

## From portrait to avatar: Gandhi in the popular imaginary

Christopher Pinney

Popular images conjure many different and incommensurable Gandhis: as human, as divine; as prophet of *ahimsa*, and as slave to the revolutionary violence of Bhagat Singh. These different personae were played out as inner turmoil by Gandhi himself. In popular picture production different images appealed to different audiences which each made Gandhi the repository of their own needs and expectations.

A few of the images lie close to Gandhi's own self-conception as a somatic, physically transparent human vehicle of a divinely inspired morality. Here chromolithography duplicates and enfleshes a photographic template, respecting the time-space co-ordinates captured by the camera. A 1920s Chitrashala Press image of a thoughtful Gandhi seated on a *takia* (inscribed "D.B. Mahulikar. Artist. Ahmedabad.") is clearly an over-painted photograph. Colour simply enhances a truth already present in the photographic image: the humility and truthfulness of Gandhi's androgynous corporeal rebuke to the brutal masculinity of colonial oppression.

In a similar way the most famous image of this period, the publisher S.S. Brijbasi's exquisite 1931 lithograph was prepared by the artist M.C. Trivedi from a photograph taken as Gandhi left Karachi en route to the Round Table Conference [though the GandhiServe Foundation website notes that it is a "studio photograph taken in London at the request of Lord Irwin"]. Very precisely modeled on the photographic referent, the chromolithograph exponentially increases the original image's size so that the beholder finds himself confronted with a life size Gandhi who is now projected emerging auratically from the depths of a darkened background. These are all images which consolidate a view of Gandhi which Gandhi himself might have affirmed: human, and involved in an experiment with truth.

Other images, superficially similar, open up a different conception. Here the photograph still serves as an explicit referent but in their chromolithographic reworking we see signs of a creeping deification. The Modern Litho Work's beautiful *Gandhi* presents him with a garland as a saint or proto-deity. The historian Shahid Amin has shown in wonderful detail how Gandhi was treated, by many, as a god. In one Bihar village a 104 year old woman reportedly told Gandhi that 'Just as we had Ram and Krishna as *avatars*, so also Mahatma Gandhi has appeared as an *avatar*'. The Mahatma found himself trapped, to an extent, within 'existing patterns of popular beliefs'. In 1921, the *Pioneer* newspaper commented on his 'unofficial canonization'. The rural public, demanded to see and be seen by the great soul: 'The sight and sound of uncouth peasants invading the train carrying Gandhi, rending the sky with cries of "*jai*" and demanding *darshan* at an unearthly hour, could be annoying and unnerving'.

Gandhi's *avatar*-like status is also implied by the caption to one image in a popular 1930s Bombay edition of *India's Case for Swaraj*. The 'S.S. Rajputana which carried Mahatmaji to London' and is captioned 'THE LUCKY SHIP'. The perception of this vessel as some sort of peculiarly fortunate *vahan* (divine mount) suggests something of the aura which by this time surrounded Gandhi. It is also apparent in two photographic montages probably dating from the mid-1940s, made in central India, possibly in Mhow. One of these depicts a central figure of Gandhi, blessed from above by Krishna, and a flag-waving Mother India, whose body is infused with signs of political potency. These take the form of the montaged heads of contemporary

national and international political leaders, including Nehru, Maulana Abul Kalam Azad, Subhas Chandra Bose, Hitler, Mussolini, Bhagat Singh, Tilak, and many others. This unlikely cohort clearly share a common concern with power and efficacy, rather than ethics.

A further montage from the same source, beneath the slogan 'Jay Hind' (victory to India) shows Gandhi on the right of the image pointing towards the central figure of Subhash Chandra Bose. Bose, as is customary in such images, is attired in the uniform of the Indian National Army, with whose forces he hoped to free India. His auto-beheaded figure (of the sort we have seen commonly used for Bhagat Singh) is captioned '*Subhas balidan*' (Subhas' sacrifice) and he kneels amidst the severed heads of others who had suffered or died in the struggle. Underneath the figure of Mother India who is receiving Bose's gift is a garlanded monument. Barely readable, this would have been immediately recognizable to Bose admirers as the I. N. A. martyrs monument to Bose, following his probable death in an aircrash on 8th July 1945. Other figures included in this astonishingly complex montage are Chandar Shekhar Azad and Sardar Patel.

We are confronted with an interesting paradox: during Gandhi's lifetime chromolithography generally positioned him within the 'empty, homogenous time' of the documentary photographic image. But local photographic practice - at least as evidenced by the two Mhow prints - was able much more easily to discard a disenchanting chronotope and inhabit a messianic space. The technology of production and its economic/ideological constraints may supply the answer to this: the artisanal montage techniques of the local photographer were more likely to reflect the popular messianism of the streets than the capital intensive products of national colour presses. An overview of local print culture suggests, however, that the 'official' vision of Gandhi as an inhabitant of an empty, homogenous, space is - in the broader scheme of things - the exception to the general messianic rule.

The major presses' unwillingness to affirm Gandhi as avatar during his lifetime rapidly decayed with the grief of his assassination on January 30th, 1948. The images which appear after Gandhi's assassination are radically different in style and substance and can be divided into 'apotheosis' images and 'avatar cycle' images. The former depict Gandhi ascending to heaven in the manner of eighteenth-century European Imperial heroes, and the latter present a central atemporal form around which a biography in the form of 'descents' appears.

Brijbasi's *Gandhiji ki swargyatra* (Gandhiji's journey to heaven) shows Gandhi hovering above the heads of Nehru and Patel as he is born up to heaven in a celestial *rath* drawn by two *apsaras*. *Gandhiji ki swargyatra* was painted by the great Nathdvara image-maker Narottam Narayan Sharma and in the intriguing detail of the image he conveyed much about the nature of the relationship between the Brijbasi business and Gandhi. The American photographer Margaret Bourke-White witnessed the scene that Narottam painted at close quarters and has left a moving record:

Nehru, Patel and Baldev Singh, the Defence Minister, performed the final touches on the bier. [...] At the burning ground I made my way to the pile of sandalwood logs where the cremation would take place. Three Hindu priests were pouring pails of ghee [...] on the logs [...] Then an oddly assorted little group came and sat down cross-legged on the ground, as though facing a camp fire. Among them were Lord and Lady Mountbatten, the Chinese Ambassador, Maulana Azad, the Muslim scholar who had been so close to Gandhi, Mrs Naidu, the warm-hearted poet, who in happier days called Gandhiji her 'Mickey Mouse', and Raj Kumari, literally bowed down with grief.

Suddenly these watchers had to rise to their feet and cling together to keep from being trampled on. The procession was approaching, the crowds about it surging, uncontrollably, close to the pyre. Although I was within a few feet of the sandalwood logs, my view of Gandhi's body was blocked off by the crush of people desperately eager for one last look before their Mahatma was given over to flames. Sometimes I could catch sight of Nehru's haggard face as he stood by the edge of the bier, then a glimpse of Patel in his toga-like robe... The flames rose high into the sky now, and the million people seemed to have sunk into a low bowl of darkness.

Narottam Narayn's image gives little sense of grief-stricken panic which Bourke-White evokes so well, but he provides a remarkably accurate record of the individuals present at the cremation. We may presume that he relied on some photographic reference<sup>i</sup> for most of this: Nehru and Patel are given prominence on either side of the pyre and in the background we can see the Mountbattens, Baldev Singh among others. Among these others is a curious though familiar interpolation: the face of Shrinathdasji Brijbasi can be seen peering between the Chinese Ambassador and Maulana Abul Kalam Azad. Shrinathdas Brijbasi was one of the founding partners of S.S. Brijbasi the most important picture publisher in twentieth-century India. Narottam here - perhaps inevitably - conjoined two men who were arguably equally dependent on each other; Srinathdasji the businessman who found in Gandhi a saleable icon who also animated the divine landscape which his images constructed; Gandhi who in Shrinathdasji found the ideal liaison officer in the production of the poetic landscape of a morally pure and independent India.

Brijbasi images also depicted Gandhi's arrival in the world of the gods. *Devlok*, painted by a Nathdvara artist whose name is difficult to decipher shows Gandhi at the front of a group of deceased nationalists who are being honoured by a group of ancient *rishis* (sages). All this takes place under the benign watch of the three major deities: Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva above whom *apsaras* hover with garlands. The formal symmetry of the image is accentuated by the framing arch which contributes to the creation of a meaning-saturated space which stands in sharp contrast to the empty homogenous time of elite nationalist politics.

Perhaps the most revealing images however are those which suggest Gandhi's status as an avatar through their appropriation of the pictorial forms of avatar representation. Since the 1880s, prints have been in circulation depicting Vishnu and his *avatars*. All of these have a common pictorial structure: Vishnu is depicted at the centre, and around this, usually in a clockwise order are represented his various *avatars*; most commonly ten, but sometimes twenty two or twenty six. The same structure is also used to reveal the narrative of a particular *avatar*: Krishna may be given the central place and his biography then unfolds in a clockwise set of vignettes. These images give form to the notion that the enduring abstract form of Vishnu is periodically made manifest through different incarnations who descend to play their role in the affairs of man.

This established template has been used to document the lives of many major nationalist figures following their death. Several images by different publishers position Gandhi within this *avatar*-template. In the artist Dinanath's *Evolution of Gandhi* published by Kannayalal Lachoomal of Delhi, the circle of Gandhi's life is mediated by his flag shrouded corpse (bearing his last words, 'Hare Ram') at the bottom of the picture. At the start of the circle at the bottom left we see his birth from a lotus, his early years as a suited barrister, the Dandi salt march at the top and so on.

In a way which would doubtless have pleased Gandhi, popular images position him in a religiously ambiguous space. A few images place him against silhouettes of temples, mosques, Buddhist *stupas*, and churches. These appear for instance in the Bombay company National Art Gallery's *Balidan*, which in alluring colours depicts Gandhi at the moment of death, his hands clasped, *Hai Ram* scripted across his chest, and a smoking gun in the foreground.

However, in the broader corpus of images, both the prominence of Buddhist and Christian motifs *and* the absence of Islamic tropes are equally striking. Hindu motifs (which one would assume to form the core iconography) feature prominently in some images: the Fine Art Trading Company's *Amar Atma* places a somber figure of Gandhi within a triangulation of a *trischul* bearing Bharat Mata, a *chakra* whirling Krishna, and a funeral pyre. *Gandhiji na asthi visarjan* a black and white print of striking naivety published by Joshi Art Works of Ahmedabad depicts the immersion of Gandhi's ashes in the *triveni sangam* where Sarasvati, Yamuna and Ganga mark out the Hindu spatiality of this confluence. Other images that claim a specifically Hindu identity for Gandhi's life and message are an anonymous late 1940s Calcutta produced image titled *Namaste* where Gandhi emerges in front of a cloud-shrouded and bejeweled Om, and Rising Art Cottage's *Dharitir kola* painted by A. K. Dutt in which Gandhi's corpse is cradled by Mother India, flanked by Shiva and Vishnu.

Set alongside these Hinduizations of Gandhi are striking visual associations with the Buddha and Christ. SNS's beautiful ascension image *Last Journey of Bapuji* shows Gandhi being drawn up through the sky by swans, moving from a terrestrial opposition of Sardar Patel and Jawaharlal Nehru to a celestial domain where the Buddha and Christ hold sway. Buddha and Christ appear in numerous other images: *Achuto Udhar* – a fascinating image in which high and low caste citizens are shown in a narrative of progress, places an approving Gandhi next to Buddha and Christ, a juxtaposition repeated in many images. Rising Art Cottage's fine image *Janasebar Pratik* reiterates the placing of Buddha and Christ above the central figure of Gandhi; and L.A. Joshi's striking 1948 image counter-poses Krishna with a *rakshas* figure shown assassinating Gandhi in the lower fore-ground of the image with Buddha and Christ at the top.

More boldly still, two images by the artist M. L. Sharma who was widely reproduced by Calcutta studios, position the fore-grounded figure of Gandhi in front of a larger encompassing image of the Buddha. In one untitled work by Sharma, Gandhi holds his left hand up in a sign of peace, mirroring the Buddha's originary *mudra*. The Ajanta Art Calendar Co's *Mahatma Gandiji*, makes this connection and dependency utterly explicit: Gandhi speaks into a microphone and Buddha streams his thoughts and philosophy into Gandhi's bald head: Gandhism is visualised here a variety of Buddhistic practice. Ashis Nandy has argued that Gandhi was in many respects as much 'Christian' as 'Hindu'. This provocative and troubling suggestion seems to have been taken as axiomatic by painters in the late 1940s.

But if this subordination of Gandhi to Buddha and Christ is surprising, more astonishing still is the depiction of Gandhi as beholden to those who used revolutionary violence in the freedom struggle. Images commonly suggest the indebtedness of official nationalism to revolutionaries. Among the Bhagat Singh related images proscribed in the early 1930s were some that depicted B.K. Dutta tearing open his chest to reveal the face of Bhagat Singh and other co-revolutionaries. This gesture, signifying devotion to one's personal master, has as its visual archetype Hanuman's cleaving of his chest to reveal his master, the god Ram. Circulating alongside these images of B. K. Dutta were even more remarkable ones which position B.K. Dutta opposite Gandhi. Gandhi has cast down his staff and is himself tearing open his chest to reveal Bhagat Singh, Rajguru, and

Shukhdev. In a similar way, an image by Sudhir Chowdhury, dating from c. 1948, and published by the Calcuttan 'S.N.S.', *Shaheed Smirity* (remembrance of martyrs) shows Nehru as the recipient of the blessings of a free Mother India, made possible only through the sacrifices of revolutionary terrorists (including Bhagat Singh) whose severed heads are placed alongside a *lota* and *puja* lamp. Official nationalism may have decried the activities of revolutionary terrorists, but popular visual culture asserted the nation's debt to those that were prepared to kill and be killed in the cause of freedom.

A similar principle of the accession of non-violence to the power of violence is apparent in the Calcutta Rising Art Cottage's *Mata Ka Bandhan Mochan* (the Mother's deliverance from bondage). This depicts Mother India giving (on either side) a spinning wheel to Gandhi, and the flag of Independent India to a crouching Nehru. But in the centre she bestows the *talvar* (sword) of freedom on Subhas Chandra Bose. For consumers of this image, conditioned by similar images which show figures identified along the continuum of Bhavani/Bharat Mata giving a sword to Shivaji (the narrative that Tilak had earlier propagated), there could have been little doubt that this was the same sword, given once again. The doubling of Pratap/Shivaji and Bhagat Singh/Chandra Shekhar Azad (sometimes replaced by their Hindu rightist antinomies, K. B. Hedgewar and M. S. Golwalkar) and the occasional interpollation of a mediatory Subhas Chandra Bose, establishes a messianic time in which persons and objects leap across empty, homogenized time. *Mata Ka Bandhan Mochan* establishes a commensurability between Gandhi's freedom through spinning, Nehru's freedom through conventional statist politics and Netaji's liberation through the sword.

Gandhi as indebted to Bhagat Singh is an image wholly incommensurable with the authorized nationalist narrative of *ahimsa* and *satyagraha*. But it is an image that conceptually seems to resonate ever more clearly with the Indian public. Indian commercial film has consistently reinscribed this subordination of Mohandas to Bhagat. While Gandhi has featured only peripherally in Bollywood consciousness, Bhagat Singh has been endlessly celebrated with a tranch of films in the 1960s and again in the first few years of the twenty-first century. As *Rang de Basanti* most recently demonstrated, Bhagat-ness has been largely stripped of its atheistic and Marxist qualities and (rather in the manner of Subhas Chandra Bose) simply serves as an empty sign of political efficacy. Bhagat's HSRA has been deprived of its radical commitment to social justice and become, courtesy of Bollywood, a patriotic lifestyle option for bored Delhi yuppies. In a similar way, *satyagraha* has been emptied of the profound psychic challenges it posed to the world-destroying addictions of colonialism and capitalism. It is time to rediscover the radical challenges in both these very different political strategies and to discover whether – in their renewed confrontation – there still lies the possibility of a new kind of politics.