

The Impact of Mahatma Gandhi on Ideological Trends in West Asia with Special Reference to Egypt

Abdul Ali*

It is an indisputable fact of history that India has been the teacher of the Arabs not only in mathematics, astronomy, medicine, and wisdom literature during medieval times, but also in their struggle for independence from colonial powers in the twentieth century. It so happened that the Arab world witnessed an unprecedented sense of nationalism between the two World Wars. In its wake they broke the shell that had contained their struggle within a suffocating space, and joined the mainstream of the liberation movement that simultaneously took place in several parts of Africa and Asia, particularly India.¹

The leaders of the rising Arab nationalism looked eagerly to India for inspiration, marking the beginning of the restoration of the age-old Indo-Arab relations that had suffered a temporary setback following the falling of both India and the Arab world under foreign domination. The Indian national movement under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi had a great impact on the Arab intelligentsia who shaped as well as nourished the nationalist momentum of the Arab masses. The defeat of British imperialism in India by non-violent means through the mobilization of the masses enabled the Arab intellectuals to discover the power of the masses. Greatly inspired by the Indian national movement launched on secular lines, the Arabs started paying attention to India's historical background of independence as well as its vast moral and spiritual potentialities.²

It was in this context that the teachings and principles of Mahatma Gandhi attracted the attention of Arab intellectuals and men of letters. Gandhi, who stayed in South Africa as a barrister for about 21 years (1893-1914), and who experimented with his *satyagraha* (pressure for reform through

*Professor (Retd.), Department of Islamic Studies, Aligarh Muslim University, Aligarh, India.

passive resistance) movement following his encounter with racism there, is considered by the Arabs as the main architect of Afro-Asian resurgence. Later, with a view to broad-basing his own national movement, Gandhi interacted with Arab leaders. He developed friendly relations with Sa‘d Zaghlul Pasha (1857-1927), leader of the Egyptian awakening, who had been a friend of Muhammad ‘Abduh and a student of Jamâl al-Dîn al-Afghânî. Gandhi appreciated his efforts in having successfully welded the minority with the majority into a solid mass on secular lines. Both of them were greatly influenced by each other.³

Through the launch of his civil disobedience movement, Gandhi not only drew the attention of the whole world, but also had a special resonance among the Egyptians. That was the main reason why *Al-Ahram*, the popular national daily of Egypt, began to give a wide coverage of the mounting acts of non-violent resistance in India. It was not only the major events of the Indian non-co-operation campaign but also the minute details thereof that were reported by the Egyptian press in a lively manner. When the British authorities arrested Gandhi under frustration at their inability to curb the momentum of the passive resistance movement, *Al-Ahram* relates “ on 4th May 1930, a contingent of armed police cordoned off the compound of the ascetic Indian leader in Surat, after which the chief police inspector at the head of a twenty-member force approached. Inside the compound, Gandhi’s supporters had been asleep, unaware of the impending danger. Suddenly, they awoke to the glare of floodlights from every direction and the sound of the approaching feet. Gandhi, who had been sleeping in the open air outside his hut, opened his eyes to find that he was surrounded by police. He smiled and asked the police chief, ‘Am I wanted?’ The official answered in the affirmative and ordered Gandhi’s arrest. Gandhi thanked him and asked if he might first be allowed to perform his prayers. Permission was granted. He then was taken away, taken aboard a separate car in a train and transported to a location approximately 130 miles south of Bombay.”⁴

It is evident from the above that the Arabs, particularly the Egyptians were kept informed of all aspects of the day-to-day and political life of Gandhi, thanks to wide coverage by the Egyptian press to his life, actions and thoughts.

Again, when Gandhi was released about nine months after his detention

on 25 January, 1931, *Al-Ahram* senior columnist Ahmad al-Sami Muhammad hailed the event as “the day of Gandhi, the day of India, the day of freedom”.⁵

The Impact of His Visit to Egypt

The chief merits and virtues of Gandhi, tempered with his concern for the cause of suffering humanity at large, endeared him greatly to the Arab people, both intellectuals and masses, thanks mainly to their wide exposure in Arabic writings. This finds ample expression in the warm welcome accorded to him on the occasion of his visit to Aden and Egypt. When the ship that carried him to London in 1931 to participate at the Round Table Conference anchored at the Port of Aden in Yemen and at Port Sa’id in Egypt, large numbers of Arabs poured in from different corners of nearby territories to welcome Gandhi. When it docked at the Port of Yemen, thousands of Arabs and Indians settled in that country assembled there and gave him a warm welcome. Gandhi reciprocated their feelings by delivering a long speech which was later published.⁶

Similarly, Gandhi had already received telegrams welcoming him to Egypt from its nationalist Wafd party leader Mustafa al-Nahhas and Safiyyah Zaghlul, widow of Sa’d Zaghlul. When the ship reached Port Sa’id on the evening of Sunday, 6 September, *Al-Ahram* described the scene mentioning, “there on the board stood the Oxford graduate, wearing nothing but a scrap of cloth worth five piastres, wire rim glasses worth three piastres and the simplest thong sandals worth a mere two piastres. These ten piastres of clothing tell Great Britain volumes. It tells it that its hundreds of millions of pounds of gold mean nothing to this prophet who, when sitting at the table of kings refrain from partaking in the many diverse morsels of various descriptions as he only dines on a small repast of dates and goat milk.” No wonder, he was presented by the Egyptian reception committee with a vessel of honey, 20 litres of goat milk and a large quantity of Egyptian red dates, known as Zaghlul after his friend Sa’d Zaghlul.⁷

The enthusiasm of the Egyptians was so overwhelming that, as recorded by Sardar Panikkar, who accompanied Gandhi on the ship, the British authorities felt compelled to take measures to prevent the Mahatma from being seen by the crowds for fear that they might be electrified by the very sight of his magnetic personality. That was the main reason why only a few leaders of the Egyptian Nationalist Wafd Party including Safiyyah Zaghlul,

widow of Sa'd Zaghlul, were allowed to board the ship and greet Gandhi as well as offer him their good wishes in his task ahead.⁸

The long, comprehensive interview conducted by *Al-Ahram's* most renowned correspondent Mahmoud Abul Fath with Gandhi covered the entire front page of its edition of 7th September. The Journalist described the hour spent with Gandhi as one of the most memorable hours of his life. To quote his own word: "It was an hour in which I sensed true heroism and the paragon of patriotism and self-sacrifice. How I wish that every Egyptian could spend an hour such as that. Indeed, many among us are in dire need of many such hours, not just one."

Further, when Abul Fath requested Gandhi to deliver a message to the Egyptian people, the latter inspired them to throw themselves heart and soul in pursuit of their freedom, saying: "You, like us, are an ancient people. I pray that you do not blindly imitate everything Western. If I have properly understood what has happened to your country, you must persist in your endeavours to realize true freedom. And, if I may hazard a modest opinion, it is that Egypt will attain liberty very quickly if India obtains its true freedom within the next twelve months. I firmly believe that if India gains its freedom through sincere perseverance and without violence, this will have a great effect on the world and certainly for all the nations of the East."

The Mahatma left a lasting impression upon several other top representatives of the Egyptian Press. In short, all those who witnessed the occasion, could not hold back their adulation of the Indian leader. For instance, Mahmud Abbas al-Aqqad, representative of the Egyptian daily *Misr* described Gandhi as the saint of humanitarianism. The popular newspaper *Kawkab al-Sharq* remarked that Egypt, as "Indian's sister in captivity, feels today its throbbing pulse and racing heart". While *al-Diya*, another national daily of Egypt, touched upon the bond that united both countries, and described India as an ancient oriental nation like Egypt, which like Egypt, was struggling to free itself from the shackles of British colonialism.⁹

His image in Arabic Literature

Several Arab writers and poets wrote articles, books and poetical compositions on different aspects of the life and thoughts of Gandhi. A few of the most famous among these are: the above- mentioned 'Abbâs Mahmud al-'Aqqad, the greatest Arab writer of biographies and author

of a widely appreciated biography of Gandhi, in which he emphasized the spiritual aspects of his leadership; Fathi Ridwan, a distinguished Egyptian playwright, who also served as minister of National Guidance under President Nasser, and author of a book on the life and struggle of the Mahatma, which is a serious, illuminating study on the subject; Muhammad Kazim, author of a work on Gandhi; and Taha al-Sayyid, author of a book on the life of Gandhi, in which he highlighted the political ideas of Gandhi.⁹

Several odes and poems were also composed in Gandhi's honour by Arab poets including Ahmad Shawqi of Egypt,¹⁰ Halim Damus of Lebanon,¹¹ Ibrahim al-Khal of Iraq¹² and Fathi Mumtaz of Libya.¹³

Muhammad Rashid Rida and Tawfiq al-Hakim of Egypt and Kamal Djoumlatt of Lebanon were other eminent Arab personalities who were deeply inspired by the lifestyle and social philosophy of Gandhi. Rashid Rida (1865-1935), the distinguished disciple of Muhammad 'Abduh and editor of the prestigious Arabic Journal *al-Manar* as well as an eminent social reformer and religious authority of his time, himself translated a book by Gandhi on self-restraint and published it with his commentary. Expressing his appreciation of the merits of Gandhi, he writes in the preface of the book: "The Chief merits and praiseworthy traits of Gandhi that adequately reflect the greatness of this man are that he trod the straight path of his religion and followed its lofty ideals with all sincerity, and that he never practised politics in isolation from religion and ethics at a time when our own cultured intellectuals are feeling shy of being associated with their religion, not to speak of following its injunctions with sincerity, as they consider it as antagonistic to enlightened and progressive thoughts."¹⁴ When Rashid Rida was criticized by some Egyptians for his high praise showered upon Gandhi, he silenced them by declaring that to his mind the thoughts and practices of Gandhi resembled those of Muslim Sufi saints of earlier Islamic periods.¹⁵

In a letter written to the Indian journalist and writer 'Abd al- Razzaq Malihabadi in 1926, Rashid Rida further highlighted the piety and religiosity of Gandhi. He also exhorted the Arab leaders of Egypt and other countries to emulate Gandhi as an ideal leader in politics. He was so impressed by the personality of Gandhi that he visited India and met him and other political leaders in the course of several meetings. He also became a staunch supporter of the viewpoints of Gandhi. That was the main reason

why he sided with the latter in the difference of opinion that ensued between him and the two Ali brothers, Muhammad Ali Jawhar and Shawkat Ali, with regard to the Gandhian methods of protest, particularly the non-violent non-cooperation. And on his return to Egypt, he wrote several articles in his journal *al-Manar* in which he opposed the views of Muhammad Ali Jawhar. The latter, however, responded to the criticism by writing articles in his own newspaper published from Delhi in those days under the title *Hamdard*.¹⁶

Next, Tawfiq al-Hakim (1898-1987), founder of contemporary Egyptian drama and a leading figure in modern Arabic literature, was full of reverence for the teachings and ideals of Gandhi. When the news of his martyrdom reached him, he wrote and published an interesting article in his eulogy in the Egyptian weekly *Akhbar-al-Yawm*, in which he compared him to Jesus Christ by pointing out the similarities in the mission and approach of both of them.

Al-Hakim described Gandhi as the miracle of the 20th century who taught the world the same lesson that Jesus had taught by meeting every situation in this scientific and materialistic age with only spiritual power in a most unexpected manner. He also described Gandhi as the miracle of the East by holding that only the East could have given birth to a luminary like him. He further said that although Gandhi died and his bodily remains were consigned to the flames, a man like him could never die; and like a torch he was still capable of lighting the path of the world.

Lastly, al-Hakim mentioned that by his deeds Gandhi reminded the West of the popular saying of Jesus: "For what doeth it profit a man to gain the whole world and lose his soul". He also called upon the West to pay homage to Gandhi, saying:

O Western world, kneel for a moment with the
 East, covering your face with shame and behold
 a man, his body now is ashes, who walked the
 earth delivering this message while the world's
 temples and cathedrals remained silent. O Western
 world, when will you learn this eternal lesson?¹⁷

Similarly, Kamal Djoumblatt, the then president of the Progressive Socialist Party of Lebanon, was an enthusiastic supporter of Gandhi's philosophy and leadership qualities. The latter's impact upon him was so considerable that he rejoiced in being depicted by Arab cartoonists and media persons as an Arab Gandhi. Djoumblatt compared his own feelings with George Bernard Shaw who called himself the Gandhi of the West, holding him as one of the few great men of the world who are produced by history only once in a millennium.¹⁸ To Djoumblatt, Gandhi symbolized the elevated political struggle based on the moral and spiritual strength of man. His discovery of the inter-relationship between man's thoughts, actions and their consequences was described by this Arab leader as one of his main contributions to human thought in modern times.¹⁹

Likewise, several odes and poems were composed in Gandhi's honour by Arab poets, of whom the name of Ahmad Shawqi, a distinguished modern Egyptian poet, is very important. It was on the occasion of Gandhi's visit to Port Sa'id that Shawqi, immortalized his name and image in Arabic literature by composing and reciting a remarkable ode in his honour. By the consensus of all critical opinion Shawqi is regarded as the greatest Arab poetic genius of the 20th century. In it the poet has not only praised the simplicity of Gandhi's lifestyle, his piety, patience and moderation as well as his moral and spiritual values, but also put him in the category of enlightened saints and apostles of God. English translation of the ode is given below for a better understanding of his image in Arabic literature:

Gandhi

O sons of Egypt! Raise your garlands and greet the hero of India, And fulfill your duties and perform your responsibilities towards this matchless leader.

He is your brother in enduring hardship and in facing the difficult situation,

And in offering the greatest sacrifice; and in the demand and struggle (for freedom).

And in being wounded, in shedding tears, and in being sent into exile from the cradle,

And in the journey for truth and at the stage of delegation.

Satnd and salute the hero on the ship from near and far;
And cover the land with myrtle and the sea with rose-flowers.

On the frieze of the Rajputana (the ship) there stands a statute of glory:
He appears to be a prophet like Confucius or something of that mould,
In speech and action he is very much like the awaited Messiah,
In piety and in the defence of truth he resembles the apostles;
Certainly he has preached truth, patience and moderation;
And when he called the Far East, it responded to him from the grave,
And he came to the sick souls and cured them of malice.
He invited the Hindus and the Muslims for unity and mutual love,
And he gathered the two swords (i.e., the Hindus and the Muslims) in one
and the same sheath by the magic of his spiritual power,
And by the power of his soul which gives strength to the 'tamers of the
lion',
And by the divine guidance which he receives from God and by the
prosperity of his good fortune.
And by his good luck which is not granted except to the one created for
immortality;
And he is not overpowered by the might, attack and army (of the enemy),
And neither does he get affected by the consideration of race and wealth,
nor by fatigue and hard work.
And it is nothing but the gift of Almighty God for the servant.

O Gandhi! Accept the greetings of the Nile, and accept this flower on my
behalf,
And be honoured on behalf of the Pyramids and the date-trees,

And on behalf of the Shaykhs of the Valley as well as its beardless cubs.

We all salute you over and over again, O milker of the cattle and spinner at the spindle!

And who avoids the use of salt and does not incline towards honey,

And who walks on foot and from Hind to Sind.

We all salute you whenever you offer your prayers half-naked in the loincloth,

And in the cell of the prison as well as in the chains of arrest.

O Gandhi! Beware of the Green Table (i.e., the Round Table Conference),

And carefully observe the faces of the 'Sirs' and the 'Lords';

And be the most skilful of the players at the Chess and the Back-gammon,

And meet the Lords as an equal meets his equal;

And say: Bring your snakes, for the snake-charmer has come from India,

And don't care for the accuser, nor get deceived by the praise,

For no criticism can aspire to approach this star,

And return India to the nation from border to border.

The great impact which Mahatma Gandhi exerted upon the Arabs is further reflected in the fact that he continues to be held in high esteem by them even long after the liberation movement was over. He is still respected and admired by their writers and poets. His exhortations for Hindu-Muslim unity, his simplicity of life, the virtues and efficacy of his *satyagrah* and non-violent revolution, and his adherence to moralistic and spiritualistic values as well as his indomitable spirit and power of determination have been the main topics of praise in the poetical compositions of the later Arab poets. This is quite evident from the poems of Halim Damus of Lebanon, Ibrahim al-Khal of Iraq, and Fathi Mumtaz of Libya. The poem composed by the Lebanese poet Halim Damus under the title *Gandhi Masih al-Hind* (Gandhi as the Messiah of India) was published in the journal *Sawt al-Sharq*, No. 82(July 1959), Cairo. The poem by Ibrahim

al-Khal was recited at a birth anniversary of Gandhi celebrated in Baghdad in October 1967 and published in the journal *Thaqafat at-Hind* (July 1969), New Delhi. The Ode by Fathi Mumtaz was published on the occasion of Gandhi's 100th birth anniversary in the journal *Thaqafat at-Hind* (January 1971). This particular poem by Fathi Mumtaz is translated below, which may be taken as a sufficiently illustrative specimen of poetical compositions on Gandhi by Arab poets of the second half of the 20th century.

MAHATMA GANDHI

O sons of India! Raise a banner among those who wave banners. And resurrect one of the past periods that have gone by.

Commit to memory the remembrance of an everlasting star, who has become the greatest immortal in the list of your immortals.

He did not earn his fame by the lustre (brilliance) of any material decoration, nor had he been in the past an angel or a prophet.

He realized by the sheer force of his spiritual power an immortality, to which time, life and starts aspire.

He devoted his whole life for the sake of his lofty objectives, to realize which he struggled hard till his feet started bleeding.

He removed from the houses of his nation the barriers of religious beliefs, as a result of which Hindus started treating Muslims as brothers.

The trumpets of imperialism raised great hue and cry against him with a view to crippling him. But he faced them bravely and wisely till he transformed by his power the prater into an idol.

He faced the adversity of hurdles (put in his way) like the strong lofty mountains; and in order to spread his mission he established the Ashram (the monk's cell).

Even intense darkness of prisons could not melt (weaken) his determination. So the volcano of his revolution continued to emit charcoal and ashes.

He diffused his teachings of peace with the greatest zeal, the echo of which is till rampant in India, and it continues to stir the aspirations of its

people.

Although his thin and lean body is like dry and broken plants, it contains a strong, invincible soul like a lion.

A great soul, who spread love around him. As such he fully deserved to get the honorific title of Mahatma.

He met his death as a sacrifice at the hands of a stupid assassinator.

Thus he died honoured as he had lived honoured in his life.

He left behind him a legend of immortality which was bestowed upon him in recognition of his genius in an arrayed retinue of immortals.

It follows from the above that Gandhi was looked upon by Arab writers as a humanist, who adopted truth as his religion and non-violence as his weapon of protest.²² He was also evaluated by them as the greatest or one of the greatest luminaries of the 20th century.²³ They further held that this wonderful personality, a great social philosopher and a man of action, did not belong to India alone, but he belonged to the whole world.²⁴

Conclusion

In conclusion it may appropriately be said that the Arabic writings on Gandhi not only sufficiently reflect the deep sentiments of the Arabs which they continue to have for him, but also symbolize their indepth understanding of his life and philosophy. Because of the thorough acquaintance of these Arab writers and poets with all the major and minor details about this unique Indian personality, it appears that they were composed not in the environment of Arabia, but in the Ashram of Gandhi. Lastly, it would be no exaggeration to say that it was mostly under the impact and influence of Mahatma Gandhi that the Egyptians, like the Indian people, adopted by and large the course of passive resistance to free themselves from the yoke of British imperialism. And the huge body of literature produced on Gandhi in the Arabic language is a sufficient proof in support of the overwhelming impact he exerted upon the Arabs, both intelligentsia and masses, thereby serving as one of the major dynamics of their political and ideological trends.

Notes and Reference

1. M. Wahbi, 'Arab Caravan' in the Journal *al-Arab* (August 1962), New Delhi, p.23.
2. *Ibid.*, p.23.
3. Z.M. Qureshi, 'Modern Egyptian Literature on India' in the Journal *al-Arab* (March 1962), New Delhi, p.14.
4. Prof. Yunan Labib Rizk in *Al-Ahram Weekly* (19-25 December, 2002) Cairo, No. 716p.16.
5. *Ibid.* P.16.
6. Muhammad Husain Khan, "Al-Za'im Gandhi" wa'l-Zu'ama al-Arab (Gandhi and the Arab leaders in the Journal *Thaqafat al-Hind*, vol. 41, No.2, 1990, New Delhi, P.71.
7. *Al-Ahram Weekly*, op.cit., P.16.
8. Maqbul Ahmad, "Indian Political Relations with the Arab World in Modern Times" in the Journal *al-Arab* (March 1964), New Delhi, PP.4-5.
9. *Al-Ahram Weekly*, op.cit., p.16.
10. The ode by Ahmad Shawqi was published in the 4th volume of his *Diwan* titled *al-Shawqiyyat* (Cairo, 1951), pp.83-85.
11. The poem composed by the Lebanese poet Halim Damus under the title *Gandhi Masih al-Hind* (Gandhi as the Messiah of India) was published in the Journal *Sawt al-Sharq*, No.82 (July 1959), Cairo, p.34.
12. The poem by Ibrahim al-Khal was recited at a birth anniversary of Gandhi celebrated in Baghdad in October 1967 and published in the Journal *Thaqafat al-Hind* (July 1969), New Delhi, pp.20-23.
13. The ode by Fathi Mumtaz was published on the occasion of Gandhi's 100th birth anniversary in the Journal *Thaqafat al Hind*, vol. 21, No.4 (January 1970), New Delhi, pp.1-2.
14. Muhammad Husain Khan, "Al-Za'im Gandhi wa 'l-Zu'ama' al- 'Arab" (Gandhi and the Arab Leaders) in the Journal *Thaqafat al-Hind*, vol.41, No. 2, 1990, New Delhi, p.171.
15. *Ibid.*, p.170.
16. *Ibid.*, p.171.
17. *Akhbar al-Yawm*, Egypt, January 31, 1948; *The Muslim World*, vol. xxxviii, No. 3 (July 1948), New York, p.229.

18. See *Majallat al-Azhar*, vol.22, No.3, 1951, Cairo, p.278.
19. M. Wahbi, "Arab Caravan" in the Journal *al- Arab* (May 1965), New Delhi, p.15.
20. Ahmad Shawqi, *Al-Shaqiyyat* (Cairo, 1951), pp. 83-85.
21. *Thaqafat al-Hind*, Vol.21, No.4 (January 1970), New Delhi, pp.1-2
22. Muhammad 'Abd al-Fattah, "Gandhi wa 'l-Insan" (Gandhi and Man) in *Sawt al-Sharq*, No.63 (December 1957), pp.6-7.
23. Dr. Yahya al-Khashshab, "Dhikrayat fi Dhikra Gandhi" in *Thaqafat al-Hind*, vol.21, No. 1 (January 1970), New Delhi, p.59.
24. 'Abbas Mahmud al-Aqqad, "Tahiyyat al-Mahatma fi Dhikrahu (Salute to the Mahatma) in *Sawt al-Sharq*, No. 1 (October 1952), Cairo.