

THE HERO AS GANDHI IN *SHADOW FROM LADAKH*

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Abstract:

Shadow from Ladakh'' by Bhabani Bhattacharya intricately weaves the principles of Gandhism into its narrative, portraying the clash between traditional Indian values and the encroachment of Western modernity. The central character, Satyajit, attempts to embody Gandhi's ideals in Gandhigram, a village he establishes. The novel explores the conflict with Steeltown, symbolizing industrial progress, and the eventual synthesis of these opposing forces. Through Satyajit and his wife Suruchi, the narrative delves into the struggle of reconciling Gandhian asceticism with the demands of contemporary life. The story highlights the broader societal dilemma of merging divergent values for India's progress and security. While the novel seemingly resolves the conflict, Bhattacharya suggests an unresolved socio-intellectual dilemma, questioning the enduring relevance of Gandhian principles in a world marked by escalating violence.

Keywords: Gandhism, Synthesis, Conflict, Modernity



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Introduction

Bhabani Bhattacharya's *Shadow from Ladakh* is marked with obvious overtones of Gandhism. The novel is saturated with Gandhian references, thought, and imagery. One chapter, in fact, is devoted almost entirely to a summary of Gandhi's early reformist career in South Africa and India. In the opening pages of this novel, Bhattacharya indicates intertwined themes all of which closely relate to Gandhi's life and philosophy. Here at the outset, the novelist asks several questions to make the theme relevant, e. g., how can the India of the Gandhian heritage respond to and cope with the destructive forces of this day? What happens to the doctrine of Ahimsa in the face of a violence that threatens the life streams of a nation? Can India maintain her spiritual integrity in a materialistically centered world order? And so on.

The central character, Satyajit, who has come to think of himself as a reincarnation of the Mahatma, makes some attempts to resolve the foregoing questions. He is a man with intense devotion to Gandhi's high principles but without the strength of character to help him live successfully in terms of those principles. Satyajit is constantly beset by a sense of his own inadequacy, but he persists, nevertheless. He founds a village named after his idol, 'Gandhigram' designing it along the austere lines of what he had seen and experienced in Sevagram, the actual village near Wardha in Maharashtra in which Gandhi took up the village industries phase of his life in 1934.

Bhattacharya's description of Sevagram is imbued with Gandhian overtones, as also his description of Shantineketan, Rabindra Nath Tagore's international school where Bhattacharya himself spent enchanted

summers as a young man. Further, as Chandrasekharan notes, when Satyajit resorts to the Gandhian course of a fast unto death in order to save Gandhigram against the encroachments of Steeltown, the fast is announced in “identical language to that Gandhiji used on the occasion of one of his most crucial fasts.”¹

Through the characterization of Satyajit’s wife Suruchi we can visualize Bhattacharya’s effort to give insight into the mind and heart of Gandhi’s child-bride and lifelong companion, Kasturba. He depicts the youthful Suruchi as wracked by Satyajit’s self imposed *brahmacharya*, yet his stalwart supporter in all his efforts towards the achievement of social reform and India’s independences.

Gandhigram and Steeltown are concrete, living symbols of two ways of life and two philosophies in direct opposition: Gandhigram, to which the spinning wheel is central, and Steeltown which has grown up around the steel mills run by American educated Bhaskar Roy. It is typical of Bhattacharya that by the conclusion of the story the opposition has been worked out and accord is established between Gandhigram and Steeltown and further that it is Steeltown that concedes strength to Gandhigram and all it epitomizes. Finally, it is Sumita, the child of Satyajit, whose life fuses the worlds of Steeltown and Gandhigram. “Satyajit, towering in the new glory he had gained, honoured by the nation as a figure of history, held his daughter no longer in his relentless power! She was free, free at last.”²

Although I find this sense of resolution Bhattacharya himself has said that the central concern in *Shadow From Ladakh* “is shaped as a socio-intellectual dilemma” and that in his “consciousness that dilemma has remained unresolved.”³ If this is so, the unresolved dilemma it seems to me, would be, that having to do with the power of Gandhi’s principle of ahimsa set against the acceleration of violence in the world order. When violence becomes the order of the day at every level of life, is there sufficient redemptive power in individual lives dedicated to the principal of Ahimsa? What can become of the doctrine on which, at the turn of the century, Gandhi launched his journal *Hind Swaraj* advocating “an exploitation-free society in which the individual can claim and defend his rights?”

In fact, this theme is most effectively portrayed in two of his novels, *Shadow From Ladakh* and *Music for Mohini*. In the first novel we have the depiction of naked aggression both at the national and international level, together with the dilemma of choices presented in this conflicting atmosphere between the non-violent principles of Gandhi on the one hand and the forces of science and technology on the other.

In keeping with Gandhian view point, the synthesis of the Indian spiritual values and the Western modernism, is undoubtedly the central theme of Bhattacharya’s celebrated novel, *Shadow From Ladakh*. This novel “preaches by implication... that India needs a blending of divergent sets of values if she is to cope with the challenge of the times.”⁴ More explicitly, there has to be in Indian life a synthesis of tradition and modernity—asceticism and worldliness, village and city, and the East and the West, in order to ensure the country’s progress and security.

As the plot of the novel unfolds itself, the clash between the traditional and the modern values becomes evident in the form of the discord between Gandhigram and Steeltown. Steeltown, gaining in importance because of the Chinese aggression, starts expanding rapidly, and its surveyors and draftsmen measure and draw maps of the pasture-land adjoining the village, Gandhigram. The village people are annoyed at it. They plan to oppose any such move because they think that the people from Steeltown are unable to comprehend what the village stands for. For them, it is simply a tract of land that can easily be acquired. The people of Gandhigram, however, think the village to be a symbol having deep meaning: “The apparently insignificant village was building up a model for the whole of India. The new community of people was creating a social order in which all were truly equal. All land belonging to the cooperative.

¹ K.R. Chandrasekharan, Bhabani Bhattacharya. P-111.

² *Shadow From Ladakh*, P-359.

³ Shimmer letter, may 20, 1980.

⁴ Chandrasekharan, p-107

Food from the fields distributed according to needs. Other needs met by small industries based locally, economic self-sufficiency was the set aim.”⁵

These people are averse to big industries. They have deep faith in Gandhian economics. Satyajit Sen, the guiding spirit of Gandhigram, meets Bhashkar Roy, the Chief Engineer of Steeltown, and expresses his concern over the unhappy developments. Bhashkar, an America-trained engineer, disagrees with him and tells him that in order to attain economic self-sufficiency and safeguard India’s freedom, the establishment of big industries as well as large-scale steel production is essential. He argues:

“Steel means economic progress Machine tools, tractors, big industrial plants, locomotives. Steel to fight poverty and hunger. But steel has gained a second meaning. It stands for our country’s freedom. That is an inescapable fact, not to be changed by wishful thinking, Development plus defence—a compulsion of our current history.”⁶

Bhaskar thinks Gandhigram “a road-block in the path of progress,”⁷ and for him “the assault on Gandhigram was ideologic, not economic.”⁸ He is of the view that Gandhigram has no relevance in modern times. It is his earnest wish to let life be “easier, freer, and happier”⁹ instead of being choked with taboos. He is convinced that after enjoying the modern facilities which are available to the city people, the village folk will certainly favour Steel town type of life. They will start adopting new ways of life, and thus gradually Gandhigram will be merged into the pattern of Steeltown. In fact, with this act Bhashkar captures Satyajit’s own weapon—the weapon of non-violence. Satyajit and the people of Gandhigram are baffled at his move. However, being a true Gandhiite, Satyajit cannot and does not stop people from going to see the cultural programme at the Meadow House, for it amounts to violence in his opinion.

The inmates of Gandhigram enjoy the programmes and finally conclude that there should be a cultural communion between them and the people of Steeltown, that the old and the new values must freely intermingle so as to make life meaningful, and that no single culture should dominate other cultures as envisaged by Gandhi:

“I refuse to be blown off my feet, though I do not propose merely to feed on the ancient cultures of our land; we have to enrich our old traditions with the experience of the new times. But the alien elements in their turn will have to be affected by the spirit of the soil. One dominant culture absorbing the rest—that cannot make for harmony; that will be an artificiality and forced unity. That we do not want.”¹⁰

As Satyajit is a devoted follower of Mahatma Gandhi, he too believes in a healthy synthesis of the old traditions and the new trends in life. He duly recognizes the vital role of Steeltown in the national prosperity. In his opinion Gandhigram will take the lead when Steeltown has finished its race. He asserts:

“Steeltown belongs to the present, Gandhigram to the future. Steeltown must do its work. But when that work is done, when the material benefits of production have been fully attained, Steeltown, decrepit and soulless, will have to seek new moorings. Then it will be Gandhigram’s turn to come forward.”¹¹

In this sense, both Steeltown and Gandhigram are complementary to each other and not completely opposed. If the former is “body,” the latter is its “spirit.” One cannot do without the other. The contention that “Body and spirit must be fed together, not turn by turn”¹² implies that there must be a blending of the new and the old values, represented by Steeltown and Gandhigram respectively.

⁵ *Shadow From Ladakh*, p.28.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p-28.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p.200.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p.200.

⁹ *Shadow From Ladakh*, p.60.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p.156

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p.156

¹² *Shadow From Ladakh*, p.156

Suruchi also pleads for a synthesis of traditional and modern values of life. Bhattacharya writes: “she had not accepted Gandhigram in its entirety. But she had not rejected it, either.”¹³ She believes in the Tagorian philosophy of the fusion of diverse elements of life, and recalls:

“Integration—that was the poet’s life-long quest: integration of the simple and the sophisticated; the ancient and the modern; city and village; East and West.”¹⁴

Suruchi, however, does not appreciate Gandhigram’s rigid adherence to the outdated morals and conventions. According to her, there must be a synthesis of old and the new in the life of the village. She reflects:

“There was one way left for Gandhigram. It must make readjustments. That would mean acceptance of life in its totality. But not the Steeltown way: that also was denial of life deep under the surface. Let license be chastened by restraint. Let restraint find its right level by a leavening of freedom. Let there be a meeting ground of the two extremes: Let each shed some of its content and yet remain true to itself.”¹⁵

Satyajit, too, has definite views about the integration of values. His desire is, however, to bring about a healthy synthesis of the two modes of life. When he sees Dalai Lama at Darjeeling, Satyajit makes it clear to him:

“What has alienated us from Tibetan way of life is the semifeudal pattern of society. A relic of the old world cannot lie within the shell of the new; under the hard pressure it’s bound to be crushed into pulp.”¹⁶

Even Satyajit’s daughter, Sumita, is not against electricity, the power to turn the wheel of modern industrial revolution. Realizing its importance to the modern civilization, she herself begins to learn about electricity. Bhashkar is astonished to note:

“The ease with which she could resolve all contradictions in her mind. Machines were the enemy. Yet she was fascinated by the

very life spark in machines—electricity. The life spark, the energy that had begotten the new century, the new civilization.”¹⁷

With the passage of time, understanding dawns upon Bhashkar. The contact with Sumita and the Chinese girls makes him comprehend the values that Satyajit symbolizes:

“A new insight had come—he had begun to understand Satyajit. Some of the things he stood for.”¹⁸

Bireswar Basu, Satyajit’s close friend, calls Bhashkar a ‘*phenomenon*’, and tells Satyajit that both of them are complementary to each other like light and darkness in the hour of twilight. They may be opposite to one another, but one alone is useless without the other.

The novelist resolves the conflicts between Steeltown and Gandhigram towards the end of the novel. As the news about Satyajit’s fast unto death reaches Steeltown, the mill hands are at once full of indignation against Steeltown. Bhashkar senses the danger and withdraws the plan of encroaching upon the land of Gandhigram. He even reckons it as the fulfillment of his long-cherished dream of bringing Steeltown and Gandhigram close to each other:

“It was in this curious circumstance, that one of Bhashkar’s dreams was fulfilled: Steeltown began to move toward Gandhigram!”¹⁹

¹³ *Ibid.*, p.273.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p.215.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p.274.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p.295.

¹⁷ *Shadow From Ladakh*, p.142.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p.284.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p.352.

Bhashkar's character itself is a curious mixture of the old and the new values. He has lived long in the West, but he does not forget his Indian heritage. Though he does not see any harm in drinking wine, dating and merry-making, he also has a high respect for the basic human values. For years Bhashkar has richly imbibed the American culture on the physical plane, yet he fails to attach himself spiritually to that culture and returns to India as soon as opportunity comes :

"He absorbed America with all his senses. Not know-how alone. He absorbed much of the human scene. He drank hard with the men. He dated with the Women .He was now very far from his homeland—in something other than mileage. Yet it could well be that within him India remained as real as ever before, that, may be, was the reason why, even after a stay of twelve years, he could cut the strong pull of America all at once and fly back home."²⁰

Rupa, a modern girl, half-American by birth, discovers to her disillusionment that Bhashkar has more of an Indian than of the Western man within him. She observes:

"So many years you lived in the West, absorbing its life, becoming part of that life. Yet back home, you were sucked at once into five thousand years of Indianism!.... the truth is that America as a whole has meant nothing to you. You brought back the industrial know-how of life! this is the case with every Indian. He goes West and becomes a new person. He returns home and at once he is a complete Indian."²¹

Bhashkar's union with Sumita also illustrates a blending of the antagonistic values. In their marriage, Bhabani Bhattacharya synthesizes the Western with the Eastern elements in life. Bhashkar is a modern man, trained in America. He has absorbed the Western life-pattern with all his senses. He believes in living life as it comes to him. Completely "free in spirit"²² he has not cared for traditional moral values. He has been concerned only with the physical pleasures: "His body had never thrived on asceticism. Where was the necessity?"²³ Sometimes, he thinks himself a mechanical device that is unable to feel anything: "Perhaps I am a kind of steel that can think a computer. But I can't feel. That's it."²⁴ On the other hand, Sumita is a typical Indian girl of high ideals. Like her father, she too holds the traditional moral values in great esteem. She is "Indian of the epic age"²⁵ when compared to Rupa. She has deep faith in the Gandhian ideology. Simple living and high thinking form the core of her being. Pure at heart, she has not yielded to physical passion, though she is attracted towards Bhashkar. He is astounded when he finds her unmoved even by the sight of the erotic sculpture in the village temple:

"It was hard for him to believe that any woman could remain untouched by the sight of the hand on the breast, both so faithfully rendered. Sumita must have seen that sculpture many times in the course of years; yet, today, in the fullness of youth, how could she fail to see the reality she had missed before, and react appropriately? But there was her prompt dismissal of it with a click of her tongue."²⁶

The married life of Satyajit and Suruchi embodies a synthesis of the old and the new values. Bhattacharya suggests the fusion of asceticism with worldliness in their marriage. Satyajit is a spiritualist. Worldly gains and physical pleasures have never meant much to him. He has been striving constantly for higher spiritual attainment:

²⁰ *Shadow From Ladakh*, p.35.

²¹ *Ibid*, p.317.

²² *Ibid.*, p.122.

²³ *Ibid.*, p.122.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p.124.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p.122.

²⁶ *Shadow From Ladakh*, p.127.

“Material possessions had always meant little to him. It was inner satisfaction that had counted. He had been restless at Cambridge, shaken by storms within. At one time he had been obsessed by the idea of becoming a Buddhist monk and living in a monastic abode—in Ceylon may be, or Thailand.”²⁷

Back to India from Cambridge, Satyajit comes in contact with Tagore and is influenced by the poet’s aesthetic ideas. He, too, starts believing that it is “fullness of life that makes one happy, not fullness of possessions.”²⁸

After some time, his marriage provides him with a complete “fullness” of life. Suruchi is a beautiful lady whose heart is brimful with love for him. They lead a happy marital life. But after some time, Satyajit meets Gandhi who summons him to take up constructive work at Sevagram. From that point, his transformation starts. He becomes more and more attached to the ideals of Gandhi and ultimately decides to lead the life of a celibate. He forces his decision on Suruchi also. Though Suruchi, out of her loyalty to her husband, yields to his wishes yet she is never able to reconcile herself to his ascetic view of life. The dull and monotonous life of Gandhigram irks her. At times she wants to revolt against him and Gandhigram. She sides with Jhanak when Satyajit wants to reprimand the girl for her betrayal of Gandhigram.

Suruchi, however, adopts herself considerably to Satyajit’s wish. She becomes “part of Satyajit the nail of his toe. A strand of hair on his scalp,”²⁹ and realizes that Satyajit’s ideals “had become part of herself. She was as much Gandhigram as he.”³⁰ Yet, despite all this, the clash between the two contrasting forces—asceticism and worldliness—continues to disturb her mind. She is not able to accept or reject the ideals of Gandhigram totally.

Similarly Satyajit too, despite all his idealism and asceticism, is unable to subdue body. Occasionally, he has to gratify his basic physical urge. Moreover, when Bires confesses his love for Suruchi to him, Satyajit is disillusioned. He cannot bear the thought of Suruchi going away from him. From now onwards, Satyajit starts “dreaming of a new life that she alone would fill.”³¹ He comes to realize how he has denied worldly pleasure to himself and Suruchi long. In the light of this new vision, Satyajit tells her:

“I will have everything that you condescend to give me, Ruchi.”

Surprised by his easy acquiescence she cried, “Condescend? Why do you say that?”

“All these years I have deserved nothing from you, and yet my demands have been limitless. At last I see it all with clear sight.”³²

Suruchi will be the light of his life henceforth. He will let himself be led by her. He will fulfil her physically, and will himself be fulfilled by her. Satyajit reflects over their relations:

“Suruchi was an urge for him to live, relive...and not on the Gandhian plane. His newly won release would seek expression in the honest acceptance of every human need.”³³

Suruchi also realizes in her turn that during all the past years she herself has gained much on the spiritual plane. Now, she does not underestimate Satyajit’s achievements on that level. All that she wishes is a synthesis of the ascetic and the worldly, of the idealist and the practical man in Satyajit:

“The past years, too had brought enrichment, and she could not negate them, throw them away. And she would hate to see Satyajit cast himself adrift. She would like her husband to be Satyajit in one part of his being and someone else in another. That someone else— it was Bireswar! Yes, he could be both. That was

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p.14.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p.14

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p.49.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p.49.

³¹ *Shadow From Ladakh*, p.212.

³² *Ibid.*, p.341.

³³ *Ibid.*, p.353.

the image in which she would want him. That was the image in which she could lose herself completely and be fulfilled.”³⁴

In this way, both Satyajit and Suruchi change. Both of them readjust their moral values, and create brighter prospects of a fulfilled life in future. Bhattacharya thus happily blends tradition with modernity in the union of Satyajit and Suruchi.

The synthesis of the idealistic and the realistic values of life is also signified in the friendship of Satyajit and Bireswar. The two friends are different in temperament as well as outward appearance. Although both are Cambridge-educated yet Satyajit has faith in the Gandian philosophy, whereas Bireswar is a typically modern man who believes in the full enjoyment of pleasures of life. Suruchi notices the difference between the two friends:

“Strange that two close friends could be such worlds apart! Bireswar made mock of all Satyajit’s beliefs. Even the spinning wheel drew barbed remarks. Satyajit in turn laughed at his friend. He said: Bires never means what he says, A queer fellow. You know, Suruchi, he never wore a hat in Cambridge, but as soon as he returned to India he bought one!”³⁵

While Satyajit is an epitome of the traditional Indian moral values, Bireswar flays such values. In this respect Bires comes closer to Bhashkar. He frankly admits to Satyajit:

“I have few inhibitions and fewer moral scruples. I firmly believe in getting what I need.”³⁶

Bhabani Bhattacharya’s significant observation, “Life is all compromise. One yields a bit here and gets it back elsewhere,”³⁷ sums up his synthetic attitude towards life in this novel, an attitude that Gandhi always advocated.

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³⁴*Ibid*, p.28.

³⁵ *Shadow From Ladakh*, p.44.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p.204.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p.115.