

BOOK REVIEW

RAMCHANDRA GANDHI

Talks and Writings

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The late Ramchandra (Ramu) Gandhi was a philosopher of high calibre. He set up the Philosophy Department at the University of Hyderabad and taught at Visva Bharati University, Panjab University and the California Institute of Integral Studies.

Apart from this, he made forays into the fields of journalism and social thought. His writings underline his commitment to pluralism, secularism, profound theological commitment of a broad order and pacifism. He came into his own, although his lineage as the grandson of the Mahatma and C. Rajagopalachari was undoubtedly distinguished. This book is a compilation of his writings and talks over the years, and it is perhaps appropriate that it is being reviewed in the *IIC Quarterly*; apart from being a regular at the Centre, it was at the IIC that he breathed his last on 13 June 2007.

It is fitting in my opinion to gauge the worth of this publication by asking a few questions and providing a few answers. Perhaps readers will get an apposite gist of the book through this.

Does the anthology give one a taste of Ramchandra Gandhi the philosopher?

Undoubtedly, yes. The volume covers a wide plethora of Gandhi's work in the field of philosophy over the years. It can be safely said, however, that Ramana Maharishi and Jiddu Krishnamurti occupy pride of place in the writings and talks reproduced. Be that as it may, others of learning or saints can by no means be called absent in this work, be it Ramakrishna Paramahansa, Sarda Devi, Swami Vivekananda, Sri Aurobindo, Mahatma Gandhi or Dr. S. Radhakrishnan. About Krishnamurti he says, 'He died only a couple of years ago, a master like him or anyone is not really fully understood or even begun to be talked about exploratively until many, many years after his death.' He then goes on to express himself on the radiance and power of this great thinker. The perceptive reader will also find interesting Ramana Maharishi's discourse with a Westerner on the power of silence over speech and action in the chapter 'Indian Spirituality and the World'. Mahatma Gandhi too is well covered in the work; in one piece the complex relationship with his eldest child (and the author's uncle), Harilal, is dealt with tenderly. Like his assassin, Nathuram Godse, Harilal also did not understand the Mahatma's message and gave himself up to alcohol. However, the family showed Harilal, who had an intelligent mind, the compassion he deserved.

Does the book do justice to the social and political message of Ramu Gandhi?

The answer is yes and no. Metaphorically, he compares life to a holdall which rail and road travellers used to carry in the years gone by (p. 107), but as holdalls became redundant, has pluralistic thought also become redundant? To some it may be so, but as holdalls have been replaced by other forms and pieces of travel luggage, which are able to serve the same purpose, the pluralistic ideology which the writer believed in will not be outmoded; it might have some alterations in its form from time to time. Even though this aspect of Ramu Gandhi's ideological belief is covered fairly well in this collection, it is not given the import that it should have been, given the sway of certain ideologies in present-day India.

Do we find in these writings a reflection of what Ramu Gandhi would have thought or expressed had he been alive today?

In this regard the book does disappoint.

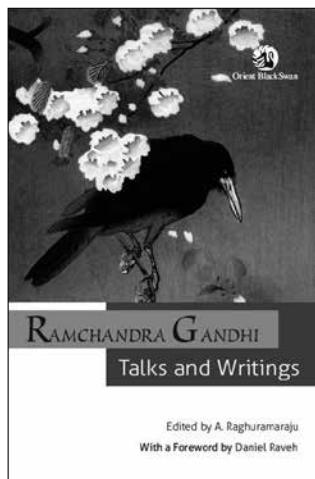
Coverage of his writings on the creed of secularism through more of his prose, or a powerful rendering of this belief which, after

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all, forms a part of the basic structure of the Constitution would have been in order. I came across a quote from him: ‘when policies become exclusive, India will turn genocidal’ (Viswanathan, 2019). It is not difficult to judge what his opinion would have been on the various events in current-day India—the Citizenship Amendment Act, the events in the context of the Ram Mandir construction at Ayodhya, or the farm laws and the resultant agitation by farmers that would have found him speaking out or penning his views. He had also said, ‘A file can destroy a million people while a gun is child’s play’ (ibid.). This comment sums up the sensitive thinker he was, and the book could have reflected on the relevance of Ramu Gandhi in the India of today.

Is this anthology a comprehensive work of note?

Barring the shortcomings pointed out above, the book is a good overview of the academician–philosopher. His thoughts as an anti-war believer and his opinion about nuclear stockpiles are well represented in the work, as also Partition, about which he says,

I maintain that these two million who were slaughtered were no Indians or Pakistanis. They belonged to the Indian subcontinent, they didn’t have Indian passports or Pakistani passports and we are responsible for their slaughter because we accepted the partition in one way or the other (p. 241).

Elsewhere in the book he says in a philosophical context:

Shishya is the Sanskrit word for which the colloquial term in Punjabi is Sikh. In fact, the whole Sikh faith to my mind has redefined humanity in a way which inaugurates a new renaissance...when we are social or not, whether we are rational or not, we are seeking self-knowledge. So, to be a Shishya is to be a human being (pp. 243–44).

I think these two references from the book give an authentic impression of the basic stream of thought running through the omnibus.

These collected works cover a good range of interviews, speeches and articles. Ramu was not lacking in a sense of humour. For example, while writing on the demise of the Janata government,

he remarks that the soft drink ‘77’ was all that remained of the great revolution that year, a tribute to the prohibitionist prime minister who headed the government at the time which collapsed mid-term. Or when he refers to President Radhakrishnan’s speech on the radio that dharma was on our side during the Chinese aggression, leading them to believe Burma was our new ally and making the Chinese withdraw! His comments on the Godhra riots of 2002 have also been included. Another interesting comment is about his feelings on what it means to be the grandson of the Mahatma. While dwelling on this he says the undeserved respect and affection he gets puts him in a quandary at times. However, given his independent views and contribution in his career as a professor so versatile, one can say this respect and affection was fairly his due.



REFERENCE

Viswanathan, Shiv. 2019. ‘The Shaman at the Bar’, *The Hindu*, 25 May.

