

COLLECTED WORKS OF MAHATMA GANDHI¹

An appeal to return to the original edition and move forward

Fifty years ago, on the initiative of Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, the Government of India set up the Office of the Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi to collect and publish all the writings, speeches, interviews and letters of Gandhiji.

The Office was headed in the first few years by Mr. Bharatan Kumarappa and Mr. Jairamdas Daulatram, both associates of Gandhiji. They were succeeded by professional editors – Dr. K. Swaminathan, an English professor from Chennai, and Dr. C.N. Patel, an English professor from Ahmedabad.

The team headed by them – including editors, researchers, translators – produced 90 volumes of “Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi”. Items found after the publication of the initial volumes, and the retirement of Dr. Swaminathan and Dr. Patel, were published in seven supplementary volumes. The government decided in 1994 to close the Office when the full set was reprinted.

The production of the complete works of the father of our nation is an extraordinary feat which no other nation has matched. We owe a debt of gratitude to many individuals and institutions which contributed to this.

Devoted workers at Harijan Ashram painstakingly collected available documents and prepared a detailed index of the 35,000 items. Mr. G.V. Mavlankar arranged in the early 1950s to deposit the entire archive in the National Archives of India and copies were supplied to Harijan Ashram.

Similarly, many items were obtained by Gandhi Nidhi and were deposited in the National Archives with copies in the National Gandhi Museum in New Delhi.

The Office employed agents in South Africa and Britain, and wrote to individuals around the world who were known to have corresponded with Gandhiji. It also did extensive research on newspapers, magazines and books to find additional items.

Numerous persons – especially members of the Gandhi family – gave freely of their prized possessions without any thought of recompense. They recognised that Gandhiji belonged not only to his family and friends, or the nation, but to the world.

Dr. Swaminathan, Dr. Patel and others deserve great credit for their meticulous research, authentication and editing, as well as their dedication.

The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi is a publication of which India can be proud. It is itself a historic document which should be preserved in the archives and be always

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available. (I think of the first edition of Encyclopedia Britannica, originally published in 1780, which is still sold in replica and is now a best seller.)

In 1997, in connection with the 50th anniversary of independence, the government decided to produce a multi-media CD-ROM on Gandhiji, including film, photographs and voice, as well as the text of Collected Works. (I had suggested to Navajivan Trust and others in 1996 that it would be desirable to produce a CD-ROM of the Collected Works for the convenience of scholars and to reach young people around the world, among whom there was growing interest in the life and thoughts of Gandhiji.) The Publications Division produced the CD-Rom in 2000. It comprised 30 minutes of film footage, over 550 photographs and 15 minutes of voice of Gandhiji in an interactive component, and an e-book of Collected Works consisting of over 50,000 pages. Thousands of copies were sold in India and abroad despite the rather high price of Rs. 2500/- and were highly appreciated. The items in the original 90 volumes of Collected Works and the 7 supplementary volumes were consolidated in chronological order in 98 volumes on the CD-ROM. Scholars could search quickly in the writings of Gandhiji and copy or print any item. I have been using it almost every day in my research.

Moreover, the CD-ROM facilitated placing of Gandhiji's writings on the internet where hundreds of thousands of people – especially students in America and Europe – have been referring to them.

The Publications Division would have deserved high praise for producing the CD-ROM, but for the serious errors which came to light when a revised edition of Collected Works was printed with new indexes.

The National Gandhi Museum recognised the need for a concordance between the two editions and began work with a grant from the Ministry of Culture. In the process, it discovered numerous errors in the revised edition.

Dr. Tridip Suhrud, a young Gandhian scholar in Gujarat, also noticed errors, did extensive research on the discrepancies between the first and second editions and informed other scholars and the media.

It was found that the CD-ROM was missing no less than 427 items of over 45,000 items in the original edition. Some of these had been inserted in the revised edition in print so that it missed 211 items. A number of items had wrong titles and there were other errors. The CD-ROM had thousands of spelling mistakes.

The discovery of these omissions and errors caused an outrage among Gandhians and scholars, including those who were associated with the preparation of the first edition. They were particularly incensed because of the suspicion - based on actions by BJP ministers in the previous government to impose their ideology on textbooks and scholarly publications – that there was probably political interference and that a national heritage was being desecrated.

In response to their representations, the Minister of Information and Broadcasting, Mr. Jaipal Reddy, promptly stopped the sale of the second edition and appointed an advisory committee of experts to recommend appropriate action.

The Committee was chaired by Mr. Narayan Desai, the well known Gandhian, and included Dr. B.R. Nanda, the eminent writer, editor and chairman of the National Gandhi Museum. I was among the four other members who were privileged to serve on this Committee. It recommended unanimously that the sale of the revised edition be stopped permanently and that the first edition be restored as the only authentic edition available. It agreed that a revised CD-ROM, based on the original edition of Collected Works, should be prepared as soon as possible, and suggested that the Ministry consider the establishment of an Editorial and Research Unit of competent scholars dedicated to Gandhian ideals.

It is now time to ascertain why the errors, which caused anguish among many Gandhians, occurred, decide on means to ensure that they would not recur, and to move forward on the commitment of India to prepare and disseminate around the world an accurate and comprehensive collection of the writings and speeches of Gandhiji. I would venture to make some suggestions and an appeal in this connection.

I have spent much of my retired life studying the Collected Works of Gandhiji, a gold mine of information and inspiration. I have edited five books of his writings. I may have discovered more writings and speeches of Gandhiji in the past twenty years than any one else. I have been particularly concerned with disseminating information on the life and thought of Gandhiji around the world. I have been assisting websites on Gandhiji in India, South Africa, Germany and Denmark.

I appreciate the alarm caused by fears that there might have been tampering with the writings of Gandhiji by political or other forces for ideological reasons. I have not seen, however, convincing evidence that such tampering has taken place. I have studied the missing items and I cannot see how any political party would benefit by deleting them. There has certainly been professional incompetence, irresponsibility and lack of sensitivity to the importance of Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi as a national heritage. The former director of Publications Division who supervised the production of the CD-ROM and the revised edition bears a grave responsibility.

It appears that the task of preparing the CD-ROM was given to a computer company without editorial supervision. There is a spelling mistake even on the short page of contents. The text was apparently scanned from the original edition and was not spellchecked or proofread. The structure of the volumes was altered thoughtlessly.

Discovery of the omission of V.D. Savarkar in the Name Index has aroused questions. I have compared the original and revised indexes. Hundreds of names from the original are missing in the revised edition and vice versa; and thousands in the CD-ROM. The revised index was obviously prepared by a software programme, and not checked. Many names are repeated in different order, perhaps following variations in the text, and some were

missed. On the other hand, the revised index does not repeat a major flaw of the original index – the arbitrary change of spellings of South Indian names (e.g. Shastri for Sastri, Sharma for Sarma, Shriramulu for Sriramulu). I believe both the indexes should be replaced by a new index prepared by a very competent librarian under the guidance of a Gandhi scholar.

In any case, Gandhiji did not condemn Savarkar but only his advocacy of violence in the freedom struggle. He always recognised the virtues of people, not merely their faults.

I am distressed that the debate over this mishap in publishing has led to some misunderstandings and tensions among Gandhian activists, scholars and institutions because of differences of view on the causes of the errors and the means to remedy the situation. I hope these differences will be buried with the so-called revised edition. For, there is so much to do now to meet the need and demand for the message of Gandhiji.

I would like to say, in all humility, that some of the proposals made in the media to avoid a recurrence of the disaster are neither appropriate nor wise. I refer in particular to the demand that there should never be the slightest revision of the Collected Works or its structure.

I have studied the original edition of Collected Works as much as any other scholar. The editors have missed – because of errors by researchers and other reasons – a large number of items, some of which were even available in Delhi in the National Archives. There are many discrepancies in the titles. These do not detract, in the least, from my respect for the editors. Errors are to be expected in such a monumental undertaking stretching over thirty years.

It is normal practice – and I have consulted senior librarians and archivists – to revise such publications to correct the errors and omissions, insert items in their chronological order and revise the annotations if necessary.

If there could be many revised editions of Gandhiji's autobiography, not to mention the Gita or Mahabharata, why not of this publication? There has been an enormous amount of research on Gandhiji and his writings – and on events and persons concerned – since the volumes of the original editions were published. Are we being respectful of Gandhiji by deciding that his writings should be frozen with outdated, erroneous or inadequate footnotes?

I understand the fear, after the recent experience, that a decision to revise may lead to errors. But should we prevent progress because of fear of mishaps or take effective measures to avert a recurrence of the problem by entrusting revision to competent and devoted professionals?

I am not a pessimist. I believe India is quite capable of producing a team of editors as dedicated and as capable as Dr. Swaminathan, Dr. Patel and others. They were not as

vain as to think that their work as editors could not be revised. There need be no haste in revision. We can wait until a team which enjoys general confidence is put together.

Gandhiji did not consider his writings sacred. Let no one attribute sanctity to footnotes by editors who never claimed infallibility

I am concerned that this fear of errors, and perhaps a lack of confidence in the government, is precluding efforts to use the new technology to spread the message of Gandhiji.

I would like the publication of translations of selected works of Gandhiji in all the languages of the world, and the placing of these texts, as well as information on the life of Gandhiji, on websites so that we can reach millions of people.

This can be done at a modest cost – perhaps even less than is spent on one award named after Gandhiji, the *daridranarayan* who sought no award. In fact, this can be done by devoted people and institutions even without any financial support by the Government of India.

I would like to hope that our institutions can work together in harmony to make this possible and they will try to ensure that Gandhiji's message is understood, appreciated and absorbed by all the people of India irrespective of party divisions, except perhaps for a few incorrigible fanatics.

This earnest appeal, I believe, reflects the wishes of the numerous admirers of Gandhiji beyond the borders of India