

The Spirituality and Politics of Mahatma Gandhi- Father of the Nation

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Abstract: The flesh and blood Gandhi was a most unlikely saint. He was a skinny, bent figure, nut brown and naked except for a white loincloth; cheap spectacles perched on his nose, frail hand grasping a tall bamboo staff. This was one of the century's great revolutionaries. Yet this strange figure swayed millions with his hypnotic spell. His garb was the perfect uniform for the kind of revolutionary he was, wielding weapons of prayer and nonviolence more powerful than guns." Gandhi may have become a "towering myth" in the West, but it was one that mattered. His work and his spirit have awakened a moral beacon for all times. At first glance, Gandhi's ideas may seem irrelevant to current struggles for social change. He railed at industrialism and material pleasures. He remained unpersuaded by the value of modernity and technology, and offered us instead a backward-looking romantic vision of a simple society. Much of his ascetic personal philosophy has lost its meaning for newer generations of people used to more hedonistic ways. His kind of pacifism would not be tolerated even in India where he is regarded as the Father of the Nation. Despite Gandhi's idiosyncrasies and the anachronism of some of his ideas, there is much to his beliefs that is relevant. For us, his enduring value lies in the power of love, peace, and freedom. Freedom and justice were ever his guiding light. His ecumenical approach to religion is a model of tolerance that we can follow; and his vision of non-violence as a basis of change provides lessons for resolving conflicts within our society. We are particularly attracted by Gandhi's way that reform begins with an individual. Spiritualize and awaken the individual conscience, and we will have an easier road to peaceful change. A majority of one is all one requires to effect meaningful change.

INTRODUCTION

For Mohandas K. Gandhi (1869-1948), religion was both, the formal where ritual practices diverged, and the eternal where all faiths had common goals. Prayers were needed to affirm and activate the divine within, not to ask favours. He did not care for dogmas. For him, it was not theology but morality that mattered. There was truth in each of the religions, but that did not mean they were all true, because they contained some falsehood as well. God was infinite even if every religion was partial and limited. He argued for *sadbhava*, that is goodwill and toleration. Therefore religions could gain much by a dialogue, and none should claim exclusivity since it would amount to "spiritual arrogance." Religion was "not an authoritative and monolithic structure of ideas and practices, but a resource from which one freely borrowed ..." It was the basis of all life, and it thus shaped all activities. No action was without the influence of religion, and for him politics was not separate from religion, although he did not advocate theocracy. Religion was a matter of freely and sincerely held beliefs.

Gandhi was following an ancient tradition of using spirituality as a basis of social change. The Buddha and Jesus Christ had used them effectively. Gandhi's unique discourse on the subject was the result of his having discovered the East and the West at about the same time, the one through the other. [1]

Thus he incorporated Christian notions of love, forgiveness, and uncomplaining suffering into his philosophy while rejecting the idea that salvation could come only through Christ; and he embraced Islam's emphasis on equality. Jainism's *anekantavada* (the many-sidedness of truth) made him tolerant to all religions.

Injustices could be eliminated if *ahimsa* (non-violence) was practiced. But he found the Hindu idea of *ahimsa* too passive, and the Christian notion of love too attached. Thus he combined *ahimsa* and love, and added the Hindu concept of *anaskati* (detachment) to arrive at his activist philosophy. For Gandhi the world was ordered on moral principles and brute force had



no place in it. He added fasting as a tool in his armoury. Fasting was not hunger strike designed to extract submission or evoke self-pity. Rather it was a way of atoning vicariously for the misdeeds of others. This "vicarious suffering" like "voluntary crucifixion" is an essentially Christian idea.

Hinduism nevertheless formed the core of his religious beliefs.

It offers salvation through karma-yoga (selfless action), raja-yoga (bodily discipline), bhakti-yoga (devotional endeavours), and jnana-yoga (knowledge through mental discipline). He chose to stress the first, and adapted it to four fundamental Hindu ideas to suit his philosophy of social activism. Thus, Moksha (individual liberation), Tapasya (penitence), Yoga (mind-body harmonization), and Samadhi (withdrawal to prepare for moksha) all were adapted to suit his commitment for social reform and change in the service of the poor and the needy.

He drew upon the lives of ordinary people to create symbols with which they could identify. His approach was always aimed at appealing to the head and the heart. In any situation, he set the rules, developed his own unique logic. From this core set of beliefs, he shaped satyagraha (Passive Resistance). This concept means "soul-force" in Sanskrit, but in Gujarati (Gandhi's native language), it also means insisting on truth without being obstinate or uncompromising. Truth had many sides, so one had to remain open and flexible. The use of violence implied infallibility and was therefore totally inappropriate in satyagraha. [2]

He called satyagraha "surgery of the soul" intended to awaken the opponent's humanity.

A satyagrahi (one who pursues Passive Resistance) has to observe certain rules of behaviour: believe in the power of right action, think rationally, study the situation, dissuade the opponent, keep open the channels of communications, use intermediaries, follow rules and principles, be courteous, remain open to compromise, and accept suffering love. If the opponent proved to be unyielding, the satyagrahi must engage in economic and political action such as boycott. Take positive action, or be trampled upon like worms, is the way he put it.

This is the lesson he sought to impart at his ashrams or communal settings where he experimented in group living.

Religious spirit was used at these places to turn the individual into a social activist. The first, Phoenix Settlement, was inspired by a single reading of John Ruskin's *Unto This Last* (1900), a work that extolled the virtues of the simple life of love, labour, and human dignity. The second was founded in 1910, and was called Tolstoy Farm in honour of Leo Tolstoy (1828-1910). Gandhi first read the Russian's *The Kingdom of God is Within You* in 1893 soon after it was published. At these two experiments in communal living, he sought to shape the moral and spiritual life of the residents so that they may engage effectively in political and social change in the world outside.

When he returned to India, ashrams continued to be an important part of his life. He taught the residents to serve their fellows around strict moral principles, and to be daunted by nothing, not even death, in pursuing their goals. They were expected to find the truth through a life of simplicity, tolerance, hard-work, discipline, and self-reliance. Christians, Hindus, and Muslims nurtured respect for one another. There was much that was experimental as the residents tried out new diets, nature cure, and harmonious living with the environment. It was a way of training an army of spiritualized soldiers ready to effect change through ahimsa (non-violence). [3]

DISCUSSION

The ashrams produced heroic individuals. He entered South Africa in 1893 a hesitant person; he left in 1914 self-confident and purposeful, spiritual and humble. He had learned that thought had no meaning unless it was lived out. Life was shallow unless it carried with it a vision. It was a weapon with great potential.

In India, Gandhi launched the Non-Cooperation Movement in 1920 that lasted for two years. It was inspired by the simple but effective idea of withdrawing cooperation to the imperial government, and of setting up alternative institutions. Non-cooperation came in several stages: resigning from government services, refusing to use government-created institutions, withholding taxes, quitting the armed services, and destroying foreign cloth. The movement made independence a widely shared goal. It radicalized a large body of Indians who had been drawn into it, and it helped to promote the Indian National



Congress whose president he became in 1924. The movement reduced the hold of the colonial state on the people, but it failed to end foreign rule. For Gandhi, the failure signaled a need for reform from within. He withdrew from active politics, and devoted his energies to a "comprehensive syllabus" for change in what became known as the Constructive Program.[4] This program aimed at effecting national regeneration. Gandhi believed that Indians did not deserve independence unless they ended divisiveness, and changed their outmoded practices and beliefs. For him, political power for its own sake would only encourage careerism. Overall, Gandhi hoped to awaken spirituality. The program aimed to produce, among other things, Hindu-Muslim unity, equality for the untouchable caste, use of domestically-produced cloth (khadi), development of village industries, institution of craft-based education, and a ban on alcohol. It also worked for other desirable social changes such as introducing equality for women, developing health education, promoting indigenous languages, working for economic and social equality among peasants, workers, and tribal groups, creating a code of conduct for students, bringing help to lepers and beggars, and inculcating respect for animals.

For 35 years Gandhi single-mindedly expended his energies towards achieving these aims. The goal of political independence, however, had a logic different from and often contradictory to that of the Constructive Program. Satyagraha (Passive Resistance) required working within the institutions created by the colonial state. Many Indian leaders were more interested in political independence rather than moral regeneration, and believed that the second was better left until after the first had been achieved. Gandhi needed to redefine constantly the relationship among conventional politics, satyagraha, and his reform program, not always with success. This made his overall strategy incoherent, and he appeared occasionally erratic and unpredictable. He was most comfortable with his reform program and satyagraha rather than conventional politics.

Gandhi's search for communal harmony went with an inner personal search. When violence broke out between Hindus and Muslims, he blamed himself, and often wondered why God was not working for him. Was he pure, had he removed all traces of violence within himself? This brought him to the conclusion that the possible source of his violence was the presence of unconscious sexuality. He had already taken a vow of celibacy in 1906. He thus began his experiments of sleeping with carefully chosen female associates. The experiments showed him that he was pure and that God had not forsaken him. He was ready to offer his own life to fight against communal violence, and thus to awaken the conscience and moral energies of his misguided countrymen. From October 1946 to February 1947, he walked from village to village, working 18 hours a day and covering as many as 49 villages, living in huts. His feet developed chilblains. He faced death threats. Nothing deterred him.[5]

Gandhi's emphasis on awakening individual spirituality offers a solution to communities in search of ways to effect desirable social change. The process must begin with the individual. Awakened to the potential within, the individual will carry the message to others. The individual thus repays the moral debt owed to others, and contributes to harmonious living. This strategy is an effective anti-dote to the modern state's tendencies towards centralization and bureaucratization; as well as against the intolerance that divide one human being from another. Share, do not waste resources; do not despoil the environment; and recognize that the earth belongs to all who live in it. There is much we can learn from him.

Gandhi exercised leadership by example. There was nothing he expected his followers to do that he himself was not prepared to do. There are many such instances when he took the lead. His sheer dedication and commitment inspired his followers. They quickly recognized that nothing deterred him. Here are three examples.

First: When he agreed to a political compromise in 1908 with the Boer leader Jan C. Smuts, some of his supporters accused him of expediency. He remained firm that it was the right thing to do, and so set out to be the first to register for a new identity document and thereby honor the compromise. On his way, however, he was severely assaulted by one of his compatriots. When he regained consciousness, he insisted on fulfilling his promise to be the first to register, and asked that the registrar be brought to him.

He headed the column of 2000 marchers during the Great March of 1913 in South Africa. He dressed like them, ate what they ate, and was prepared to experience all the hardships that they endured.[6]

Gandhi was himself a moral symbol: his dress, his language, mode of public speaking, food, bodily gestures, ways of sitting, walking, talking, laughter, humor, and staff or walking stick. Each evoked deep cultural memories, spoke volumes, and conveyed highly complex messages. He hoped to reach the "whole being" and thus to mobilize their moral energy. In



this world that he created, the colonial world had no access. No other leader before Gandhi had such a clear and complete strategy of action. None possessed either his self-confidence or his organizational and communication skills.

CONCLUSION

Gandhi evolved a distinct mode of discourse. He appealed to the emotions by judiciously selecting culturally significant symbols drawn from the daily lives of ordinary Indians. The symbols were: khadi, cow, Gandhi cap, and spinning wheel. The spinning wheel was not only intended to rebel against modern technological civilization, but was affirming the dignity of rural India. It also affirmed the dignity of manual labor and social compassion. By supporting the spinning wheel he was promoting the needs of the poor. It was infinitely more moral than asking for financial donations.[7]

The use of violence denied that all human beings had souls, and that they were capable of appreciating and pursuing good, and that no one was so degenerate that he could not be won over by appealing to his fellow-feeling and humanity. Violence presupposed infallibility and this was not the case. The consequences of violence were irreversible. Morality suggested otherwise, and ends do not morally or otherwise justify the means.

The way out of the dilemma of effecting change without violence is to use soul force. Mobilize the enormous latent energy of the soul, and thus bring to bear spiritual power to the issue. The new method should open up the opponent's heart and mind and thus renew rational discussion. However degenerate a person might be, he has a soul, and thus he has the capacity to feel for other human beings and to acknowledge their common humanity. Satyagraha was a "surgery of the soul", a way of activating "soul-force" and "suffering love" was the best way to do it since "moral nobility" disarmed opponents. A sense of common and indivisible humanity was necessary as an article of belief; as well as the feeling that degrading another degraded oneself. So the community's moral capital was necessary. Gandhi would say that it is always present no matter appearances to the contrary. Satyagraha has resonance in both Hindu and Christian traditions: spiritual nature of human beings, the power of suffering love, and the deliberate and skillful use of suffering love to reach out to and to activate the moral energies of others.

A satyagrahi (or a practitioner of Passive Resistance) observed basic principles: study rationally, carefully, and methodically the situation; convince opponents of the passion of his feelings; keep open channels of communication; use intermediaries; observe rules and principles, be courteous; be ready for compromises; be prepared for suffering love. When the stakes got high (that is suffering love alone was not enough), the satyagrahis used additional methods: defiance of laws, non-payment of taxes, non-cooperation, and strikes. Gandhi's vocabulary changed when the reality proved intractable: "non-violent warfare", "peaceful rebellion". He also introduced fasting as a tactic for purification and attracting public support.[8]

The modern industrial civilization is characterized by rationalism, secularization, science, technology, and globalization. Gandhi saw the impact of modern civilization essentially through the eyes of its victims. For him, all civilizations are inspired and energized by specific human conceptions, which, if corrupted could become sources of evil. The corruption he spoke of related to the neglect of the soul as a consequence of the emphasis on materialism and reason. It made for an aggressive, violent, and exploitative world sustained by regimentation and abuse of the natural environment in which the poor and the weak were treated with contempt.

The modern state tends to promote the idea those ordinary individuals—especially the poor and the "weak"—are not able to solve problems on their own. This has destroyed stable and long-established communities; devalued personal autonomy; and has undermined the individual's sense of identity and continuity. It could destroy the moral foundation of the individual, and this could lead to indifference, alienation, and hostility.

Gandhi was prepared to accept the role of the state as a trustee within defined limits in which the local community could determine its own needs. In India's case, the village community was a basic unit of economy. Large-scale industries were necessary, but they should be located in a city and restricted. Local communities should have the power to redefine their own institutions.

Gandhi's notion of a good society held that human beings are informed by the spirit of piety and recognize their interdependence. They are governed by moral and spiritual powers. They cherish plurality of reason, intuition, faith, and



traditions, and appreciate the individual's need for autonomy. It places morality at the center of individual behaviour. The spirit of reverence and broad-minded tolerance is the hallmark of a society that Gandhi helped us to see.

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