

“GANDHI”

reviewed by John Passmore.

Sir Richard Attenborough's epic production "Gandhi" is a victim of its own documentary technique. For this the British producer can hardly be faulted as the nature of the subject — a towering 20th century personality — is bound to undermine the viewer's sense of dramatic authenticity.

Attenborough was not in the happy position that Shakespeare and Schiller found themselves in when writing their respective historical dramas, "Richard III" and "Maria Stuart".

In those plays historical veracity was of little consequence. Shakespeare could transform the English king into a virulent deformed exemplar of evil with impunity as Richard's actual life and royal career did not — bar the princes in the Tower — loom large in the public imagination.

The climax to "Maria Stuart" is the meeting between Elizabeth and Mary. In terms of the play it matters little that Mary and Elizabeth never actually met. Both Shakespeare and Schiller wished to present the public with a dramatic evocation of particular issues central to the problems of the day. The central figures in "Richard III" and "Maria Stuart" are symbols, characters in a play and not faithful historical reproductions.

Historical veracity is essential to any documentary representation of a particular personality, hence the weakness of "Gandhi". Attenborough can interpret a little here and emphasize (or de-emphasize) a little there but he cannot depart in any major way from the recorded history of the life of Mohandas Gandhi.

No actor can ever hope to portray a historical figure in a documentary film with much success even if that actor (in this case, Ben Kingsley) is a very fine one. Gandhi was a man charged to a very great degree with a particular personal dynamism. He was, therefore, his own greatest actor. The documentary nature of the film demands that Kingsley be infused with that self-same dynamism — become Gandhi — and that's not possible.

The "willing suspension of disbelief" cannot take place and knowledgeable viewers are always conscious of the fact that they are watching a terrific impersonation of Gandhi by Ben Kingsley just as Alec Guinness' brilliant impersonation of Hitler in "The Last 10 Days" left us filled with admiration for the impersonator. At no stage did Guinness the actor merge with Hitler the Fuhrer.

I seem to have belaboured the point but it affects the entire film. A documentary such as this has to compress the best part of 78 years into 3½ hours in a coherent manner. All but essentials must be pared away. When you have highly skilled actors helplessly relegated to impersonating Gandhi, Nehru, Patel, Jinnah, etc. (and forced to "talk" compressed chunks of history for the sake of documentary coherence) the conversation sounds contrived.

Surely the intelligent Patel, the sophisticated Nehru and the shrewd Jinnah never engaged in such simplistic conversation when formulating the resistance campaigns against the British? The "pared away" nature of the film and the problems connected with replicating historical

personalities in a documentary drama have a very damaging effect in terms of the quite crucial themes of passive resistance and "Satyagraha". Gandhi/Kingsley's pronouncements pertaining to this unique form of resistance are delivered into a tensionless cinematic vacuum which reduces them to pert Dickensian mouthings.

Such were the insurmountable handicaps Attenborough faced when making the film and we can only sympathize with him.

Where Attenborough stumbles of his own accord is in his interpretation of certain events and personalities. Three aspects of the film spring to mind.

One of the major criticisms levelled at the Mahatma was the fact that he never, to my knowledge, actively championed the oppressed peoples of South Africa regardless of ethnicity. The march of 2000 Indians into the Transvaal and the passive resistance campaign aimed at the new Asiatic registration laws were inspired and organized by Gandhi but he did not attempt to incorporate blacks in a common protest.

However, in one scene where Indians are marching in defiance of the Acts, a group of blacks look at them in amazement. The clear inference is that the black labourers would be similarly inspired. This struck me as an offensive example of the "gloss-over" technique. The second interpretation concerns Gandhi's use of "Satyagraha". "Satyagraha" — soul force in which extreme pressure is brought to bear against the powers-that-be without recourse to violence — was a fundamental tenet of Gandhi's resistance. That cannot be denied. Nevertheless, Gandhi was shrewd enough to realize that the British had to be denied the opportunity to use arms against civilian protesters. Impassioned crowds versus the Maxim gun is no contest.

The wily Gandhi realized that a small but militarily mighty colonial presence would be utterly frustrated when faced with massive but amorphous pressure. Armed insurrection can be localized. Satyagraha resistance disqualifies military intervention. In terms of the struggle for independence, "Satyagraha" was a strategic device as well as a philosophical concept. Far too little of the wily, cunning Gandhi is shown and far too much of the beaming saint. Gandhi was both and to remove one dimension of his character represents negligence on the part of Attenborough.

Thirdly, Attenborough's most serious historical abuse lies in his presentation of Jinnah.

Mohamed Ali Jinnah was certainly narrower and more nationalistic than Gandhi but for three decades he strove for Hindu-Muslim unity. It was with great reluctance that Jinnah abandoned the cause of unity in 1940. Despite their differences he supported Gandhi at a number of crucial moments. To portray him as little more than a singularly ill-tempered popinjay does the cause of historical veracity considerable violence.

Valid but less important criticism can be levelled at the sometimes rambling nature of the film. Selective editing would have been a blessing here. The roles of many of the characters (reporters, adoring disciples, photographers,

helpers at the "ashram") come across as fatuous inter-
polations in the script.

What then makes "Gandhi" a memorable and moving ex-
perience despite itself?

The film's greatest achievement is that it reminds us of Gandhi,
the man, at a time when we could do with all the reminding
that we can get. From all accounts Mohandas Karamchand
Gandhi was a placid, even a placatory man. His was not a
thrusting and aggressive personality. All too often such a
person can, over a period of time, implicitly condone a wide
variety of abuses. For Gandhi individual human life and
freedom were sacrosanct. Any diminution of human free-
dom had to be met with the greatest possible resistance
except violence, as violence automatically impugns the ideal.
From that position Gandhi would not budge. No amount
of physical duress could undermine his tenacity in this
respect. What to so many of us is the high ideal was, for
him, the bottom line. His insistence on human freedom
informed his life to the point where he believed that
oppressors would relent once shown the folly of their ways.
It is hardly surprising then that he radiated love and warmth
to those who imprisoned him for 2338 days of his life.

Gandhi's championship of Indian independence was always
bound up with his concept of human rights. His energies
were directed to combating the ugly products of frus-
tration, chauvinistic nationalism and sectarian conflict.

The Mahatma's offering of the premiership of India to
Jinnah was an act perhaps without parallel. Never, to my
knowledge, has the leader of the largest and most powerful
section of the population voluntarily offered political sway
to the leader of a less powerful minority.

The greatest quality of the man was his support of the poor.
Gandhi aimed at the closest possible identification with
them, particularly that most socially wretched and exploited
of peoples, the Untouchables. Renaming them "Harijin"
(children of God) Gandhi strove to arrest their plight. This
persistent striving became almost frantic towards the end
of his life. It is to Gandhi's credit that India has slowly
begun to move away from the horrors of caste and enforced
social deprivation.

Given his ideals it follows that Gandhi considered the 1947
India/Pakistan split as the crowning failure of his life. Given
the difference between the nature of the man and the nature
of the world he lived in, it is tragic, ironic but unsurprising
that he should be murdered in front of the people who at
his prompting, had embraced "Satyagraha".

Near the beginning of the film we see Gandhi being thrown
off a white train at Pietermaritzburg.

Noting the nature of South Africa some 80 years on one
need hardly add the dreary postscript that some things
never change. □

TOWARDS A CERTAIN FUTURE: THE POLITICS AND ECONOMICS OF SOUTHERN AFRICA –

By Robert I. Rotberg (David Philip, Publisher,
Cape Town, 1981)

reviewed by G.H. Oldham

Robert Rotberg's book shows the author to be knowl-
edgeable, perceptive and insightful about the problems of
southern Africa. The book is divided into three parts and
deals separately with South Africa, Namibia and Zimbabwe.
It is, perhaps, a little unfair to review the book so long
after publication because political developments and
other events have tended to outrun some of the authors
forecasts and predictions. For this reason the review
concentrates on Rotberg's analysis of South Africa.

His theme is, as far as South Africa is concerned, that
responsible and decisive leadership by the ruling oligarchy
which sets the country on an evolutionary reform path
may be sufficient to avoid racial conflict, or armed struggle
and eventual revolution. Time, however, is running out.

The next chapter examines the ascendancy of Afrikaner-
dom and the structure of domination. The latter depends
on control or distortion of State institutions, rigidifying
the enforcement of separation, control over information,
military spending and police organisation including security
apparatus such as detention and banning.

The point the author wants to drive home, however, is that

real power is vested in a ruling oligarchy — a small group of
men around the Prime Minister. The political system is
beyond the reach of interest groups, public opinion, the
parliamentary opposition, the press and other instruments
of change. Rotberg further alleges that local branches of
the Nationalist Party 'can rarely oppose the party hierarchy
effectively; few are sufficiently brave or assertive to try'.
He obviously did not anticipate the breakaway of the Con-
servative Party led by A. Treurnicht. In fact the existence
of a growing right-wing opposition seems to undermine the
theme that the oligarchy may have the power to become
a modernising force because of their independence from
the electorate. P.W. Botha has found unexpectedly strong
resistance to even the present proposed constitutional
changes.

The intention of separate development may be seen as the
maintenance of white prosperity and privilege. The response
of the underprivileged has taken a number of different
forms: non-violent and violent. After looking at some of
these responses in his third chapter, Rotberg concludes
that in the near term the A.N.C. is not strong enough or