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Mahatma Gandhi: A Sesquicentennial Birthday Tribute

Abstract

Mahatma Gandhi has left his heritage of spiritual force; the influence which emanated from his personality was ineffable, like music, like beauty its claim upon others was great because of its revelation of a spontaneous self-giving. Suffice to say, he never belonged to his age. He was rather a link between the past and future, and the philosopher for the 21st century. In fact, in 2007 the United Nations has rightly decided to observe October 2nd (Gandhi's Birthday) as the Day of Non-violence. As a tribute, especially in 2019 as his birth centennial year, we must recall the saintly man, who preached non-violence, and his ideals that are potential to address many of our contemporary concerns.

Key words: *Mahatma Gandhi, Non-violence, Ahimsa, Satyagrah, world peace, truth.*

Mohan Das Karamchand Gandhi was born on 2nd October 1869. We are celebrating his 150th birth date in 2019. Being a world statesman, he was not confined to the territorial boundary of India. His political guru was Gopal Krishna Gokhale who said about him: "He was a man among men, a hero among heroes, a patriot among patriots and we may well say that in him Indian humanity at the present time has really reached its high Water-market."

Mohan became Mahatma by his words and action. He was unlike Kautilya and western philosopher Niccolo Machiavelli who opines 'end justify means'. Rather, Gandhi did not locale any difference between the means and end.

Viswakabi Rabindranath Tagore was older to him. The first Asian Noble Prize winner, Tagore said these words about Gandhi: "Occasionally there appear in the area of politics, makers of history, whose mental height is above the

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common man level of humanity. They wield an instrument of power which is almost physical in its compelling force and often relentless, exploiting the weakness in human nature – the greed, fear or vanity. When Mahatma Gandhi came and opened up the path of freedom for India, he has no obvious median of power in his hand, no overwhelming authority of coercion. The influence which emanated from his personality was ineffable, like music, like beauty its claim upon others was great because of its revelation of a spontaneous self-giving.”

Barring the two great sons of the soil who were older to Gandhi, many people representing various walks of life had given their estimate of Gandhi either during his struggle against the alien rule or while writing obituary notes.

Gandhi after his return from South Africa where he practiced his epoch making movement: Satyagraha accorded a new dimension to the Congress led freedom struggle against the British colonial authority. He located arrogant, anti-people, authoritarian colonial authority that had no respect for freedom and democratic values. Ever since partition of Bengal there was sinister design to divide India on communal lines. This was evident when the Morley-Minto reforms initiated communal electorate which became the harbinger for the ultimate division of India on communal lines in 1947.

India was a pluri-cultural country and it was under foreign rule for many centuries. Despite that the civilizational ties and cultural traditions were extremely strong. But the British found the 1857 revolt as a warning signal and they could not relish the fact that Indians had accepted a weak Mughal emperor named Bhadur Shah Zafar to be the ‘Emperor of India’. Though the revolt led to the end of the Company rule, it also began the political and legal regime under the British. The 1860 Indian Penal Code, 1861 Indian Police Act and 1872 Indian Evidence Act along with several other draconian acts like the Vernacular Press Act, the Arms Act, and many more intended to terrorize the simple, innocent and law abiding British subjects in India. Of course, it ignited the Indian mind and seeds of freedom struggle were sown during the lent decades of the 19th century. Gandhi at that time was studying law in England and was aware of the Indian institution and the early year of the Indian National Congress as well as the role of both Tilak and Gokhale whom he admired most. As a law student, he could identify illegal, racial and undemocratic intentions of the British colonial administration. He studied literature available then and was impressed by the writing of Thoreau and Leo Tolstoy.

After obtaining the legal qualification he went to South Africa for legal profession. He spent two decades of his precious middle age there. The stay in South Africa changed Mohan Das and the foundation of his experiments in

non-violence and Satyagraha were laid. He experienced the brutal nature of the alien administration in a foreign land. The suffering of the non-white population in South Africa agitated him. The policy of racial discrimination adopted by the British colonial authority created a new rebel in him but it was of different taste. He motivated and encouraged the non-white Indian settlers in South Africa to be a part of a non-violent movement. It was a decade long Satyagraha which began in 1904 and continued until 1914. The success of Satyagraha and non-violence convinced him about their efficacy. He returned to India in 1915 and saw his countrymen suffering due to anti-people rule by the colonial authority. On the advice of his political guru Gokhale, he toured various parts of his country and got acquainted with misery, poverty and exploitation of people. During those days the colonial government was involved in the World War I and Gandhi thought it appropriate to help the government's war efforts. He also saw the plight of the Congress which was only a middle-class led pressure group. He took interest in transforming the organization into a mass-organization. Initially he found an ashram on the banks of river Sabarmati which very soon emerged as a centre of social, religious and political activities. He utilized his experience and success of Satyagraha and non-violence from South Africa in India. The opportunity came into existence when an innocent crowd in Amritsar on the day of Baisakhi, 13th April 1919 were killed by Brigadier Dyer in the most inhuman and cruel manner.

From 1920 till 1947 Gandhi used his 'Soul-force' and as a master political strategist envisioned, planned and led three prominent people's movement against the British: the non-violent Non-cooperation Movement (1920), the Civil Disobedience Movement (1942), and finally the Quit India Movement known as the August Movement (1942). In the process he could unstable the roots of British colonial dispensation and forced them to be on the back foot. The Indian National Congress had to abscond its elitist approach and was slowly indoctrinated into Gandhian philosophy. However it is to be remembered that Gandhi was a man of action. He avoided generating any systematic philosophy.

"The traditional values of Indian philosophy and religion greatly influenced him and he attempted to apply them in everyday life. As a man of faith, it was his constant endeavour to confirm his eternal life to the inner truth as he saw it. He identified 'Truth' with 'God' or 'Soul' or 'Force' or the 'Moral Law' which governs the whole universe." (*SHIRMALI*, 1970: 15)

According to Gandhi, there was no higher principle to govern man's life and conduct the Truth. In all his activities, whether it was the service of the Harijans or the propagation of Swadeshi or Civil Disobedience against the

unjust law of the state, he tried to affirm the fundamental principle of truth.”
(SHRIMALI)

Gandhi found in untouchability practices by the Hindu society a greatest profanity against God. Further, he advocated Swadeshi Movement because he stood for one's own country and all that people do or produce are their own. One has every right to use their own neighbourhood, resources and develop his own surroundings. It was not a narrow doctrine promoting caste or religion. Rather it was a rule of conduct to one's own nature.

It is often said that Gandhi was against technology. Rather, he was against robotic use of technology. If technology enhances ones participatory production, he was in support of it. He believed in 'production by masses and not in production for masses'. Further, he had the fear that massive role of technology might undermine some of the traditional values of Indian society. He was against the concentration of wealth in just a few hands. He was critical of centralisation of power, urbanisation, unemployment and political, economic and social exploitation.

As a result, Gandhi advocated neither capitalism nor doctrinaire socialism instead humanism grounded in religion. He realised the basic instinct of the people of India. That is why, he located in religion/ truth/ soul force the cardinal principle of life.

Gandhi took leadership in Non-cooperation Movement and Civil Disobedience agitation thinking that it was his moral duty to sensitize people to resist anti-people laws of the State. He thought that these laws were in conflict with that of God or the higher moral principles that govern the society.

Researchers and eminent writers have examined the advocacy of Gandhi in the field of social and political reform. Everywhere he was experimenting with truth. His affirmation of truth was called Satyagraha, which of course was not his creation, rather an age-old technique based on the fundamental tenets of the Hindu society. He stood for the basic principles of Jainism that help to attain salvation. According to Jain scripture, right conduct was of five kinds of Ahimsa – non-violence, truthfulness, non-stealing, celibacy, and non-possession.

Gandhi recommended their five principles as the code of conduct for Satyagrahis. According to Shrimali, "Ahimsa for Gandhi was not a negative virtue but included the attributes of compassion towards all living creatures". Similarly for maintaining purity of thought, truthfulness was essential. Non-stealing, Brahmacharya and restriction of material wants constituted the essential elements of Hindu society. They also formed the core of all Gandhian thought.

In Hinduism these basic principles had a greater bearing on the cultivation of the spiritual personality of man rather than on the worldly life.

Gandhi's unique contribution lay in applying these ideas not merely for the individual's spiritual growth but also for the betterment of society. B.G. Gokhale (1961) said: "at no time in Indian history except for a short period during emperor Ashoka's reign, were these ideas applied at the collective level".

It was Gandhi who had a strong contingent of Satyagrahis who sharpened the course of freedom struggle against the British. Non-violent Satyagraha played an instrumental role in the liberation of the country. Gandhi was unhappy towards the conclusion of the largest freedom struggle as it ended with the partition of India and communal holocaust. He also fell victim to an assassin's bullets.

Gandhi never belonged to his age. He was a link between past and future. His observation on technology is a testimony to that. He said: "technology is feeding our pleasure centre but squeezing out our human spirit." He warned that the wrong use of technology might cause unheard distorters.

Helen Dixon (*Foreign Affairs*, October 2018) wrote: "Today, technology is being used to control what we see, what we can do, and ultimately what we say". Thus, fear of Gandhi about a hundred years ago stands established today. We cannot say what might happen in the age of 'Digital Dictatorship'.

Today, when in the absence of Cold War we are amidst fear. The United States in the post-9/11 period is only balancing its agony. Around ten countries in the world are nuclear weapon countries of which a sizeable number is neither reliable nor dependable. The fear existed when both the world wars were fought and Gandhi during his life time experienced the wrong use of technology and growth of weaponry system. He observed: "the better mind of the world desires today not absolutely independent states warring one against another, but a federalism of friendly interdependent States."

He also said: "my goal is friendship with the world and I can combine the greatest love with the greatest opposition to wrong."

For this Gandhi had a recommendation – "my structure of a world federation can be raised only on a foundation of non-violence and violence will have to be totally given up in world affairs."

Gandhi, therefore, was not confined to the territory of India. He saw in weapon development system leading to nuclear arsenal and small and petty issues relating to territory and arrogance causing irreparable loss to the civilization by two global wars. He was apostle of peace.

Gandhi can be considered as the philosopher for the 21st century. In fact, in 2007 the United Nations has decided to observe October 2nd (Gandhi's Birthday) as the Day of non-violence. His comprehensive message for right conduct and right living has made him immortal. Both Gandhi and Gandhism are respected all over the world. Nelson Mandela and Martin Luther King (Jr.) had become iconic leaders by following 'Gandhi Marg'.

Cruel assassin's bullet deprived us of the wisdom of a great soul who relentlessly fought for Indians pride under a colonial dispensation. Kakasaheb Kalelkar in an obituary note rejected the hatred based on religion and wrote that though Gandhi was a Hindu and his religion was Hinduism, yet according to Gandhi – 'my religion has no geographical boundaries' speak volumes on his stand on religion.

Kamaladevi Chattopadhyaya, one of the main architects of All India Women's Conference said, 'Gandhi was universally acknowledged as the greatest man of his age'. Though Gandhi never occupied/ desired for an official position yet he was the tallest statesman of his time. His greatness came from the realm of the spirit, his influence, and unparalleled leadership, from his universal love and faith in mankind.

The messages from Rajendra Prasad, JL Nehru, Sardar Patel and other eminent personalities place Mohan Das Karam Chand Gandhi as one of the most revered statesman for his simple living and free as well as frank opinion on socio-cultural and economic matters. He lived a life for others. He desired a strong village democracy and Swadeshi economy to make India self-reliant in a hopeless post-war world.

On 31st January, 1948 (a day after Gandhi's martyrdom) the *New York Times* wrote: "A light has gone out. The rest remains for history's inexorable hand to write down. A hush will go round the world to-day as Gandhi's frail-body is borne to the banks of the sacred river Jamuna, there to be turned to ashes. Out of the ashes we do not know what flowers will spring. But this we do know that saintly man who preached non-violence, is dead by violence. Those who saw him cut-down believed that with a last gesture of forgiveness, he forgave his last enemy. His undying spirit speaks now to all India and the world. He has left as his heritage a spiritual force that must in God's good time prevail over arms and armaments and dark doctrines of violence."

India lost a guardian on 30 January 1948 and the irreparable loss is felt today all over the world.