

23 Grams of Salt

Retracing Gandhi's March to Dandi

Anuj Ambalal



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NAVAJIVAN

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The Bookends are Still There

By the early 1980s I had spent several years reading about Gandhi and had completed an M.A. dissertation on Gandhi's approach to conflict. I decided that it was time to head to India and search for Gandhi on the ground rather than in books. I imagined how boring it must have been for the remaining elderly Gandhians to have strangers come up to them with the request: "tell me about Gandhi." I was interested in that great event of Indian political history, the Salt March to Dandi, and realised that if I tried to find out more about it—as there was precious little about the event itself in the Gandhi-related literature—I would be able to ask specific questions of those I talked to and that there was no better way of forming my own impressions of the Mahatma than by re-walking the route of the original Dandi yatri.

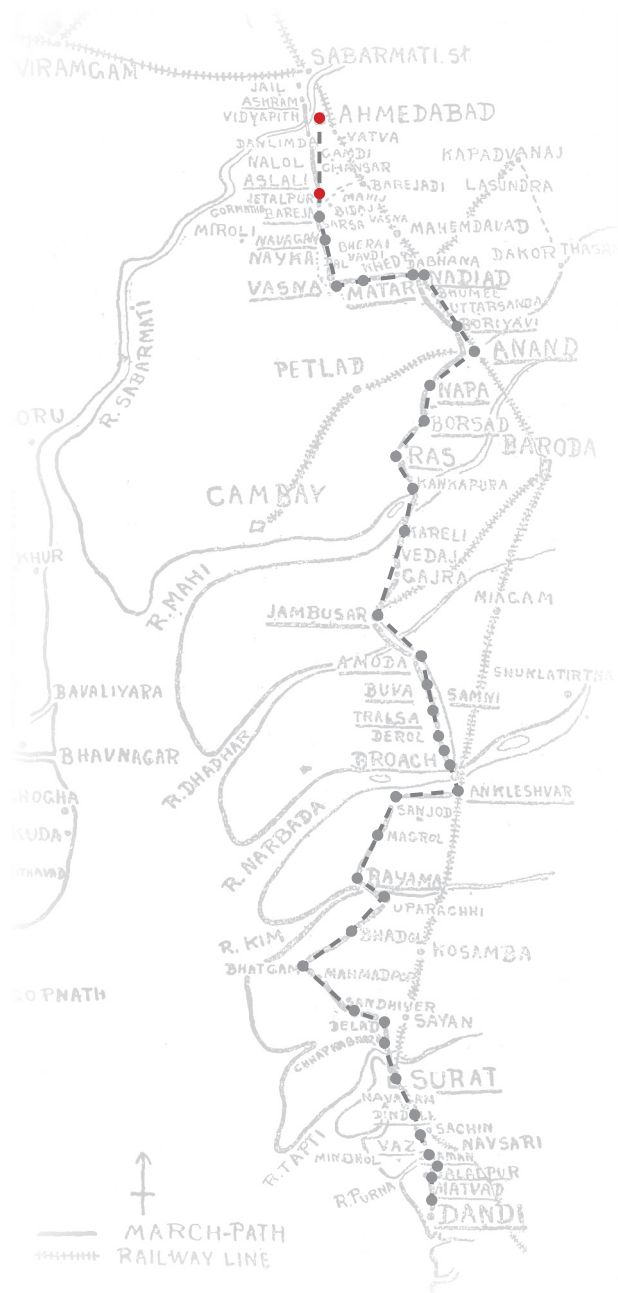
After having gone through the newspapers of the time, both nationalist and pro-government, reading the archival accounts of police spies who reported on the March and interviewing most of the remaining elderly ex-marchers, early in the morning of 12 March 1983, with a few trusted friends, I walked out of the Sabarmati Ashram in Ahmedabad and headed towards Aslali, the first village the marchers halted at. I followed the timetable of the March, often staying in the same buildings Gandhi and the original marchers stayed in, observed the route and recorded reminiscences, and, on the evening of 5 April, I arrived at the seaside village of Dandi where fifty-three years before Gandhi, on the following morning, picked up a handful of saline mud, breaking the iniquitous salt laws and challenged the might of the British Empire.

In the 1980s there were still fairly strong memories of Gandhi's visit in many of the villages and most of the buildings in which the marchers stayed were still present. The villagers often complained to me that before elections politicians would come and promise to build a memorial Gandhi road along the route but noted that while piles of crushed rock were deposited by the side of their village, nothing happened when the elections were over. The Ashram was no longer an isolated community on banks of the Sabarmati River across from the main part of the city but remained a wonderful oasis in the midst of the sprawl of Ahmedabad. The villages on the way to Dandi often looked poor and many of the sites associated with the March were dilapidated and there was very little at Dandi itself to mark the spot where Gandhi performed his historical politically defiant act on 6 April.

Over the years I have visited the Ashram many times and while the slums that once existed between the Ashram and the Gujarat Vidyapith down the road had been replaced with flashy hotels and the camels that spent the night on Ashram Road had disappeared, the Ashram remained its serene self. However, many of the villages were now connected by highways rather than country lanes, some had been swallowed up to become mere suburbs of nearby towns, and many of the Gandhian sites had been demolished and built over or allowed to deteriorate beyond repair. And at Dandi itself there is now a museum dedicated to the March, and an enormous memorial site, resembling a Gandhi theme park, outside. Progress cannot be stopped but because of his stunning photographs reproduced in this book, which have brought a flood of memories back to me, Anuj Ambalal deserves the highest praise for capturing what is left on the ground of this great legacy before significant parts of it, other than the bookends represented by the Ashram and the Dandi National Salt Satyagraha Memorial, disappear completely.

Thomas Weber

Ahmedabad · Aslali



The Salt March to Dandi commenced from Sabarmati Ashram in Ahmedabad, which is about three hundred and eighty kilometres away. The point of departure was the ashram's gate near a tamarind tree that Gandhi named Sarva-Sakshi Amli, or, the All-Witnessing Tamarind. Standing in an otherwise barren terrain, the now fallen tamarind tree witnessed everything before and after the march. Beyond it, half a kilometre from the ashram, lies Dandi Bridge. In 1930, the first satyagrahis to Dandi crossed this bridge, traversing a gorge between the ashram and Gujarat Vidyapith, an institute of higher learning founded by Gandhi to boycott the British system of education. Unlike the tamarind tree that lives only in memory, Dandi Bridge has been rescued after decades of decay and neglect. I remember its formerly dilapidated state. I remember its rusty and tattered yellow sign in hand-painted Gujarati script. I remember news reports decrying its ruined sections. Now that the historic structure is restored, access is restricted. But as luck would have it, on the day I went prepared to climb the locked gates to shoot inside, the bridge was open temporarily.

For the satyagrahis, crossing Dandi Bridge was less fraught of an action than crossing Ellis Bridge, the first bridge of Ahmedabad. Since Ellis Bridge was constructed and named by the British, there were concerns that its use in the Salt March might defeat the purpose of boycott and the message of Swadeshi. Incidentally and ironically, Ellis Bridge became the venue for long deliberations on whether the protesters should walk on it. Imagine the confusion experienced by the large crowds gathered to observe the rejection of all things British. Eventually, the satyagrahis decided to sidestep Ellis Bridge. In yet another contrast between the old and the new, the old bridge has been discontinued from active use. It is flanked on both sides by new bridges for commuters. Padlocked gates prevent access to the historic bridge.

Determined to scale the gate of old Ellis Bridge without drawing attention, I reached the site before daybreak. It was too dark to shoot. I switched on

the car radio to kill time, but the wait only increased my anxiety. Parking away from the bridge, I ambled closer to the gate, intending to climb up and jump to the other side. Luckily, there were not many people at that hour, but a vehicle passed by occasionally, reminding me of the risks of being seen entering a restricted area. As I mustered courage and reached halfway up, it dawned on me that the gate was a bit higher than I had anticipated in my enthusiasm. Or rather, I was older. The last time I jumped from a gate was twenty-five years ago, in college. Memory plays tricks on you to make youthful actions appear deceptively easy much later. I took a literal leap of faith from the top of the gate and luckily broke neither bone nor camera in landing on the tarmac. Now that I was inside, the bridge's bowstring arches provided cover and allowed me to shoot with ease. Fresh grass sprouted on the edges of the broken motorway, infusing the industrial structure with warmth and life. In spite of the light traffic on either side, the bridge seemed surprisingly isolated and pastoral in character.

At Chandola Lake, Gandhi delivered the first of his many powerful speeches of the march. On the dusty road from the ashram to Chandola, dirt began to envelope the marchers. So thorough was the layer of grime on the satyagrahis' faces that the crowds following the procession did not recognise Gandhi and walked right past their beloved leader. The eighty satyagrahis washed in the mostly dry and muddy lake and then rested on its bank. The area around Chandola Lake was a small village on the outskirts of Ahmedabad ninety years ago. Small-scale industry and unsanctioned construction flourish there today. Early in the morning, a pungent odour emanated from what I imagine were chemicals discarded by industrial units. The lake is filled to the brim with severely polluted water that cannot support life.

My project to retrace and document the sites of the Dandi March began two years ago at Rangjyot, the printing facility at Navajivan Press where I

print my photographs. One day, I was in the middle of pre-press operations, when I walked Vivek Desai—friend, photographer, and managing director of Navajivan Trust. He sat next to me and shared his plan to invite photographers for an assignment about Gujarat. I was intrigued. Each photographer, he continued, would document within a year's time a unique aspect that interested them in Gujarat. It sounded like a fantastic concept. If executed well, I said, it could make a great publication. A faint smile lifted the corners of his mouth, and he asked me if I might consider accepting his invitation. Without missing a beat, I agreed. That night, as my mind raced in many directions, a kernel of focus that had lain dormant for over half a decade, emerged with a new sense of urgency: I would shoot the historic sites of the Salt March of 1930, from Sabarmati Ashram in Ahmedabad to the coastal village of Dandi, as they exist in the present.

As I immersed myself in researching the history of the march, the pre-photographic task became clear: I would have to match the sites described in various accounts published many decades ago to the transformed environment before my eyes. To this end, I prepared a dossier of local facts from my reading and carried it on the shoots. It became a handy map of history that helped my camera see what was significant. My second task was recording the testimonial accounts of any surviving witnesses of the march. Vivekbhai knew of an elderly gentleman, Lakshmansinh Chavda, who walked with the satyagrahis from the Sabarmati Ashram up to the Income Tax Circle in Ahmedabad. Lakshmansinh was visiting his son Dilip in mid-2018. From here materialized a web of prior connections. Dilip worked at Kalamkush, a handmade paper factory near the ashram, where I had shot a photo series in the past. I re-acquainted myself with Dilip and visited his home located across the ashram complex. Lakshmansinh reclined on a bed far away from the room's only window. Morning light streamed in from the window, but it did not reach him. Dilip and I helped Lakshmansinh sit next to the open door of the backyard. After taking a few stills, I video-recorded his reminiscences of Gandhi.

A former security guard at the Sarabhai residence in Ahmedabad, Lakshmansinh walked with the satyagrahis when the march flagged off. He battled advanced amnesia but two memories stood out sharply in our conversation. He remembered handing a towel to Gandhi after the latter bathed in the Sabarmati river. While putting the towel on Gandhi's shoulders, he noticed that Gandhi's arms reached his knees. Lakshmansinh bowed and told him that such long arms were signs that he was a great soul. Gandhi simply smiled at the remark. His other encounter with Gandhi took place when he was a domestic employee in the house of Sheth Mangaldas, a pre-eminent industrialist of Ahmedabad. His employer had been in a car accident, and while he was laid up, the trio of Jawaharlal Nehru, Vallabhbhai Patel, and Gandhi paid him a visit. The younger Nehru climbed the steep staircase spryly. When came Gandhi's turn, Patel jokingly asked Lakshmansinh to assist the old man up, punning on "up the stairs" in Gujarati to also imply the stairs to heaven. Gandhi replied with a joke of his own: with independence still far away, why was Patel in a hurry to see him up?

It seemed to me that Lakshmansinh could only tap into memories that were associated with Gandhi. Recalling the two interactions changed him, perhaps into someone he was in his youth. Over the years, Dilip had noted down anecdotes that his father narrated about Gandhi, and these now seemed a part of the family lore. He used the notes to prompt his father. But the delicate connection to the past snapped at times, leaving Lakshmansinh staring past us. The blank look in his eyes brought great pathos to his face. Lakshmansinh's portraits were the first photographs I took in retracing the march. A few months after our encounter, Dilip called me with the news of his father's demise. One of the last living witnesses of the Salt March was gone. The loss saddened me greatly.

During this project, I spent more time *not* shooting a historic site than shooting it. At Sabarmati Ashram, I would switch off my camera and sit

in solitude under the shade of the ashram's ancient trees, waiting for the right frame to compose itself. I looked forward to these poignant waits. They stimulated my imagination. My mind often re-enacted the historical events that once took place on these very grounds and within Hriday Kunj, Gandhi's home from 1918 to 1930, when he vowed before the Salt March not to return home till Swaraj was won. A series of bygone activities came alive for me: Gandhi eating frugal meals prepared in the pantry; Gandhi working in the small office bathed in sunshine; Gandhi sleeping by the veranda; Gandhi emerging from the front gate on the morning of the march; the satyagrahis gathering for the last prayers at the ashram. Kakasaheb Kalelkar presented Gandhi with his iconic bamboo staff in the ground beyond Hriday Kunj, towards the back gate. This was the staff the Mahatma carried throughout the march. It is ingrained in our collective visual memory. At the gate, Kasturba applied tilak to Gandhi's forehead for an auspicious beginning to the march. My mind conjured these stirring images that might have been routinely ceremonial at the time. Once the tourists at the ashram moved out of my frame, I went back to shooting. Perhaps my shoots were excuses for these waits.

From Sabarmati Ashram, I retraced the march to Gujarat Vidyapith. The institute was established in 1920 to offer education to students who boycotted British colleges as a part of the non-cooperation movement incited by the Jallianwala Bagh massacre in Amritsar. It was the first national educational institution of its kind. Its success prompted the opening of such schools in various parts of the country. Gujarat Vidyapith was officially the first stop where the satyagrahis met with a reserve cohort prepared to step up in the event of their arrest. The university, which was then on the urban periphery, is now a green oasis in the heart of Ahmedabad. The marchers were welcomed eagerly in what is now the oldest building there. The historical sites once charged with the fervour of the satyagrahis appear strangely placid today.

The marchers spent the first night of their journey at a dharamshala—a rest house for travellers—in the village of Aslali. With unparalleled enthusiasm, the residents of Aslali cheered the arrival of the satyagrahis. Of all the centres on the route to Dandi, Aslali proved to be the one most bedecked with flowers. Now, it is a densely populated town overrun with brick and mortar houses. I knew from my research that the dharamshala was demolished to make way for a panchayat building. It took many cold calls on passersby to locate the building successfully. It was the peak of the monsoon season; rain clouds had begun gathering quickly. Once the staff arrived, I met Manilal Prajapati, a peon in the panchayat. When he was a child, his school was housed in the dharamshala. He showed me around the building and identified the spot where Gandhi slept during the stop.

In a Shiv temple behind the panchayat building, Gandhi gave his Aslali speech. A Swaminarayan temple now stands imperiously between the two, cutting off their circumstantial connection. The Shiv temple from the early twentieth century is modest in size, confined to a very small but tranquil yard. Devotees come and go about their rituals quietly. There is not the frenzy of activity usually associated with large temples. The light drizzle that had contributed to my admiration for the ambience switched to a heavy downpour suddenly. I shielded my equipment and hurried away, jumping over puddles that formed at an alarming rate. By the time I reached the car, I was drenched but satisfied with what I had documented so far.



Hriday Kunj, Gandhi's home between 1918-1930, Sabarmati Ashram, Ahmedabad



Hriday Kunj gate, Sabarmati Ashram, Ahmedabad

The Myth that Needs to be Buried

Gandhi's 1930 Salt March to seaside village of Dandi, and the following Civil Disobedience movement, are among the most significant events in modern Indian political history and they possibly also represented the greatest nonviolent battle led by history's greatest nonviolence campaigner. Here we had a skinny 45kg, scantily dressed 61 year-old Mahatma armed with nothing but a bamboo staff marching to the sea with a handful of mostly youthful followers in an attempt to liberate India from the yoke of British colonialism.

But it was also far more than that: here was a demonstration of the power of nonviolence in action. While the march launched a mass struggle that filled the prisons and shook the foundations of the British Empire, Gandhi saw the march as a pilgrimage, as a living sermon. It was not merely about removing the British but also to demonstrate what an ideal nonviolent society should look like, how ideal lives should be lived. Gandhi himself saw the Salt March as the quintessence of his philosophy in action.

A great many myths have crept in to the Salt March story: That there were 79 official marchers instead of 81, that the distance of the March was exactly 241 miles, that the route of the March is exactly the one recorded in the various texts and, most significantly, that the March was a failure. All classes did not participate equally in the Civil Disobedience campaign launched by the March. The campaign did not heal the growing rift between Hindus and Muslims. Although tens of thousands were imprisoned, this amounted to only one-fifth of one percent of the population. Following

inconclusive talks in Delhi and London, and with Gandhi again languishing in gaol, the movement eventually petered out. The salt laws were not repealed and freedom did not come to India for another seventeen years.

However, as a result of the March and the following campaign, the world came to see the moral legitimacy of India's cause. For the first time women became significant participants in the Indian political system. And much to the disgust of Churchill, who was appalled by the "nauseating and humiliating spectacle of this one time Inner Temple lawyer, now seditious fakir, striding half-naked up the steps of the Viceroy's palace to parley on equal terms with the representative of the King-Emperor", for the first time the British were forced to talk eye-to-eye with the leader of a subject nation and as Jawaharlal Nehru was later to remark, "people of common clay felt the spark of life."

The Salt March gave the world the idea of mass nonviolence in politics, and to Indians it helped produce the "Father of the Nation." But it was also a living sermon to the country. It was heard by many and it changed many. The revolution that Gandhi sought to achieve was not merely political, it was also social. The independence that he fought for was not only national but was also personal. It was about empowerment: it told the people that they were stronger than they thought and that their oppressors were weaker than they imagined. Gandhi went so far as to remark that the Civil Disobedience campaign that the Salt March initiated was "not designed to establish independence but to arm the people with the power to do so."

The March was more than the propaganda exercise of the clever and astute politician that Gandhi undoubtedly was. It was also a lesson on how battles should be fought, on the appearance of the ideal free India where none was considered high or low, how villages should be organised in a sanitary and cooperative way, how principles should be adhered to in the face of

adversity, the meaning of openness and truth, and how we should relate to others, how we can deal with our opponents so they do not become our enemies, and how we can be the change that we are trying to bring about. In short, how lives should be lived. Viewed in this light, no matter how one interprets the political successes or otherwise of this key campaign in modern Indian political history, whatever one thinks of the amazing event that was the Dandi March, there can be no failure for someone who was doing what he had to do and reminding us that we too should be doing what we have to do in order to do the right thing, in order to be true to ourselves, in order to be free. All this should not be forgotten and the myth of failure needs to be buried.

Thomas Weber

Meandering

The man liked to walk. So much so that he walked to meet his assassin. But we are getting ahead of ourselves. Or maybe not. Any consideration of his walking must be done with the awareness—acute, visceral awareness—of his final walk. We need to wander off.

The story begins with the truth of death; this is of course not meant in a literal sense. The death of the father. Death is a grave idea in our age. In this age, each culture experiences the death of the father. Tradition has a voice, an injunction—do this, do not do that. The voice of the father, or that of the mother, which told us things. My mother always told me (never an injunction to do this and not that) do anything but do it with thought and understanding. Thus she always had this apprehension that I would lag behind both in thought and in understanding. But we are not prepared to accept that, everywhere, the father has died. It seems that he has been killed. Then, what is this death? It is a punishment, if we were to accept that we would never return from that place. This thought does occur, and it occurs to everyone. There are those who believe that death is not a punishment, it is not the end, it takes us someplace else, to some heaven where we already have a place reserved for us. In such a world, death is not so unbearable.

In the final years of his life MK Gandhi gave himself up to the *Ramanama*, the name of Rama. He was surrounded by failure and a raging fire. It was at once a sign of MKG's deep faith and his utter despondency and loneliness. Ramanama became the cure and perhaps the only form of

cure that he came to rely upon. In the midst of intense debate about the nature of India's independence, MKG often retreated to Uruli-Kanchan, to a naturopathy clinic. The retreat was a mode of finding a cure, a healing, not only for the diseased body of patients that he treated but also for the disease of India. To one and all, he said, recite the Ramanama with a pure heart. The cure for the disease, both of the body and the body-politic of India, lay in the Ramanama. He spoke of Ramanama as infallible remedy, a *ramban*, as he put it in Gujarati. Ramanama was no longer a symbol, nor was it a metaphor. Ramanama had become the thing itself. Ramanama alluded to no reality or presence outside of itself. It had become, for MKG, real. It was incumbent upon him to prove this reality. He was convinced that the violence that surrounded him was due to his own failing, his imperfect ahimsa and imperfect *brahmacharya* or asceticism. As he walked through the ravaged villages of Noakhali and Bihar, sleep eluded him. Even the chanting of Ramanama failed to bring repose. He lamented, "Why can't I, who preach all healing virtues of Ramanama to others, be content to rely on it exclusively myself?"¹

Surrounded by raging fire, MKG embarked upon the final *yajna*, a final sacrifice. He needed one final proof of his vision, of his striving, of his *yajna*. MKG began to speak of his death, Death as the ultimate *yajna*. He hoped that through his *iccha mrityu*, the glow of ahimsa would spread all around. MKG imagined this death: a violent death at the hands of an assassin and his ability to face the bullets on his chest without any trace of hatred for the assassin and to meet his maker with the name of Rama on his lips. Such a death, he hoped, would show that he had been a true devotee of god as Truth, *Satya Narayan*. Speaking to those who had come to listen to his prayer discourse and who sought to prevent him from taking the name of Rahim as also his would-be assassins MKG said the following:

¹ *Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi (CWMG)*, New Delhi: Publications Division, vol. 86, p. 218.

I shall have won if I am granted a death whereby I can demonstrate the strength of truth and non-violence... Yes, if I have been sincere in my pursuit of truth, non-violence, non-stealing, *brahmacharya* and so on and if I have done all this with God as my witness, I shall certainly be granted the kind of death that I seek. I have expressed my wish at the prayer meeting also that should someone kill me I may have no anger against the killer in my heart and I may die with Ramanama on my lips.²

In private, he expressed his desire to give one final proof, one definitive demonstration of his faith, of his striving to see God face to face. He said to Manu Gandhi that his striving was to meet death with the name of Rama on his lips. He believed his striving to be incomplete but hoped that death would be his witness. He said to Manu, “If I should die of lingering illness, it would be your duty to proclaim to the whole world that I was not a man of God but an impostor and a fraud... But if I die taking God’s name with my last breath, it will be a sign that I was what I strove for and claimed to be.”³

On January 30, 1948, he stopped three bullets in their path of hate, as described so evocatively by Ramachandra Gandhi. It was a death unlike any other. It allowed for us to think of it as punishment and him as *iccha mrityu*.

For MKG it was *iccha mrityu*—a death that he had hoped and willed for in the last years of his life. It stunned the new nation into silence. That silence was deep and heavy as it contained not only the collective guilt of so many of his countrymen, but also the violence that had so perturbed that lonely man. That martyrdom allowed—howsoever momentarily—violence to be contained. In some strange ways, it gave permanence to the Partition. His often-repeated remark that the Partition would be accomplished over his dead body came to be true, by a strange act of fate. It also gave us

² CWMG, vol. 90, p. 489.

³ CWMG, Vol. 86, pp. 521-522.

an example of *namasmaran*, of repeating the name. He said, “You must learn to repeat the blessed name of Rama with such sweetness and such devotion that the birds will pause in their singing to listen to you—that the very trees will bend their leaves towards you, stirred by the divine melody of that Name.”⁴

It is this divine melody that we search in his rambling wisdom.

I wondered why he walked to Dandi. To break the salt law? To offer civil disobedience? To teach us non-violence? Or was it to teach us something far more fundamental to human nature? I am reminded of a painting.

The garden is magical, the distant hilly sky crimson, the two faces aglow with light, almost beatific light, the younger man clad in translucent dhoti sits pressing the legs of an older man in a diaphanous lower garment which is undone. In the distance an undecipherable image, like God who shall not be captured by the human eye, and three figures, one of them unmistakably of a woman, in meditative silence or a conversation so deeply intuitive that words are superfluous. This is Bhupen Khakhar’s 1986 oil-on-canvas *Seva*, one of the most evocative paintings of modern India.

The painting captures the gamut of meanings—said and unsaid, uttered and inarticulate—of the act called *seva*, translated all too often as “service.” *Seva* is derived from *saha* and *eva* meaning “together with.” It is suggestive of a mode of being in the world, with nature and with fellow beings, as also with

⁴ CWMG, vol. 57, p. 446.



Seva 1986, Bupen Khakhar
Oil on canvas, 46" x 44"

the divine who refuses to reveal her true nature. Understood thus, *seva* is the epitome of fellowship, of a state of communion with the self, other, and divine.

Seva, by its very root, is an act performed with others and also for the others. *Seva* cannot be self-serving, self-aggrandising, self-seeking. Even the search of the self in *seva* is through this act of communion. It is an the act of being with others, being that is non-acquisitive, being that seeks only to serve that pain is alleviated, suffering made bearable, joy experienced and divine made immanent. This makes *seva* the preferred mode to be free from sin, and if one cannot be free from sin, for atonement. *Seva* creates a fellowship based on shared pain and care of those in pain. To care is to perform *seva*.

Seva is also both a vocation of freedom and a paeon to it. It is a mode of freedom where freedom is sought and experienced not as an assertion but by a process where the self is surrendered to others in and through service. The greater the surrender, the deeper the freedom. And yet, or perhaps for that very reason, *seva* is an act of self-volition. In this sense, *seva* is the complete opposite of servitude and slavery, where both self and self-volition are denied.

For these reasons, *seva* has captured our imagination. It allows for a search of the divine by being in the world as an act of service. This very ideal moves the philosophy and practice of relatively recent religious formations like the Sikhs. The practice of *kar seva*, bodily service rendered to others and through them to Truth, captures the spirit (despite its horrific and destructive usage as we have rendered).

It was MKG who brought *seva* from a personal, religious, ethical universe into the realm of the political. If his personal god was *Satya Narayana*, his god was equally *Daridra Narayana*. If *Satya Narayana* takes one to Satyagraha and Swaraj, *Daridra Narayana* takes one to *Asteya* (non-stealing) and *Aprigraha* (non-possession or poverty). An ethical person is

one who recognises the pain of others. And, together, they create a mode of freedom where the ethical is ever present not as a philosophically negotiated ground only but as the last person, the most dispossessed, the meekest that we have been “together with,” been *sevak* of.

Violence is the perfect opposite of *seva*. *Seva* as service, as care, as non-acquisitive selflessness is a necessary condition for *ahimsa* (non-violence or, more aptly, love). Violence unto the others occurs when they are pushed outside the realm of care and of *seva*. *Seva* denies the legitimacy of violence as an act of freedom, as more we take to violence, the more we recede from ourselves. Violence is the denial of the self; *seva* is the affirmation of the self, of living together with others.



Meetha no Satyagrah 2012, Haku Shah
Oil on canvas, 24" x 24"

The true meaning of his walk, this and the final one, lies in another painting. Look at the image of the salt-picker. Haku Shah's MKG is the mendicant not because he would not return to Hriday Kunj at Sabarmati, but because he has no need for a home, a dwelling now. The barest of loincloth captures the state of being a mendicant who seeks sacrifice from us and would grant us the boon of Swaraj in return. There are no surging ecstatic crowds, no poet Sarojini Naidu exclaiming “Hail, Deliverer.” But there is a bird, proud of its crown. A bird that is *udgriva*, one whose neck is turned upwards, a bird that is all of us who experienced in that moment a surge of freedom that allowed us to look heavenwards.

Ahmedabad, 2020

Tridip Suhrud

Fading Footsteps

The idea of doing a photo series on Gandhi first occurred to me in 2012. I cannot recall what exactly triggered it but I was certainly obsessed by it. After considerable rumination I narrowed it down to two broad ideas, and the Salt March documentation was one of them. The other idea was a series with conceptual undertones called *In Search of...Bapu*, which I worked on immediately. Since then Gandhi is a theme that has recurred instinctually in my work.

What makes Gandhi such a compelling subject? It is a question that I have often asked myself. Generations of artists, across various mediums, have found themselves gravitating towards Gandhi. Perhaps, each embarks upon one's personal journey searching for the *idea* of Gandhi. There is nothing extraordinary about the man's early life. His insecurities, complexes and inner struggles can make him as ordinary as any of us. Perhaps they make him even more endearing. What can we make of the strange coincidences that led him to his path? Actor Ben Kingsley once said in an interview, 'Do not throw young men off trains. It can have serious consequences.' Can we conceive of a scenario where Mohandas had not been thrown off at the Pietermaritzburg station? Would the world have seen a 'Gandhi' then? Would the concepts of *satya* and *ahimsa*, restricted till then to the spiritual realm, have found their way into politics? Well, we will never know, as that singular incident changed the destiny of a nation, and sent ripples across time and space. Mohandas went on to become a Mahatma by showing the world an alternative. He inspired the masses to take that path and led the most unique freedom struggle mankind has seen so far.

The Salt March is regarded as one of the defining movements in the history of the Indian independence struggle. While growing up I had heard stories of the march from my grandparents; about the valor of the brave satyagrahis who dared the government and walked all the way to Dandi behind their fearless leader. Stories of how the striding Mahatma captivated the nation and how the might of the British Empire was humbled by a pinch of salt. These were all stories till Weber's book, *On the Salt March*, made them real for me. The book's detailed history and Weber's evocative writing intrigued me. I started thinking about those buildings, villages and people: would they still be around after all these years? If so, in what state might they be? This benign curiosity soon turned into an obsession and it led me to undertake my own journey in search of the Salt March sites.

I faced many challenges as I undertook this project. The most difficult of them all was self-doubt, and it persisted throughout a year and half of principal shooting. Lack of adequate information required to locate and identify the historic locations in the present day was also a big concern. I had to rely on descriptions given in books, oral narratives of the locals and most importantly, my own judgment. The historical part of my text is referenced from secondary sources—mainly Thomas Weber's *On the Salt March*, Kalyanji Vitthalbhai Mehta and Ishwarlal Iccharam Desai's *Dandi Kuch*, and *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*. Weber's account, even though it was of the early 80's was immensely helpful in the identification of the places.

As far as the sites are concerned, a lot has changed over the years, and more so in the past decade. Many of the original buildings have been demolished for various reasons and replaced with new construction. Rural youth have migrated, a movement that has fractured the tradition of the oral history told from one generation to the next. Over a period of almost two years I covered more than eighty villages through which the march had

passed. In my travels I met mostly second-generation locals in their 70s & 80s, who narrated me stories of the march that they had heard from their elders. This information has not been passed on to the next generation and is likely to be lost in the coming years. Having travelled the entire route and seen the decline of the structures first hand, I am certain that not many of the dilapidated buildings will survive the next decade if something is not done about them urgently.

The pictures of the series have been shot over multiple trips, not necessarily made in the chronological order of the march. I see this book primarily as a photobook and the text is meant to contextualize the pictures that otherwise can look cryptic, incomplete, and at times, misleading. The purpose of this book is to build a visual narrative of the route taken by the marchers by depicting the villages, people, environment, landscapes, trees and buildings, as they exist. This is what the marchers would see if they were to set off on the same route today.

This book is in remembrance of a unique march that was conceived and led by a very unique man.

Anuj Ambalal

23 Grams of Salt: Retracing Gandhi's March to Dandi

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Page 414: Seva 1986, © Dhaval Khakhar

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Original map of Dandi march reproduced from *Young India*, March 27, 1930

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Anuj Ambalal studied finance from the Middlesex University, London, and worked briefly as an equity researcher before taking up photography. He works in diverse genres in the medium and has a number of solo and group exhibitions to his credit, in India as well as internationally. Ambalal has had no formal training in photography. He lives in Ahmedabad where he also follows his other passion, furniture design.



Rijuta Mehta is an Assistant Professor of English at the University of Toronto. She holds a doctorate from the department of Modern Culture and Media at Brown University. Her research interests are postcolonial literature, visual culture, and critical theory.

In its unexpected meshing of historical account and visual essay, Anuj Ambalal has created a marvellous book.

On one level, as he says: 'This is what the marchers would see if they set off on the same journey today.'

Yet his images are consistently 'beautiful'—very aestheticised, very stilled, very silent.

And cumulatively, without any blatant *message*, what is conjured is a journey through Gujarat like the protagonist of Gogol's *Dead Souls*, he encounters many buildings that 'look like an invalid on his last legs'—a world where very little has happened since Gandhi passed through; only a further peeling of walls and doors!

Gandhi's life was emblematic, not only of national liberation, but a radical quest to *awaken* from what Anuj Ambalal has called 'the disease of India'.

With great sensitivity, subtly and self effacingly, the photographer documents decay and desolation, yet somehow conveys that a radical cure is still possible.

I think it is a book many will want to own.

Timothy Hyman

London, September 2020

This journey, retracing the steps of the Mahatma and those who walked with him ninety years ago to break the draconian Salt Law, scours through what the winds of time has left behind. It attempts to recover, rebuild stories lost in the dusty doorways leading through mud-ways and paved pathways, dried up reservoirs and river-ways, maidans with or without the luxurious canopies of banyan trees where the marchers had tread or rested and where Gandhiji addressed the local populace. It is a forgotten hinterland barely traversed since, but Anuj Ambalal's penetrating

lens uncovers it all, peeling walls of amnesia layer by layer. And indeed each of these has a story to tell. Not only the tales of the indefatigable marchers but also of the people who stood steadfastly by the questing soul who led them. Charged with the spirit of the marchers as though joining them, these images have turned many a site into visions of searing clarity: no matter that they represent the pristine world of nature or the most mundane spectacle of urban existence.

Gulammohammed Sheikh

August 23, 2020

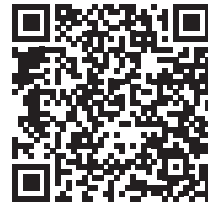
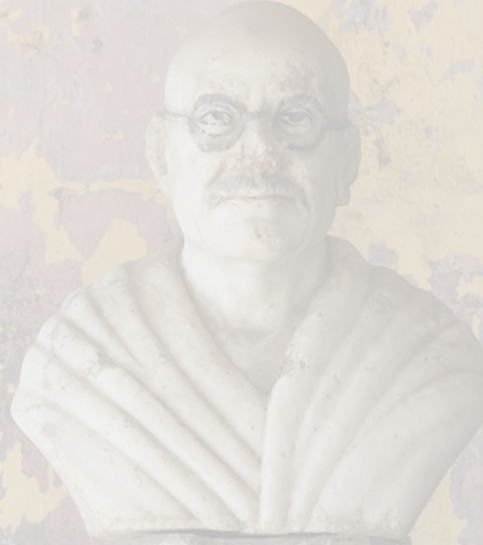
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