



## ***Relevance of Mahatma Gandhi in New India***

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### **Abstract:**

*"Generations to come, it may well be, scarce believe that such a man as this one ever in flesh and blood walked upon this Earth."*

— Albert Einstein

*This famous quote by Albert Einstein on Mahatma Gandhi was said on Gandhi's 70th birthday. Mahatma Gandhi not only offered us independence, but his ideology enlightened India as well as the world. Even today, after so many years, Gandhi is rightly credited with pioneering non-violence, satyagraha, resistance to tyranny through mass civil disobedience, and vocalizing a transcendent message that helped the Indian National*

*Congress acquire independence from the British in August 1947. Gandhi is rightly called the **Father of the Nation** because he single-handedly stood up against the mighty British empire and, without any arms, brought her independence. At a global level, when violence is being condemned, religious fundamentalism is rebuked, and high technology with high profit is not going to solve the problem of the teeming millions of the people of the world, Gandhi is the only hope of survival for the whole of humanity at large. Dr. Martin Luther King said: "...if humanity is to progress, Gandhi is inescapable."*

**Keywords:** Non-violence, Transcendent, Enlighten, Humanity, Rebuked



## Introduction

Nowadays, the issue of Gandhi's relevance has been dominated by two contradictory views: the one arguing that Gandhi is the only hope of survival for the whole of humanity; the other regards Gandhian ideals as otherworldly, primitivistic, archaic, and impractical. Hence, the present article concentrates its attention on the main question of whether Gandhian thoughts are relevant in New India.

The article consists of four sections. The first section makes a modest attempt to explain Gandhi's main ideas. The second discusses the arguments which are advanced to criticize Gandhian ideas. The third explains the relevance of Gandhi in New India. The final concluding section argues that Gandhi's philosophical, religious, economic, and social approaches and a number of contemporary Gandhian perspectives are relevant to an understanding of human values and social change today.

## Gandhi's Main Ideas

Gandhism starts with the famous line "**simple living and high thinking**," and its objective is to transform the individual and society. Gandhi was a staunch believer in truth. In fact, the very naming of his autobiography, "*My Experiment with Truth*," reflects his life observance and experimentation with truth. Another important philosophy he promoted was that of non-violence. Gandhi's non-violence is linked up with truth. The fundamental basis of Gandhism is the conception of spiritual reality, which is truth. He defines God as truth. According to him, the only certain means of knowing God or reaching truth is non-violence. **Truth is the end; non-violence is the means.** Non-violence is an important principle put forward by Gandhi as it helped to avoid bloodshed in various pursuits. Gandhi's faith in non-violence is firm. According to him, real



*Swaraj* is possible only through non-violence. Hence, he said, “Non-violence is the first article of my faith. It is also the last article of my creed.”<sup>1</sup>

Today, world problems are not limited to internal conflicts. Men are living in a world that is increasingly divided day by day by global unrest, fear, anger, hatred, discontent, despair, immorality, etc., and the number and intensity of conflicts seem to grow. Past examples have proved that war and violent ways to resolve such conflicts are not a good idea.

In fact, today there is hardly any country in the world where some activities are not going on along Gandhian lines. In short, there is a global non-violent awakening and awareness after Gandhi. The name of Mahatma Gandhi transcends the bounds of race, religion, and nation-state and has emerged as the prophetic voice of the twenty-first century. Today, Gandhi is remembered for his passionate adherence to the practice of non-violence and his supreme humanity in every corner of the world.

What is the significance of Gandhi to the modern world, and what is the secret of his success? Gandhi has been a great light for the Tibetan leader Dalai Lama, who puts Gandhi’s success in the right perspective. He said, “Many ancient Indian masters have preached *Ahimsa*, non-violence as a philosophy. That was mere philosophical understanding. But Mahatma Gandhi, in this twentieth century, produced a very sophisticated approach because he implemented that very noble philosophy of *Ahimsa* in modern politics and he succeeded.

In the past century, many places in the world have been drastically changed through the use of brute force by the power of guns—the Soviet Union, China, Tibet, Burma, many communist countries in Africa and South America. But eventually, the power of guns will have to be changed



by the will of the ordinary people. To fight these big wars, the common ordinary people in this modern age need Gandhism.

The core of the legacy Gandhi left for humanity is that he taught us that **truth is greater than all worldly possessions**, and that violence, injustice, exploitation, and disparities are inconsistent with truth.

Gandhi used non-violence as an alternative to power. He did not deny the existence of political power, but he thought in the struggle of power, there is always the victory of one party over the other. But Gandhi's non-violence is an alternative to power that stresses the point that there would be no defeat for either party and conflict will be resolved by bringing about greater understanding and love between the two. It may be said that even in this nuclear age, humanity will have to turn to Gandhi's teaching of non-violence if the devastation of civilization is to be avoided.

For Gandhiji, politics is a moral problem of value. Gandhi's prophetic emphasis is "**there is no politics devoid of religion.**"<sup>2</sup> Gandhi stands for people's politics and not party politics. In Gandhian politics, democracy becomes the rule of the people. Through non-violent resistance, Gandhi resists injustice and exploitation and thus purifies politics. This gives an alternative to the bullet.<sup>3</sup> Gandhi was against narrow nationalism.

Gandhiji warned humanity that unprincipled growth will land humans on the brink of disasters. Gandhi condemned the nineteenth-century doctrine of *Laissez-faire*, which is the political basis of capitalism.

Gandhi wanted to solve problems of social tension, social disharmony, and social disequilibrium by genuine brotherly solidarity.



According to Gandhi, the evil we are to fight is within us. Motifs such as give and take, live and let live, love and to be loved have become clichés in the new dictionary compiled by the champions of unlimited growth.

Gandhi also warned humanity against a series of social and political turmoil and ecological devastation unless modern civilization takes care of nature. Hatred of all forms, exploitation in whichever manner it exists, is the negation of humanity's basic right to exist. Like a devotee of the *Gita*, he was trying to see the Eternal spirit in the suppressed population.

Gandhi convinced humanity that wars never solved any problem. Gandhi dreamt of a warless world. Therefore, Gandhi's political and social philosophy in general and his approach to the concepts of truth, non-violence, and *satyagraha* in particular could be the starting point of the generation of non-violent or less violent cultures and societies. Gandhi himself says that "I have nothing new to teach the world. Truth and non-violence are as old as the hills. All I have done is to try experiments in both on as vast a scale as I could."

Hence, his contribution during the century of his life was great indeed; his contribution in the next century, where the world is threatened by a man-made survival crisis, could be even higher and of great value.

### **Criticisms of Gandhian Thought**

Objections to the relevance of Gandhian thought have been made from the very beginning of Gandhian thought. Gandhian thought has been criticized as primitive, otherworldly, archaic, and impractical. Several critics regard Gandhian ideals as "the primitivist yearnings of a withdrawn mystic" and "other-worldly." George Orwell has argued that we "must choose between God and



man" and that "Gandhi's teachings cannot be squared with the belief that man is the measure of all things and that our own job is to make life worth living on this earth."<sup>4</sup>

According to Lokmanya Tilak (1856-1920), Gandhi's great compatriot, the Gandhian project of integrating politics and morality is unsuited to this worldly concern. In his famous letter to Gandhi, he wrote that politics "is a game of worldly people and not of *sadhus*" and that "the approach of Sri Krishna is more suited to this world than the Buddhist approach."<sup>5</sup>

Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941) too, made objections to Gandhi's attempt at mixing truth with politics. Tagore in his classical letter to Gandhi of 12 April 1919, at the outset of the Mahatma's first rational campaign in India, argued, "power in all its forms is irrational, it is like the horse that drags the carriage blind-folded...The danger inherent in all force grows stronger when it is likely to gain success, for then it becomes temptation."<sup>6</sup>

Tagore's suspicion of politics and power increased as Gandhi pursued his aim of independence, and at the height of Gandhi's non-cooperation campaign in 1921, Tagore launched a salvo entitled "The Call of Truth," which is unparalleled in Indian political literature for its eloquence. In it, Tagore conceded that "to make the country our own by means of our creative power is indeed a great call."<sup>7</sup> But the use of this power must be purely moral and not political, for politics and truth will not mix. Gandhi's supreme difficulty in responding to this charge was that he had himself set truth as his highest goal and had acknowledged that the practice of politics meant "wrestling with the snake." That power can be deadly poisonous, and the best of men may be bitten. He could only seek to justify his leadership with the assertion that "my politics are not corrupt, they are inextricably bound up with truth."<sup>8</sup> It is Tagore who gets the better of this debate, for Gandhi is arguing not only with Rabindranath but against a tradition, and ultimately with a part of himself.



M.N. Roy (1886-1954) also subjected Gandhian ideas to searching criticisms from a Marxist point of view. In 1923, he published *One Year of Non-Cooperation*. In this book, he paid tribute to the saintly personality of Mahatma Gandhi and compared him to St. Thomas Aquinas, Savonarola, and Francis of Assisi. But he also noted several shortcomings of Gandhism:

(i) Gandhism lacked an economic programme to win mass support; (ii) it wanted to unite all sections of Indians, exploiters like landlords and capitalists, with the exploited peasants and workers; (iii) the incorporation of metaphysical propositions into political action was unfortunate because political dynamism was sacrificed at the alter of the subjective consideration of conscience; (iv) the reactionary economics of Charkha was unpalatable to the Marxist M.N Roy; (v) Roy also criticized the vacillation of Gandhism. He did not like Gandhiji's seeking interviews. Hence, he said that Gandhism was not revolutionism but "weak and watery reformism."<sup>9</sup>

After his release from jail in 1936, Roy intensified his campaign against Gandhism. He criticized Gandhism on several grounds. First, he condemned Gandhism as a reactionary social philosophy teaching the impracticable concept of social harmony. Second, he regarded Gandhian *Ahimsa* as a subtle intellectual device for concealing the capitalist exploitation of the country. According to him, non-violence arrested the revolutionary urge of the people. Third, he refused to accept any metaphysical notion of absolute spiritual truth which Gandhism preached. Fourth, under Gandhi's leadership, the Congress was being turned into a spinner's association. Finally, he regarded Gandhi as the embodiment of Indian backwardness and obscurantism.<sup>10</sup>

Gandhi's own disciple, Jawaharlal Nehru (1889-1964), disagreed with Gandhi's conception of non-possession and the limitation of personal requirements, as well as with that of the theory of trusteeship. Nehru said, "Personally, I dislike the praise of poverty and suffering. I do not think



they are at all desirable, and they ought to be abolished. Nor do I appreciate the ascetic life as a social ideal, though it may suit individuals. I understand and appreciate simplicity, equality, self-control but not the mortification of self.”<sup>11</sup>

Even if desirable, the ascetic ideal of the deliberated and voluntary restriction of wants is impracticable for the masses. Indeed, Nehru thought, advantage should be taken of the development of science and technology to increase their standard of living.

Nehru also thought poorly of Gandhi’s theory of trusteeship. He poses the question squarely and, in posing the question, goes to the heart of the matter. Is it reasonable to believe in the theory of trusteeship—to give unchecked power and wealth to an individual and to expect him to use it entirely for the public good? “Even Plato’s philosopher Kings could hardly born the burden worthily. And is it good for the others to have even these benevolent supermen over them? But there are no supermen or philosopher-kings; there are only frail human beings who can not help thinking that their own personal good or the advancement of their own ideas is identical with public good. The snobbery of birth, position, and economic power is perpetuated, and the consequences in many ways are disastrous.”<sup>12</sup> Nehru’s skepticism whether the rich may be depended on to use their surplus wealth for the common good has to be answered. Can the evils of an acquisitive society be eliminated except by institutional changes designed to protect the have-nots from exploitation?<sup>13</sup>

Besides, Gandhi’s theory of *Satyagraha* or non-cooperation has also been subjected to searching criticism on several grounds.

(I) Vijayaraghachariar, president of the Indian National Congress held at Nagpur in 1920, considered boycott of schools and courts not only impracticable but undesirable. He said that to





draw students into the highly excitable vortex of politics would be highly injurious to the nations; it could also lead to the description of the family as the students would be separated from parents and from their brothers and sisters. Besides, the abolition of courts and of the profession of law would result in the increase of offense and criminal cases and in the decline of the rule of law, resulting in a bad preparation for the democratic form of government which they wanted to establish.<sup>14</sup>

(II) Shrinivasa Sastri (1869-1946), a trusted counselor of India, regarded non-cooperation as a doctrine of negation. Moreover, non-cooperation spread a spirit of revolt and undermined the essential foundation of society, that is, the habit of obedience to law and order.<sup>15</sup>

(III) In his book "*A Nation in Making*" (1925), Surendranath Banerjee (1848-1925) points out that non-cooperating masses are consumed with hatred of the alien government and its officials; and when a sentiment is firmly rooted in the public mind, it grows and expands. From the hatred of the alien government and its officials, it is extended to political and religious opponents and other castes and creeds. "It is this sentiment of hatred fostered among the masses, directed in the first instance against the British Governments, that came by a natural process of growth, to be extended to all others who worshipped in a different temple, culminated in those communal and caste feuds that have darkened over recent history."<sup>16</sup>

(III) Sivaswami Aiyar (1864-1946) in an article in the *Indian Review* (1930), argues that the spirit of lawlessness, of law breaking, once roused, cannot be laid to rest when the particular occasion has passed.<sup>17</sup>

(IV) Furthermore, M. Ruthraswamy, who was a professor and educationist and a member of Rajya Sabha in 1962, criticized Gandhi's non-cooperation on three main grounds. First, non-cooperation is too simple, too straight, too blunt and obviously a weapon to be effective in a numerous,



diversified, cross-gained state like that of modern India.<sup>18</sup> Second, a general spirit of civil disobedience to the state, if engendered in the mass of the people, is likely to be harmful to the stability of the state in the long run. “It may help to destroy British rule, but will it be easy to exercise it even in the India of *Swaraj*?”<sup>19</sup> Third, the basic mistake which Gandhiji made, in Ruthraswamy’s view, is that he took an over-optimistic view of human nature, that man is by nature good and peaceful. He questions the validity of this view and states that man’s great drama is that of battling against his own worst nature.<sup>20</sup>

Finally, the concept of *Sarvodaya*, conceived by Gandhi and adopted by Vinoba Bhave and Jay Prakash Narayan, has also been criticized on three grounds. In the first place, human nature, it is admitted, is capable of excellence but until the bulk of the community has attained that excellence – a matter of time and training – how can *Sarvodaya* work?<sup>21</sup> Secondly, while *Sarvodaya* advocates this doctrine that government is the best which governs the list, the grooving complexity of modern life demands state intervention to solve the problems of war, poverty, and unemployment.<sup>22</sup> Lastly, admitting that a self-sufficient village community with restricted wants and greater economic equality is the desirable ideal, how can the winds of change blowing from affluent societies be prevented from adversely affecting the psychology of the people who are to leave under such ideal conditions?<sup>23</sup>

### **Relevance of Gandhism**

Despite all these criticisms, most of the Gandhian ideas are relevant in New India.

In the first place, the contemporary society is a fragmented society. The outer uniformity produced by science and civilization has not resulted in any inner unity of mind. In such a devastating society, it requires to reform the mind of individuals, and here Gandhi’s contribution is



unparalleled. Gandhi believes in the mutual dependence of men's activities on one another and the unity of human life, which is an indivisible whole. According to Gandhi, one cannot divide life—social, economic, political, and purely religious—into separate watertight compartments.

Secondly, his religion is "**Sarva Dharma Sambhava**" (Equal Approach to All Religions). It is very near to Swami Vivekananda's 'Universal Religion' or Tagore's 'Religion of Man'. His religion unites men of different faiths and brings them on the same platform to reach the ultimate truth, i.e., the spirit of humanity, and thus conflict shall be resolved amicably and not with the superiority of one another. Gandhi's religion makes a man spiritual and scientific.

Thirdly, through *Satyagraha* (Non-Violent Resistance), Gandhi resists injustice and exploitation and thus purifies politics. Thus, Gandhian Politics has a dominant and constructive role to play. He was against narrow nationalism. His concept of politics was for higher value.

Fourth, if the *Sarvodaya* ideal is not acceptable, it at least suggests the desirability of adopting the **middle path** in social and political organization. Hence, the acquisitive instinct must be curbed, greater decentralization must be adopted, economic inequality must be reduced, and individuals must participate more in government.

Fifth, as a Vedantist and a Vaishnava, Gandhi believed in the spiritual oneness of all lives, and hence, he was absolutely opposed to untouchability. The eradication of untouchability was an issue of transcendental value, surpassing even political independence. All through his life, he fought for this noble cause and considered it as a slur on Hinduism.

Sixth, Gandhi's ideas are still relevant to us that truth is higher than falsehood; that a non-violent way of life is preferable to a violent one; that politics devoid of morality becomes poisonous; that industrialism is a sin, for it is antithetical to self-abnegation;<sup>24</sup> that cities like Mumbai and Kolkata



have become the symbols of material prosperity in India are the countries' "real plagues spots;"<sup>25</sup> that India's soul lives in the village must be resuscitated; and that the use of narcotics and intoxicants is a vice which must be given up.

Seventh, nothing confirms the sociological validity of Gandhi's teaching better than the plight of men living in the contemporary industrial society. Industrialization in advanced developed countries has created the problem of environmental pollution, greenhouse effect, acid rain, and toxic waste disposal. This has given rise to the **Green Politics**, which is busy in creating an awareness of ecological risks and in forcing a genuine search for global solutions. Groups inspired by Gandhi are now seeking to widen the relevance of Mahatma's teachings to encompass issues of peace, human rights, economic equality, and democracy.

Eight, Europe, from Italy in the South, through Germany and former Czechoslovakia to Denmark and Sweden in the North, is turning to Gandhi. The savagery of "ethnic cleansing" in erstwhile Yugoslavia, barbarism in Bosnia, the rediscovery of war as a realistic means to conflicts, proliferation of the sources and targets of violence, and the deepening socio-economic divide between and within nations, despite the widening of the boundaries of democracy, has triggered a new awakening. This is evident in the quest for a new paradigm rooted in Gandhian values and a negation of the values of "developmentalism," "discredited Socialism," and "reformed capitalism."

Ninth, in Europe, it is being increasingly realized by peace activists, political scientists, social critics, and philosophers that **non-violence** and Gandhian forms of intervention alone hold out hope of political peace. The question "What is the way to peace?" cannot be answered unless we proceed from the Gandhian dictum: "There is no way to peace, peace is the way." It is hard to get such a



message in a milieu where even peace-keeping is militarized and Gandhian social and political values are ignored as archaic.

Thus, while in his own country, the prophet has been consigned to a vulgar debate about whether and where his statue should be placed, his relevance is being increasingly felt in Europe. It seems that like the rediscovery of neem as superior to chemical pesticides, Gandhism too has to re-emerge in India as a transnational product, stripped of its attributes which have made it a fetish and not a lived experience with potential for transformation.

Now in the twenty-first century, Gandhi is a world phenomenon. It means, as if he has been reborn. The world knows that Martin Luther King Jr., Lech Walesa, Nelson Mandela, Ho Chi Minh, Yung-Su-Ky, Daisaku Ikeda, and a host of the geniuses of the world have followed the footprints of the great Mahatma.

Gandhi is now more relevant on a global level than before. The quintessence of divine wisdom, "**Vasudhaiv Kutumbakam**" ("Mankind is one family"), proclaimed by India millennia ago, was the ultimate aim of Mahatma and his thought. In this globalized tech-savvy world, the concept of 'Sarva Dharma Sama Bhav' or all religions are the same and "Sarva Dharma Sada Bhaav" or goodwill towards all religions professed by Gandhiji are essential to maintain an atmosphere of harmony and compassion and to realize the idea of 'Vasudhaiva Kutumbkam' (The world is one family).

## Conclusion

Thus, Gandhism is relevant in New India for more reasons than one. It is politically relevant because it can overcome not only military and ethnic conflicts but also address the violence of confrontation between the state and civil society. It is relevant in the economic field because



economic imbalances created by development can be removed by following its prescription. In the social sphere, Gandhism may prove to be a panacea for the resultant social tensions rooted in cultural antagonisms. Gandhism is more relevant today than ever before for solving the burning problem of environmental pollution. Gandhi as a communicator to mobilize the people can also inspire the present generation on how to unite people across barriers of literacy, language, ethnic identity, class, caste, and privileges.

In conclusion, it may be said that if cleanliness is conducive to health, then Gandhi is relevant. If eating for keeping one's body fit for social work is necessary, then Gandhi is relevant. If recognition of the dignity of physical labour is a sign of modernity, then Gandhi is relevant. If tolerance and universal courtesy are marks of civilized life, then Gandhi is surely relevant. If identification with the lowly and the lost is the quality of leadership, then Gandhi is relevant. If untiring work for the upliftment of the poor, the needy, the down-trodden, and the unfortunate is humanistic, then Gandhi is relevant. If the essence of social justice is to "wipe the tears from the face of the poorest in the land," then Gandhi is relevant. If standing aloof in the midst of raging passion is a sign of human inner strength, then Gandhi is relevant. Above all, if dying for communal harmony is a noble cause, then certainly Gandhi is relevant in New India.

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