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PART I

Influence

CHAPTER I

The nature of influence

INTRODUCTION

We all come to times in our lives when we change our beliefs or ways of living. How do these changes come about? Why at one particular time rather than at another? To what degree do such changes come about because of contact with persons and ideas that have the power, at that particular point in time, to alter our destiny? William James noted that ‘Our ordinary alterations of character, as we pass from one of our aims to another, are not commonly called transformations, because each of them is so rapidly succeeded by another in the reverse direction; but whenever one aim grows so stable as to expel definitely its previous rivals from the individual’s life, we tend to speak of the phenomenon, and perhaps to wonder at it, as a “transformation”.¹ Where this transformation is a religious one, especially if it is preceded by crisis or is sudden, James calls it ‘conversion’. This means that ‘religious ideas, previously peripheral in [the] consciousness, now take a central place, and that religious aims form the habitual centre of [the person’s] energy’. This self-surrender, while to James more interesting and with more abundant and startling subconscious effects, is not the only form of conversion. And, by and large, it is the other form that is of more concern to us here. In the ‘volitional’ type of conversion ‘the regenerative change is usually gradual, and consists in the building up, piece by piece, of a new set of moral and spiritual habits’.² Gandhi, and those who were his followers in various senses, did change deeply as a result of their interactions, sometimes suddenly but more often as a ‘final straw’ in an evolutionary process. In exploring causal antecedents of the changes that grew out of these relationships, possibly the word that best sums up what I am trying to convey is ‘influence’.

¹ William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature* (Glasgow: Collins, 1960), p. 199.

² *Ibid.*, pp. 201, 209.

The first definition of influence in the Oxford dictionary is an astrological one. It informs us that influence is an ethereal fluid that flows from the stars in a way as to affect a person's character, personality and destiny. Of course the Oxford dictionary does not leave it there. Further definitions, perhaps more immediately relevant for my task, include the flowing into a person of 'any kind of divine, spiritual, moral, immaterial, or secret power or principle'; and the 'exertion of action of which the operation is unseen . . . by one person or thing upon another'; and most pertinently, 'the capacity or faculty of producing effects by insensible or invisible means without the employment of material force, or the exercise of formal authority; ascendancy of a person or social group; moral power *over* or *with* a person; ascendancy, sway, control, or authority, not formally or overtly expressed.' In short, influence is also an agency of power, without the overt exercise of power in any political sense, that can affect and modify something or someone else.

When someone changes their attitudes or behaviour as a result of some sort of physical sanction, we call the process the exercise of power. Although psychologists may also use the term 'influence' as synonymous with more surreptitious techniques of persuasion, for the purposes of this study I am not interested in mass communication and in influence as the formation of public opinion or manipulation (where someone, for example a clever salesperson, pressures another to do something they would not otherwise do, such as purchasing a product they may not really want; or pressures someone to do something that builds up a debt relationship that may later compel an act of reciprocity). Nor am I using it in the way it is employed in the social psychology literature where the influence is often a synonym for the word 'power' and generally concerns the questions about how agreement is actively elicited from others (through rewards or punishments) and about the dynamics of social groups where members tend to hold similar views. I am using the term in the sense that it is used in sociological parlance, where the process occurs voluntarily or unconsciously without the necessary presence of an active influencer. The issue for me is best encapsulated by the sorts of answers that can be expected to be given when someone is asked: 'who have been the main influences in your life?' In short, for my purposes the astrological metaphors are more apt than the psychological explanations concerning the use of overt power in relationships.

Influence can come from formal institutions such as schools and the mass media (where often it does amount to manipulation), from other individuals or informal groups. Although he lived at a time before the advent of mass media as we know it, Gandhi of course must have been

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greatly influenced by family members and school. The influence of family and school are more or less given to all of us, but there are other influences that strike cords with some of us and not with others, some that affect us at some times in our lives where they would not at other times. What really concerns me here is the seemingly selective influence of individuals, personally or through notable books, or by way of informal groups, on the making of the Mahatma. This includes the relationships that prompted or legitimated changes he made or gave him the social support necessary for taking innovative risks – the top of the hourglass. Equally, I am also interested in the bottom of the hourglass, the influence of Gandhi in shaping the lives of others who went on to make substantial contributions in their chosen fields in ways that can, at least to a discernable degree, be said to have come about because of this influence.

CHANCE, CHOICE AND DETERMINISM

Of course we should not totally overlook chance as a determinant of history, especially personal history. There has been a tendency to see the march of history as somehow inevitable, however, in the words of Merriman, chance, and equally we could add ‘coincidence’ here, ‘has not always received its due from historians seeking to explain world events’.³ At the individual level most of us accept the role played by chance in our personal lives, why, then, not in the life of Gandhi? Perhaps it was pure chance that he went to England to study law, that he stumbled upon a certain vegetarian restaurant, that he ended up in South Africa to practise his new profession, having failed at it at home, or that Henry Polak and Hermann Kallenbach were introduced to him. Of course chance played a role in the life of the Mahatma, and of course so did many other factors – and far too many for them all to be put down to mere chance. Gandhi chose to do things that most of those around him simply did not choose to do.

The determinists tell us that every event has a cause or a series of determining causes and that we are victims of a past which has conditioned us to choose in a certain way. At times we may not be able to trace the sequence of cause and effect, and at times there may be many contributory causes to an effect. If an event happens where we cannot pinpoint any cause, we may call it a chance happening and if the happening seems to have been caused by ourselves, we say that we chose it by our own free will. Whatever

³ See John M. Merriman’s introduction to his edited book, *For Want of a Horse: Choice and Chance in History* (Lexington: The Stephen Green Press, 1985), p. ix.

the driving determinants of our choices are, differing possibilities present themselves to us and we continually have to make choices regarding them. The degree to which our choices are free is still debated by philosophers and psychologists. In any case, the choices we make can have profound consequences for our lives. Whether the choices made by Gandhi were 'hard determined' by his previous history, including his interactions with the others described in this book, cannot be settled here. However, there is ample evidence that the relationships discussed had a profound influence on him, encouraging his evolution in certain directions, perhaps being 'soft determinants' in his development. While it is undoubtedly true that small causes can have large effects and that no one can tease out all the possible determining variables in any given life, I am trying to understand Gandhi's own life journey by attempting to piece together what probably were determining conditions, by attempting to distinguish significant connections between events and less significant ones.

What I have attempted here is not to write counterfactual history of Gandhi's life: if this did not happen, or if this person had not met Gandhi, or if Gandhi had not read this particular tract, what shape would his future have taken? Possibly, perhaps even probably, Gandhi would not have become the Mahatma if he had not gone to England to study, or, even more importantly, to South Africa as a failed Indian lawyer. But could he have become the Mahatma without the circumstances that led him to write articles on Indian recipes for London vegetarian journals? Other counterfactual questions could include: If Gandhi had not met Raychand would he have become a Christian? And then what? If he had not met Polak would he not have founded an intentional rural community based on simplicity and spirituality? Would he have remained an urban lawyer or would his ashram days merely have come a little later – or perhaps even earlier? If Maganlal Gandhi had not died when he did, would Gandhi have returned to Sabarmati after the Salt March and continued with its unruly (or in that case perhaps less unruly) inhabitants? Without meeting Gandhi could Rajendra Prasad have become President of India and Vallabhbhai Patel Deputy Prime Minister? Would Kenneth Kaunda have been a believer in nonviolence for as long as he was without his reading of Gandhi? And without such a reading, what different path would the American Civil Rights Movement have taken with a non-Gandhi-influenced Martin Luther King Jr.? Without meeting Gandhi, would Shantidas have set up Gandhian ashrams in the south of France? Would there be no philosophy of deep ecology, or concepts of structural violence and Buddhist economics if their founders had not undertaken a careful reading of Gandhi? While these questions

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may be interesting to speculate upon, no definitive answers are possible. Nevertheless, as Ferguson suggests, such counterfactual scenarios need not be mere fantasy, they can be 'simulations based on calculations about the relative probability of plausible outcomes in a chaotic world'.⁴ I will leave these speculations to others who may wish to engage in them. Although the plausibly causal, or at least influencing, connections in the four substantive chapters in each half of what follows have not previously been commented on at any length, the connections and their consequences explored here *were* made and *did* happen and although chance and coincidence may have played their parts, the people and philosophies Gandhi came into contact with at more than a superficial level, generally through seemingly conscious decisions on his part, also had a very strong influence on his personal future development. And it is argued that he also had similar strong influences on the personal history and intellectual development of those portrayed here who came into contact with him or his ideas.

EVOLUTION, TIPPING POINTS AND TRIGGER EVENTS

Life is a progression of one thing after another. We learn from our mistakes, we are inspired by people and events, we change our world views as we mature. Short of accidents, major illnesses, wars or other significant catastrophes, only rarely does something momentous happen that alters our lives in an instant. Most changes are gradual, or volitional conversion in James' terminology. They tend not to occur on the road to Damascus. Sometimes, however, although probably coming out of a later realised nurturing groundwork, change seems sudden. How often does it happen that we may be interested in something or want to go somewhere but do very little about it until, suddenly (and possibly very suddenly to the outside observer), one day a decision to follow through on the interest is taken and we change our lives? Why did it happen then, not before or later? Out of what dynamics do seemingly rapid changes emerge?

Although the word 'conversion' usually refers to religious change, it also has a wider meaning and can, at the less dramatic end of the scale, grow out of the phenomenon that I have been calling influence. There is a dearth of empirical studies on the unconscious and psychic mechanisms involved in conversion, and the literature that does exist is very general. However, from it can be concluded that conversion manifests itself as a change in

⁴ Niall Ferguson, 'Introduction' to Naill Ferguson (ed.), *Virtual History: Alternatives and Counterfactuals* (London: Paperback, 1988), p. 85.

personal thoughts, feelings and actions, often preceded by ‘anguish, turmoil, despair, conflict, guilt, and other such difficulties’.⁵ It is generally agreed that almost all conversion follows upon some kind of crisis where previous standards, goals and beliefs cease to function well and the conversion can be described as a coping mechanism. The crisis need not be spiritual, but may be political, psychological or cultural. Gandhi certainly had times of deep spiritual crisis in his life, and at these times his way forward tended to come out of the interaction with someone close to him. For example, the counsel of Raychand when Gandhi was questioning his own faith at a time when his Christian friends believed that his conversion, in the traditional religious sense of the word, was imminent. But there does not always seem to be a crisis before a rapid change, and this can make abrupt changes seem inexplicable.

Recently there has been much written about ‘tipping points’ where suddenly an idea, trend or behaviour pattern reaches a ‘take-off’ point the way that a present but managed disease suddenly and inexplicably becomes a full-scale epidemic or the way a subculture’s emblematic clothing becomes the height of popular fashion almost overnight.⁶

Decades ago, the dispute formation and conflict resolution theorists were talking about ‘trigger events’ where an incident (or one too many) or perhaps some annoying or irritating behaviour suddenly brings on a new realisation that pushes the person acted against into the arena of overt and public dispute. The trigger event forces a person to consciously analyse his or her experience of an action, or may cause them to reinterpret previously seemingly insignificant actions in a way that imbues them with added meaning, causing them to see the world differently. In the area of disputes this may mean that they realise that they have been wronged and that this requires some reaction.⁷

Analogous situations occur in the lives of individuals outside the context of disputes or trend changes. At times it may be hard to define the tipping points and trigger events that make sudden changes possible, but they are there. Gandhi, for example, was experimenting with different ‘New Age’ philosophies and practices and working at simplifying his life, then, literally overnight, after having read John Ruskin’s book *Unto this Last*, he

⁵ Lewis R. Rambo, ‘Conversion’, in Mircea Eliade (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Religion* (New York: Macmillan, 1987), vol. iv, p. 74.

⁶ On this see Malcolm Gladwell, *The Tipping Point: How Little Things Can Make a Big Difference* (London: Abacus, 2000).

⁷ On this see Jeffrey M. Fitzgerald, David C. Hickman and Richard L. Dickins, ‘A Preliminary Discussion of the Definitional Phase of the Dispute Process’, unpublished paper presented at the 1980 Conference of the ‘Law and Society’ Association in Madison, Wisconsin, pp. 4–5.

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purchased a property and set up a communal farm run along the lines of the dictates of his till then more or less armchair philosophy. The tipping point may have been the reading of the book, or the final straw in a lengthy evolutionary process may have started with the forming of a relationship with Polak who was to give him the book, or even with the chain of events that led him to claim Polak as a friend. In the other geographical and lifestyle shifts that Gandhi undertook, the trigger events may have grown out of special relationships or may have been provided by the sudden ending of such a relationship through death, or even by the lengthy pleading of a soulmate/disciple in search of a surrogate father that could no longer be ignored.

MENTORS, FELLOW TRAVELLERS, SOULMATES AND DISCIPLES

No inventor, including the inventor of the self, works alone. We all make ourselves in interaction with others. How do our relationships influence our future directions and even future selves? In relationships sometimes it is difficult to determine who influences whom – even if one partner is clearly the senior one. Relationships, if they are not totally one-sided (and possibly even then), are dialectical. The more influenced party, if in a direct relationship with the object of influence, can still affect the more influencing one – and, even if the dominant party is or becomes a world figure, the flowing back of influence can have profound significance.

Four terms spring to mind in this connection: mentor, fellow traveller, soulmate and disciple. Mentors are experienced and trusted advisers who are also friends. Although the term ‘fellow traveller’ is often used to describe communist sympathisers, more generally it refers to those responsive to a certain point of view without being fully paid-up members of the organisation propagating that view. The term ‘soulmate’ is predominantly used to describe the relationship between two people, usually of the opposite sex, who are temperamentally well suited to each other or have a strong affinity with each other, often at a deep spiritual and intellectual level. Disciples are the dedicated followers of a leader.

While Gandhi may have seen himself as a disciple of Raychand, Ruskin and Leo Tolstoy and considered Gopal Krishna Gokhale as his mentor, he was also a mentor to many others and an undisputed leader to still others who can be classed as his disciples. In Hindu tradition, the guru is a religious teacher who undertakes to give personal instruction to a disciple, the chela. The relationship between master and pupil is a close one with utmost reverence and obedience required of the chela. An ashram is a community

where a holy man and his disciples live. And it is the presence of the guru that gives the ashram its importance. Four of the major influential relationships discussed here are inextricably tied up with Gandhi's four ashrams.

Gandhi was a guru for many, but regardless of Ved Mehta's characterisation of some of those that worked with him as apostles⁸ most of the best-known political ones such as Jawaharlal Nehru, Rajendra Prasad and Vallabhbhai Patel were clearly more than that, being co-workers in India's freedom struggle. Of course, although Gandhi's philosophy in action actively rejected the hierarchical dependence and 'inequality of the master-disciple relationship in favour of a dialectic between equals',⁹ this did not necessarily mean that all could step out of Gandhi's shadow and operate as fully independent and creative, albeit influenced, individuals (as Shantidas could, but Mirabehn and Hermann Kallenbach could not). Disciples generally try to carry on the work of the master, often following the holy writ without the ability to marshal the creativity necessary to meet new situations. These disciples do not interest me in this particular study.

Gandhi was a fellow traveller with the South African Christian missionaries who became his close friends and in his school years, although early on the junior partner, with his childhood friend Sheikh Mehtab. Henry Polak and Kallenbach, and especially Saraladevi Chaudhurani, whom in 1920 Gandhi called his 'spiritual wife', were clearly for a time his soulmates¹⁰ rather than mere political co-workers. Maganlal Gandhi and Jannalal Bajaj, who I have included in the list of those who influenced him, were clearly disciples – but on the death of what sort of disciple does the master claim that he has been widowed? What sort of disciple is adopted as a son whose death leaves the leader in a state of utter desolation? Maganlal Gandhi and Bajaj were not the equals of Gandhi on a common quest as friends earlier in the Mahatma's life may have been, but nevertheless their discipleship was tinged with something of the soulmate relationship. Perhaps Moore's definition of the soulmate as someone 'to whom we feel profoundly connected, as though the communication and communing that takes place between us were not the product of intentional efforts, but rather a divine grace'¹¹ is nearer the mark than the more bland definition given above. Several of Gandhi's relationships I examine here seem to be of this order. Moore

⁸ See Ved Mehta, *Mahatma Gandhi and his Apostles* (London: Andre Deutsch, 1977).

⁹ Richard Lannoy, *The Speaking Tree: A Study of Indian Culture and Society* (London: Oxford University Press, 1971), p. 381.

¹⁰ Gandhi seems to have had a platonic but sexually charged love affair with Saraladevi, see Martin Green, *Gandhi: Voice of a New Age Revolution* (New York: Continuum, 1993), especially pp. 273–85.

¹¹ Thomas Moore, *Soul Mates: Honoring the Mysteries of Love and Relationship* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1994), p. xvii.

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speaks of these relationships when he notes, that ‘The point in a relationship is not to make us feel good, but to lead us into a profound alchemy of soul that reveals to us many of the pathways and openings that are the geography of our own destiny and potentiality.’¹² This is the very point of some of the explorations of relationship I attempt here. Further, Moore believes that ‘slight shifts of imagination have more impact on living than major efforts at change’, and that ‘deep changes in life follow movements in imagination’.¹³ Several slight shifts of imagination that led to deep changes in Gandhi’s life came out of the dialectical processes of interactions within his close relationships. The influence of those, often shared, slight shifts frequently proved profound.

Of those who Gandhi influenced by his personal presence most were disciples. Prasad, Patel and Vinoba Bhave clearly were disciples, but more than mere disciples and less than soulmates. Because of the mentoring of Gandhi their political guru, and because they retained the ability to act independently of their master, they achieved the highest positions in newly independent India. Shantidas, for whom Gandhi was a guru/mentor, went on to become more of a fellow traveller than obedient disciple, and the others, who did not know Gandhi personally (for example Kaunda and King) were fellow philosophical travellers who learned important political lessons from their illustrious predecessor. Perhaps Sunderlal Bahuguna is somewhere in between. Of the four major figures discussed in the section exploring Gandhi’s influence on others, Arne Næss, Johan Galtung and E. F. Schumacher are fellow travellers with Gandhi, not political disciples. Gene Sharp became one after starting off as a disciple. The web of influences is a complicated one.

CHARISMA AND AUTHORITY

As noted above, Gandhi, like the rest of us, was heavily influenced by various elements of his childhood situation and the people and philosophies he came into contact with. However, unlike most of the rest of us, he was also extremely influential. A glance at a Gandhi bibliography will readily turn up books with titles that attest to this: *Under the Shelter of Bapu*, *In the Shadow of the Mahatma*, *At the Feet of Bapu*, *At the Feet of Mahatma Gandhi*, *Homage to Gandhi*, *The Saint of Human Rights: Gandhi, A Saint at Work*, *Mahatma Gandhi: The Man Who Became One with the Universal Being*, *World’s Homage to Mahatma*, *Gandhi-Mahatma: An Anthology of*

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 257.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. viii.