Further, he would undoubtedly have waged a satyagraha, no matter who comprised the government. But where would the satyagraha have landed him, no matter who comprised the government?

Sudhir Chandra is a historian. His publications include ‘Gandhi: An Impossible Possibility’ (Routledge, 2016), which is a translation by Chitra Padmanabhan of the Hindi original, ‘Gandhi: Ek Asambhav Sambhavana’ (Rajkamal Prakashan, 2011).