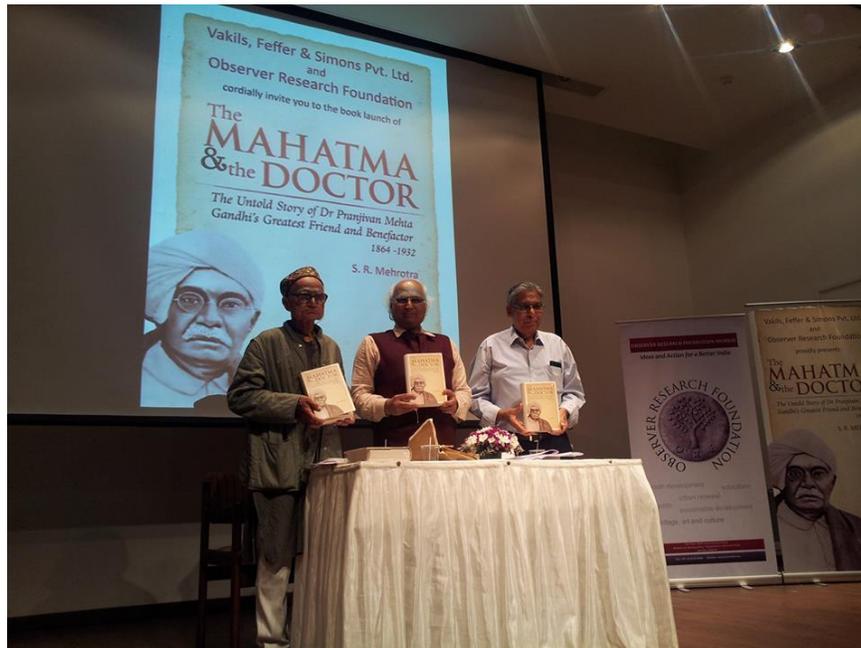


Report of the function at Worli, Mumbai for release of his biography Shri Sudheendra Kulkarni (from Facebook)

Dr PRANJIVAN MEHTA - MAHATMA GANDHI'S FRIEND AND BENEFACTOR



I was invited to release 'THE MAHATMA AND THE DOCTOR: The Untold Story of Dr Pranjivan Mehta, Gandhi's Greatest Friend and Benefactor' authored by the eminent historian, Prof. S.R. Mehrotra.

The function took place yesterday (March 7) at Nehru Centre, Worli, Mumbai.

Given the fact that Dr. Pranjivan Mehta had played a highly significant role in Gandhiji's life, it is sad that he remains a largely unknown figure. This book (published by Vakils, Feffer and Simons Pvt. Ltd.; pages 660; price Rs. 850) has brought him alive, thanks to the meticulous research conducted by Prof. Mehrotra, with commendable assistance provided by Shri Arun Mehta, the great grandnephew of Dr Pranjivan Mehta, and chairman of Vakils, Feffer and Simons Pvt. Ltd.

"Providence has chosen me to rescue this great and good man from oblivion," said Prof. Mehrotra in his scintillating speech. He is 85 years old, and he spoke for 90 minutes without referring to a piece of paper.

My colleague Radha Viswanathan conducted the programme. Shri Bimal Mehta welcomed the guests. Smt. Sangeeta Bhansali proposed a vote of thanks.

A 5-minute audio-visual presentation on the life of Dr. Pranjivan Mehta was shown before the release of the book. It was made by my colleagues at ORF Mumbai -- Riddhi Chokhawala, Dr. Sumedh and Radha Viswanathan.

Below is the text of the speech I delivered after releasing the book

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Speech by
Sudheendra Kulkarni
Chairman, Observer Research Foundation Mumbai

After releasing Prof. S.R. Mehrotra's book

'THE MAHATMA AND THE DOCTOR:
The Untold Story of Dr Pranjivan Mehta,
Gandhi's Greatest Friend and Benefactor

Nehru Centre, Mumbai – 7 March 2014

Organised by
Vakils, Feffer and Simons Pvt. Ltd.
&
Observer Research Foundation Mumbai

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Prof. Mehrotra ji, Shri Arun Mehta ji, Smt. Sangeeta Bhansali ji, Shri Bimal Mehta ji, sisters and brothers,

It's truly an honour and a privilege for me to have been invited to release this outstanding book by an outstanding historian.

Thank you, Prof. Mehrotra ji. Thank you, Shri Arun Mehta ji.

I had heard a lot about Prof. Mehrotra ji from my friend, Sanjana Roy Chowdhury, who was the editor at Amaryllis, the publishing house that published by book 'Music of the Spinning Wheel: Mahatma Gandhi's Manifesto for the Internet Age'.

From the way she described him, as an octogenarian scholar (he is 85 years young now) who is not only an authority on Mahatma Gandhi but also lives a life of Gandhian simplicity, I developed an immense curiosity to meet Prof. Mehrotra ji.

Then, in the course of writing my book, I happened to meet Shri Arun Mehta ji. From him, I came to know a lot about Dr. Pranjivan Mehta. Especially, how it was Dr. Mehta who was the first person to describe Gandhiji as a Mahatma – that is, six years before Gandhiji returned to India from South Africa. And several years before Rabindranath Tagore used the honorific 'Mahatma' to describe Gandhiji.

Shri Arun Mehta ji even showed me the original letters that Dr. Mehta had written to Gopalkrishna Gokhale, one of the greatest Congress leaders of the time, sharing his clairvoyant observations about Gandhiji way back in 1909 and 1912.

I then happened to read Prof. Mehrotra's lengthy introduction to a centenary edition of Hind Swaraj. It had the stamp of high scholarship and was full of little known details about how Gandhiji came to write Hind Swaraj. Especially, how Gandhiji wrote that book, in Gujarati, in four days flat on his voyage back from London to South Africa.

When Gandhiji's right hand got tired, he wrote with his left hand. And in the entire original manuscript, he changed only two small words.

To understand Gandhiji's mind, 'Hind Swaraj' is as important as his autobiography. It's truly inspirational writing, the work of a yogi.

After reading his introduction to 'Hind Swaraj', Prof. Mehrotra ji became a celebrity in my mind, in the same way that sports heroes and film stars are celebrities for other people. And my desire to meet him became even more intense.

At the same time, I also developed a keen desire to know more about Dr. Pranjivan Mehta himself.

It was at that time that Shri Arun ji told me that Prof. Mehrotra ji had offered to write a biography of Dr. Pranjivan Mehta.

A few months ago, I received a call from Shri Arun ji, saying, “Prof. Mehrotra ji is here with me. Would you like to come and meet him?” I was so excited that I left everything and went straight to Shri Arun ji’s Prabhadevi office.

My meeting with Prof. Mehrotra ji confirmed my previous impression that he was indeed an intellectual celebrity. On that day I received a dummy copy of this book, autographed by Prof. Mehrotra ji himself. I read the main biographical part of the book in a single day.

The book is in two parts. The first part of nearly 200 pages is Prof. Mehrotra’s meticulously researched biography of Dr. Mehta’s life.

The second part, of over 400 pages, includes a collection of Dr. Mehta’s own writings. And this part is as precious and fascinating as the first one. In particular, I must make mention of four of his writings – (1) ‘Hindu Social Ideals’, which was his presidential address on the occasion of the 11th anniversary of the Hindu Social Club in Rangoon; (2) Vernaculars as media of instruction in Indian schools and colleges; (3) A dissent note describing, and protesting against, the plight of poor Indian passengers travelling by British ships to Burma and back home; (4) his book in Gujarati on Cholera, Plague and Other Infectious Diseases.

After reading this book, I said to myself: “This is the kind of book that truly needed to be written. India should be grateful to the author and the publisher for bringing out a book that is a tribute to someone who was more than a friend and a benefactor to the Father of the Nation.”

Therefore, ladies and gentlemen, please join me in expressing our deepest gratitude to Prof. Mehrotra ji and Shri Arun Mehta ji for the great service they have rendered to the cause of enriching patriotic literature, Gandhian literature in particular.

And I have a suggestion to make here, Shri Arun ji. Indeed, it is not really my original thought, but a thought shared by a young friend of mine in Delhi – Hindol Sengupta, himself a highly talented young writer – in response to my Facebook post on the release of this book today. Expressing his happiness over the publication of this book on Dr. Pranjivan Mehta, Hindol asked me to tell the Publishers to organise a similar launch function in Delhi. I fully endorse that suggestion, Shri Arun ji.

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Dr. Pranjivan Mehta’s prescient observations about Gandhiji

Friends,

My first introduction to Dr. Pranjivan Mehta was through the film ‘Gandhi My Father’, which was made by my good friend Feroze Abbas Khan. The film is about the troubled and tragic life of Harilal Gandhi, the eldest son of Gandhiji.

There is an episode in the film which shows that Pranjivan Mehta had made an offer to Gandhiji to give a scholarship for suitable student in his ashram in South Africa to study in England.

Obviously, Gandhiji’s son – I don’t remember whether it was Harilal or Manilal – wanted to avail that scholarship. Kasturba also wanted that scholarship to go to her son. But Gandhiji refused to give it to his son. Instead, he gave it to another young boy, whom he considered more deserving. Besides, he wanted his sons to live and work in the ashram, and not to entrain the idea of going to England, studying law and become a rich lawyer.

It is this quality of Gandhiji of being utterly selfless which had appealed to Dr. Mehta. And this is what Dr. Mehta prophetically writes in his letter to Gopal Krishna Gokhale:

“During my last trip to Europe I saw a great deal of Mr Gandhi. From year to year (I have known him intimately for over twenty years.) I have found him getting... more and more selfless. He is now leading almost an ascetic sort of life – not the life of an ordinary ascetic that we usually see but that of a great Mahatma and the one idea that engrosses his mind is his motherland.”

(Dr. P.J. Mehta's letter to Gopalkrishna Gokhale, 8 November 1909.)

Dr. Pranjivan Mehta wrote another prescient letter to Gopalkrishna Gokhale on 28 August 1912.

“In my humble opinion, men like him [Gandhi] are born on very rare occasions and that in India alone. As far as I can see, it seems to me that India has not produced an equally far-seeing political prophet like him during the last five or six centuries and ...if he was born in the 18th century, India would have been a far different land to what it is now and its history would have been altogether differently written.”

* * *

Four milestone episodes in Dr. Mehta's relationship with Gandhiji

What comes out of Prof. Mehrotra's book clearly is how close was Dr. Mehta's relationship with Gandhiji was.

Indeed, that relationship begins on the very day – 29th September 1888 – when Gandhiji, then a young boy of 19, arrived at the Victoria Hotel, near Trafalgar Square, in London to study for the Bar.

And this relationship continues till the day Dr. Mehta breathes his last on 3rd August 1932 in the distant Rangoon General Hospital. Gandhiji was in Yerawada Jail in Pune at the time.

Gandhiji's homage, upon hearing about the demise of Dr. Mehta, is heartfelt: “I feel forlorn without a lifelong faithful friend....If I had been free, perhaps the Doctor would have drawn his last breath in my lap.”

Between their first meeting in London in 1888 and Dr. Mehta's death in 1932, Dr. Mehta remains a very significant person in Gandhiji's life.

Let me refer to four important milestone episodes in Gandhiji's life, in which Dr. Pranjivan Mehta appears as a catalyst.

The first, in Gandhiji's own words, is how Dr. Mehta became the intellectual sounding board for Gandhiji to write 'Hind Swaraj' in 1909.

“I stayed with Dr. Mehta for [more than] a month [in London in 1909]. Although he loved me, he had no opinion of my intellect [then]. He thought I was foolish and sentimental. But experience had made me a little bold, and a little vocal also. Dr. Mehta was an intellectual giant. How could I pit my wits against his? But I did place my point of view before him. It appealed to his heart. His attitude changed. So I said let me write down the argument. I wrote down the discussion as it took place.”

The second episode, friends, is how Dr. Mehta happens to become a link in the historic communication between Gandhiji and Leo Tolstoy. And here I quote from Prof. Mehrotra's book, on page 20:

“After his 'long chats' with Gandhi in July-August 1909, Mehta went to France to meet his old Kathiawadi friend S.R. Rana, like his a barrister turned jeweler, who had settled in Paris and was active there in the cause of Indian freedom. Rana gave Mehta a copy of Leo Tolstoy's 'Letter to a Hindoo'. Tolstoy had sent this letter on 14 December 1908 to a Bengali revolutionary named Taraknath Das, then living in the United States of America, in response to the latter's communication to him, dated 24 May 1908, requesting him to raise his voice on behalf of India, enslaved and exploited by the English.

“This letter of Tolstoy -- a fairly long one and written with great care and industry -- has been circulating for a long time among Indian extremists in America and Europe. Mehta was struck by the similarity of some of Tolstoy's views with Gandhi's. He sent the letter from Paris by post to Gandhi in late September 1909. Gandhi had read many of Tolstoy's works and had been profoundly influenced by them.

“The central message of Tolstoy in his 'Letter to a Hindoo' was contained in the following passages:

'A commercial company enslaved a nation comprising two hundred millions. Tell this to a man free from superstition and he will fail to grasp what these words mean. What does it mean that thirty thousand men, not athletes but rather weak and ordinary people, have subdued two hundred million vigorous, clever, capable, and freedom loving people? Do not the figures make it clear that it is not the English who have enslaved the Indians, but the Indian who have enslaved themselves? ...

'Do not resist the evil-doer and take no part in doing so, either in the violent deeds of the administration, in the law courts, the collection of taxes, or above all in soldiering, and no one in the world will be able to enslave you.'

"This is what Gandhi himself had been preaching and practicing of late in South Africa in the name of passive resistance. He was, therefore, delighted to read Tolstoy's 'Letter to a Hindoo' and find in it a confirmation of his own views.

"Tolstoy was an internationally reputed writer and moralist. His views provided grist to the mill of Gandhi and Mehta. They decided to use the authority of Tolstoy's name to spike the guns of the party of violence in India. (The Congress at the time was split between Radicals and Moderates.) It was resolved to print 25,000 copies of Tolstoy's 'Letter to a Hindoo' and distribute it world-wide. The cost of the operation was to be paid for by Mehta.

The third episode appears on page 182 of the book. Prof. Mehrotra informs us that the idea of launching the Salt Satyagraha – the famous Dandi March in 1930 – came to Gandhiji from Dr. Pranjivan Mehta. As far back as in 1920, Dr. Mehta had written a letter to Gandhiji:

"There is no difficulty in manufacturing salt in our country. If government permits, we can manufacture salt to satisfy our own requirements and also export the same. The object of the government through the salt laws is to keep in its own hands the manufacture and export of salt. ... It is necessary to start a movement for the abolition of the salt laws. No country in the world imposes tax on salt which is used even by the poor." (Emphasis added)

Lastly, I would like to quote from the book that Dr. Mehta wrote, way back in 1911, on the life of Mahatma Gandhi. This must have been perhaps the first biography of Gandhiji written by an Indian and published in India. It is titled M.K. Gandhi and The South African Indian Problem by Dr. P.J. Mehta, Bar-at-Law, Rangoon. It was published by G.A. Natesan & Co., Madras. It's priced at Four Annas. A mere chavanni.

This biography again shows how farsighted and perceptive Dr. Mehta was in anticipating the greatness of Gandhi. For he ends his book with these lines:

"I have known Mr. Gandhi for over twenty-two years very intimately. (In his introduction to the Gujarati edition of the book, Dr. Pranjivan Mehta does not use the word "Mr. Gandhi". Rather, he calls him 'Bhai Mohandas'.) During all that time I have found that the one great difference between him and others is, that once he is convinced that a particular line of conduct, as tested by the highest canons of morality and the strictest doctrines of religion, is correct, it will not be long before he adopts it for himself as his daily practice, if he has not already been observing it.

"He says that if you wish the good of those you come in contact with, the only way to achieve the end is to be good yourself. Self-improvement and self-culture are his ideals. He always acts upon the proverb 'Example is better than precept' and that is how all his theories and practice are blended so harmoniously one with another in his daily life.

"No earthly temptations are too strong for him, and none of them can make him swerve from the noble path that he has chalked out for himself. It is no exaggeration to say that in this age of materialism it is not possible to come across another man who lives the ideal life he preaches.

* * *

Let's urge the Government for erecting a memorial to honour
Dr. Pranjivan Mehta – one in India, another in Rangoon

Thus, we see friends, why it is important to know about the life and personality of Dr. Pranjivan Mehta. History will remember him as the person, indeed the very first person, who recognised the greatness of Gandhi and who also played the role of a philanthropist helper in Gandhiji's patriotic activities.

But this part of history had remained largely forgotten. Hence, we should be grateful to Prof. Mehrotra ji and to Shri Arun Mehta ji for bringing this history alive in the form of this much-needed book.

Here I have a specific suggestion to make. We Indians are proverbially not good at preserving our history and historical memory. Which is why, someone as important as Dr. Pranjivan Mehta remains largely unknown today. A country that doesn't preserve history doesn't honour history. And a country that doesn't honour its own history cannot rise to greatness.

Therefore, it's of utmost importance that the people and the government of India erect two memorials in honour of Dr. Pranjivan Mehta – one in India and the other in Rangoon, where Dr. Mehta lived for many years. Indeed, he was the most active political personality of his time in Rangoon, one who not only campaigned for India's freedom from Burmese soil but also showed solidarity for the Burmese people's struggle for independence.

The memorial in India should, preferably, be in Mumbai. The ideal site would be Mani Bhavan, the sacred national memorial to Mahatma Gandhi. This building was indeed owned by Dr. Mehta's family.

As an aside, I would like to mention here that the Observer Research Foundation, in partnership with Ratan J. Batliboi, a reputed architectural firm, has been working on an ambitious project called 'India @ 70: An Initiative to Revive Mumbai's Glorious Contribution to India's Freedom Movement'. The project envisages the comprehensive transformation of two iconic public places in the city which are associated with the Freedom Movement – Azad Maidan and August Kranti Maidan – both of which, sadly, are today in a terrible state of neglect.

With these words, I once again heartily congratulate Prof. Mehrotra ji for writing this book, which my colleague Ms. Radha Viswanathan rightly described as a "gem". I also compliment Shri Arun Mehta ji of Vakils, Feffer and Simons Pvt. Ltd. For publishing this book.

Thank you.
