

# Indian democracy should revisit Gandhian thought

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Mahatma Gandhi represents a figure of unique integrity, consistency and humanity. The point of departure of his life philosophy and the basis of his theory and activity in practice are freedom and welfare of any human being and prosperity of peoples and nations of the whole mankind. Non-violence is the elementary and indispensable condition for the materialization of these noble goals. These principles and values represented a permanent source of inspiration in Gandhi's guidance in his imaginative undertakings both in the struggle for freedom and independent development of India and the promotion of her role in the international community. As a matter of fact, Gandhi's firm belief in the creativeness and openness of the people of India and his own active engagement for a peaceful and friendly cooperation among nations on equal footing, without any interference or imposition were inexhaustible sources of his personal wisdom and high credibility both as the father of modern India, as well as one of the major moral, spiritual and political international authorities of our times. Today, largely due to the work of Mahatma Gandhi, India has its political independence and the work of building that greater freedom which he set in train in continuing by non-violent workers all around India. But Gandhiji himself had altered his successors that they would face a more daunting journey on the road to the betterment of the people of India, than he himself had done. His 50 years struggle for national independence reached a culmination in August 1947, but he could see that national independence of India was really only the first step towards ultimate goal-equality of opportunity for all through non-violent action. That is the reason why Gandhi represents today not only the collective conscience of India, but also the collective conscience of all humanity. My claim is that Mahatma Gandhi remains a relevant thinker today because of his theory and practice of non-violence, but also because of the way he defended all his life political tolerance and religious pluralism. Nothing about his defence is doctrinaire or a priori. Everything he claims about the importance of individual autonomy and political freedom, for human life, for modern living, is tested by experience.

Everybody knows that Gandhi's ideas evolved through experience from a highly simplistic view to more mature, sophisticated and relevant propositions. Gandhi agrees with Kant that "maturity" consists in man's taking over responsibility for using his critical rationality and that critical rationality consists in the unflinching examination of our most cherished and confronting assumptions. Therefore, Gandhi was able to articulate a fundamental change-taking place in Indian but also modern understanding which still gives his philosophy contemporary relevance. One thing is certain about Gandhi's thought: it is not only modern, but also mature. Gandhi's heroic break with religious fanaticism, tendency of opening up the possibility for a critical structure would provide universal norms for human action. Nevertheless, Gandhi was not a system builder. He was essentially a pathfinder towards social and individual goals. Therefore, Gandhi's philosophy is neither utopian, nor eschatological. It is simply a critical view, which tells us what we need to do in order to go forward in the path of metaphysical humanism. Gandhi tells us to proceed with clear conceptual thinking and scepticism of the facts. Therefore, according to him, we must never fail to seek knowledge and enlightenment; never give up the virtues of common sense, civility, justice and non-violence. Therefore, a sense of balance and proportion of what fits when and where is crucial to the theory he enjoins us to practice. Nevertheless, for Gandhi pure rationalism was neither scientific, nor human. More importantly, Gandhi's attachment to religion is limited. Religion for Gandhi is identified with ethics rather than theology. Therefore, most of Gandhi's major concepts and methods of struggle are not absolutist concepts. It would be totally unfair to judge and analyse Gandhi through some absolutist concepts and ideas. In this connection the most significant concept that is relevant to revalidating Gandhi is that which went by the name of "Swaraj". Today "autonomy" is not merely an economic concept, but it is also a political concept. The new spirit of "autonomy" not only in form, but also in essence, is very much discussed in the west as a pattern to enforce the civil society vis-à-vis the state. Gandhi was in fact a stern defender of the role of law, and advocate of fundamental human rights, a critic of all forms of political action based on violence and intolerance and a fervent of limited government. Gandhi's political thought cannot, in this sense, be identified either with the liberal tradition, or with the anarchist tradition or with the claims advanced by a number of communitarian philosophers today. Gandhi belongs to none of the three ideological options which are available for us today. One option is the return to a "religious dogmatism". The second option is "relativism" which is exemplified by the postmodernist movement that believes that the

objective truth should be replaced by hermeneutic truth. The third option is the “rationalist fundamentalism” which believes in the total power of reason and disenchanting everything substantive. Gandhi belongs to neither of these three main visions influential at present. He is not a religious fundamentalist. He is not a cultural revivalist, and he is not committed to the idea of absolute reason. What strikes me as interesting in Gandhi is how he kept a space in his mind open for doubt and for sceptical irony. In this sense the moral and political principles of Mahatma Gandhi do not constitute a sort of real gearbox that drives our thought and action in one direction, and is powered by a spiritual engine with only a monolithic ideology as the fuel source. Even if Gandhi was very loyal to India and to the Indian people, his responsibility as a modern intellectual figure, made him speak the truth beyond the national and the cultural frontiers by picking the right moral and political alternative and then intelligently representing it where it could do the most good and cause the right change. In this respect, the contribution of Mahatma Gandhi in the creation and cultivation of a public culture of citizenship, that guarantees to everyone the right to opinion and action, as an alternative to a system of representation based on bureaucratic parties and state structures, is one of the most relevant issues discussed in the western political philosophy today. Gandhi was very conscious about the fact that the cultivation of an “enlarged pluralism” requires the creation of institutions and practices, where the voice and perspective of everyone can be articulated, tested and transformed. Gandhi’s vision of modernity provides us with a number of fruitful insights that may help us to confront the dilemmas of the modern age. In this respect, Gandhi is one of the main intellectual figures today who has the disturbing capacity to unsettle our fixed categories, to shake our inherited conceptual habit, and to let us see the world in a new light.

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Gandhian principles involve at its core non-violent methods of making the opponent submit. However, these noble principles would not work in many circumstances. Nelson Mandela was an ardent follower of Gandhi and his principles; however, he believed that Gandhian principles could not be applied to many situations. If you fight against an exploiter by fasting unto death and inflicting self-pain in order to embarrass the opponent into submission, it might work if your opponent is noble enough. However, an opponent with no moral

conscious as such or one who simply does not care about your cause even a bit, will leave no means to suppress your cause if found in conflict of his own. What Gandhiji preached was possible to work in case of British rule, because at that time, Britain was a democracy with a free press, which means it could be embarrassed through moral means and was susceptible to international and domestic opinions. Non-violence has often offered no solutions to many colonial ruled nations who could achieve freedom only after a bloody and violent struggle. Similarly, the principles of self-reliance have become out-dated in the current setting, as it is mostly seen as a form of protectionist barrier, lacking the will to take up the advantages and benefits that an increasing interdependent world has to offer. Today's urbanizing set up requires the country to embrace the technological innovations taking place around the world too. As the world was falling into the chaos of fascist regimes, violent and brutal methods of conquest and resistance, India was a proud nation where we were fighting through the means of truth, peace, non-violence and moral values. Today's scenario stands in contrast to such principles as we see governments spending many a times more for military purposes than on health and education, the stockpile of weapons that countries have to themselves today can destroy the planet, million times more than what happened at Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Universal peace is still a distant dream. Gandhiji will always remain one of the eminent icons of anti-colonialism in history, from whom we have a lot to learn today. The great contribution which Mahatma Gandhi made in the 20th century is well known. The struggle against colonialism was a very important feature of a greater part of this century. It was of the greatest importance from the perspective of justice and democracy. Mahatma Gandhi not only made a very important contribution to this struggle against colonialism but in addition blazed a new trail by insisting with all his moral force that struggles for justice and truth should be based on non-violence. This proved to be an inspiration for many other struggles against injustice in various parts of the world including those led by Martin Luther King Jr. and Nelson Mandela. The other most defining feature of the 20th century related to the two world wars. As the world belatedly realized the importance of avoiding such disasters in future the importance of Gandhiji's insistence on nonviolence as one of the most basic precepts of life became even more important. It was also realized by perceptive observers that the roots of colonialism, as well as world wars, can be traced to never-ending greed and the conflicts created by this greed. Here again the insistence by Gandhiji on simplicity and voluntary frugality as a way of life and as one of the basic principles of life tied up very neatly with his



commitment to non-violence. Unlike other political leaders of the world he never tried to promise more and more to the people of his country but instead devoted himself to spreading the principles of nonviolence, simplicity and limited needs as a desirable way of life. He moved the economic debate beyond the narrow and familiar capitalism versus communism debate and instead concentrated on basic principles like simplicity, justice, prioritising the needs of the poorest, decentralisation, creation of local self-reliant economies and villages to the extent it is practical, respecting labour, protecting sustainable livelihoods while discouraging avoidable luxuries and parasitic pursuits and protecting livelihoods. The danger of jobless growth does not exist in the Gandhian scheme of things with its insistence on technologies being in tune with the needs of protection of local livelihoods and skills instead of following the ruthless logic of unencumbered capitalist growth. Gandhiji may not have used the words environment protection but the kind of economy he visualized is the one in which the base of environment protection can be created. If the root cause of colonialism (or neo-colonialism and continuing imperialist ambitions) and wars lies in greed, then it follows that to avoid these we need an economy and a way of life based on limited needs, voluntary and happy acceptance of frugality and commitment to nonviolence. Thus in the Gandhian vision we have a framework in which a wide base for realizing the most important objectives of peace and environment protection can be realized while at the same time meeting the essential needs of all people in sustainable ways. Mahatma Gandhi would have made many great contributions with these ideas and thinking in the emerging post-colonial and Post-World- War II world if he had lived for another 15 years or so but his life was very tragically cut short by an extremely stupid and narrow-minded assassin and his co-conspirators who had absolutely no understanding of how much the world, and not just the nation, needed the broad vision of Gandhiji in those critical years. It would have been very interesting to see Gandhiji with his far-reaching ideas and tremendous moral force reaching out to the world troubled by the Cold War and the arms race. In independent India he would have had the support of his nation and its government in reaching out to the wider world which he did not have under the colonial government. All that is the history of lost opportunities. But coming to the present times the most defining feature of the 21st century is that there is nothing less than a survival crisis caused by a number of very serious environmental problems on the one hand and accumulation of weapons of mass destruction on the other. As the world gropes without much hope and with an increasing sense of futility for the entrenched leadership to find solutions for

these pressing problems before it is too late, genuine hope can emerge if there are strong grassroots efforts for peace and environment protection. To reach out to more and more people these grassroots efforts should also be based on meeting the needs of all people on a sustainable basis. In this effort to reconcile the three objectives of peace, environment protection and justice based on satisfaction of needs of all people, the ideas of Gandhi can be very useful, particularly as these are supported by his impressive record of living a life based on these principles and leading several struggles and campaigns based on these. Hence while his contribution during the century of his life was great indeed, his contribution in the next century when the world is threatened by a man-made survival crisis could be even higher as a well-thought-out application of his ideas to resolving present-day serious existential crisis could be of great value. As the world enters the twenty-first century in less than three years, the assumption that technology can provide easy solutions to all problems that face humankind, including environmental ones, is coming under scrutiny. Some of the most respected economists of today are questioning the basic assumptions of traditional economics. The pattern of industrialisation, based on insatiable consumerism as an indicator of growth and quality of life, is increasingly being considered a menace to the world's environment. But a close look at the views of economists and the scientific establishment in India shows that their concepts of 'development' and 'underdevelopment' are derived from out-dated political-economic theories. Technology is not value-free. It creates its own imperatives. The Gandhian view of the present world system needs to be seriously considered, as it is the only ideology which addresses both political and economic issues, and the question of level of technology desirable. It is true that the economic and demographic situation has altered considerably since Gandhi's lifetime, and that some of the solutions which he put forth, and which might have been possible then, may no longer be feasible today. This is why we need a debate on the subject. It is not intended to make a fetish of Gandhian thought, but to consider its relevance today. The sleeping giants, China, Brazil and India, with low standards of living, high growth rates and hardworking populations, will eventually pose an economic threat to other parts of the world. What kind of economic system will these countries have in the twenty-first century? Will they be integrated into the world's economy, or will they face difficulties owing to their peculiar social, economic and cultural situations? If they become an integral part of the world economy, will their entry itself pose problems for the global economic scene? Can there be growth with social justice? The new economic trends are widening the division between

the haves and have-nots the world over. The inequalities of income in India are especially great. The free market system cannot work as well in these conditions as in other Asian countries, as it will only widen the gulf between the rich and the poor, and aggravate social unrest. It is clear that the large proportion of the population that has been kept out of the modern sector in countries like India can hardly be expected to survive by the 'trickle-down effect'. The Indian political establishment, corrupt as it is, has accepted this by taking up major programmes for the benefit of the urban and rural poor, but the benefits do not reach those for whom they are intended. Community development was introduced in India during the Nehru era, and was later sought to be strengthened through the introduction of Panchayati Raj. The 73rd and 74th Amendments to the Indian Constitution have tried to strengthen local governments by insulating them from the state political process, but it is difficult to predict success for these efforts. In all these experiments, the incompetence and corruption of the governmental sector is a major problem as it gives employment to unemployables, and prevents the market economy from functioning according to its own norms. The second major problem that requires analysis in the present world context is the question of population. How many people can the world support? The answer is obviously related to the standard of living at which they are to exist, and the quality of life that is expected. If the underdeveloped world, which accounts for 80 per cent of the world's population, were to increase its per capita energy consumption by 15 times in order to become developed, the world would either burst from heat, or instantaneously run out of energy resources. How are we to persuade the poor in a developing country like India to accept family planning when their economic condition requires them to produce more children and set them to work at the age of six or seven? One way is to crack down on child labour, as India is now trying to do. Yet scientists have been unable to convince policy-makers and world public opinion that something has to be done and quickly, and that globalisation of the world economy is a recipe for suicide. In fact, the very measures we take to control the heat caused by global warming (refrigerators, fans, air-conditioners) and to make our lives more comfortable (automobiles, microwave ovens) add to the problem itself. Some positive developments are, however, visible. Multi-nationals appear to have prepared for the possible success of the environmentalists in enforcing an environmentally sound economic order, by undertaking research which will enable them to eliminate chlorofluorocarbons in refrigerators, or to switch to neem and other non-toxic plants in many commercial areas. In fact, it is, as usual, the Indian government that is behind the times. Keeping in view the

grim scenario that faces the world, we must ask ourselves if there is any solution, and if so, how it can be made acceptable to the common man and the powers that be in India and in the world at large. The solutions certainly do not consist in putting pressure on the industrialised countries to give financial aid to the third world countries for preserving their forests and changing over to environmentally sound technology (the Rio summit solution). If enough pressure is brought to bear on the multinationals (and more importantly, on our own elite who encourage the import of any foreign technology, no matter if it is polluting), the worst effects of global warming and environmental threat to the globe may still be averted. India is probably the only country in which at least a modicum of effort has been made to understand and analyse the Gandhian approach to economics. Jawaharlal Nehru did not accept Gandhi's ideas, nor did most of the post- independence policy-makers of the country. However, some effort was made to introduce a self-reliant, village -oriented model of development, which would have made India a model for rural development for the Third World, somewhat on the lines of Maoist China, without the mass murders that took place in that country. We need to consider an Indian experiment in this context. Indian scientists, economists and social thinkers need to think afresh on how India can tackle her critical problem of achieving sustainable development without destroying the value systems of the Gandhi-Nehru era. These value systems are relevant not only to India but to the entire south Asian region.

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### Where Gandhian values stand today?

Being born in India, when first starting to make sense of academia, the first of the names that are heard amongst the plethora of freedom fighters and national heroes is that of Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi — also known as Mahatma Gandhi, or Bapu. He is on India's currency notes; buildings and roads are named after him; and, most importantly, the leading political party carries out his last name through its magnetic leader, Sonia Gandhi; the name that she inherits from her lineage. Gandhi gave India its very first lessons of tolerance, non-violence, Satyagraha, the Quit India Movement, the Dandi March, and of belief in one's own faith. He not only played a crucial part in India's independence, but also brought it up as a mature nation on the international platform. He went to London to study law and started the very first movement against social discrimination while in South Africa. Gandhi witnessed the torture and discrimination of Indians in South Africa, which was



also aggravated due to his personal experiences, including the incident where he was thrown out of a train because he refused to move from the first class. Though Indian revolutionaries were flogged down, their voices were heard all over the world and helped in shaping the Satyagraha Movement. But the question remains: How far have Gandhi and his values brought India? The known and existing Gandhian values are not in use, as of now. Non-violence is certainly not the term to be associated with the present day India, which is suffering from various forms of violence on a daily basis. A country that suffers from cross-border terrorism and the highest forms of crime on a regular basis cannot put the security of its citizens at stake by following the doctrine of "non-violence" or "patient dealings" in the long run. India, as a country, witnesses incidents where an honest Indian administrative service officer suffers suspension — a glorious self-proclamation by the state government because she tries to investigate the mafia connections with the state government, and then the action is dubbed as a necessary means for a young and immature female officer. It is a country where a female journalist gets shot while returning home from work, and then the chief minister of the state calls her an "adventurous woman" who risked her life deliberately. Disturbingly, India is a country where a young physiotherapist is brutally raped and killed by six people in a moving bus, and then the country's law puts one of the accused in juvenile custody as he was 17-years-old. It can be argued that if Gandhi were alive today, he would have led India on newer and stronger principles. However, Gandhi's principles may be apt for a personal and spiritual growth of an individual, but they certainly need modification according to the present nuclear age. It is a time where "self-defence" needs to be the foremost guideline, then "non-violence" or "non-cooperation." From Gandhi, the youth can learn to be resolute and focused towards their purpose despite all hardships. But do they have the same vigour as the "saint of Sabarmati" had? The lean and thin man who brought the whole nation together must be wondering from above if the able and young India has the defiance to go against the wrong single-handedly. "Purpose" and "resolution" are interesting terms to be noted here. What if one's purpose makes one selfish enough to pursue it at any cost? What if Gandhi's ideals are no longer the need of his country and were just a manifestation of creating a long-run hegemony? The collective consciousness that Gandhi created suited the era that he lived in. Today, more than Gandhi, India is in dire need of Subhash Chandra Bose, Chandrashekhar Azad, and the trio of Bhagat Singh, Sukhdev and Rajguru. More than one man leading the nation through his ideals, present-day India is in need of leaders whose visions can match with those of the common man and

especially the underprivileged ones — leaders that can be benevolent and quick decision makers, who have the ability to transform and evolve at a quicker pace. Gandhi's visions form the very base on which a new generation of decision makers must adapt, in order to compete on the global level. If the energy of the youth can receive honest and selfless motivation and direction from the experienced, then India can surely earn back the title of the "Golden Bird." Gandhi's vision should not be lost in religious, political and emotional fervours. It must be reorganized and reconstructed for a brighter and logical future. India's entire abiding trust with destiny endures even as we stride into the ranks of the emerging powers of the third world. And we face gargantuan challenges as we struggle to come to terms with the real demons; terrorism, factionalism and growing violence in every corner of the globe. With war clouds that loom menacingly over our skyline, we are compelled to question the relevance of Gandhi's principles of nonviolence and passive-resistance for us today. Gandhi's non-violence was never a call for 'no action' in the face of inequalities, injustice, and oppression. Deeply into the teachings of The Bhagavad Gita he remained intensely infused with the philosophy of that epic Hindu treatise on Life. 'Do your duty whether it is to yourself or to your country', was his prime moral dictated and on this axis, Gandhi's total philosophy was centred. To succumb to injustice and domination in the name of non-violence would mean a complete repudiation of the meaning and import of his grandiose principles. Sadly, the memory of the Mahatma in India is reduced to mere rituals today. His ideals are forgotten and much of what he stood for is remembered only on his birth and death anniversaries, as fading symbols of our fight for freedom, or watching the slapstick Munnabhai resurrection of the prophet of peace for entertainment. Our youth bred on contemporary ideas of instant-gratification and new-age technology have neither the patience nor the time to turn 'the other cheek' if they are struck on one. They strike right back far more savagely to avenge their insult or injury, if provoked. It is indeed the all-pervading 'eye for eye and tooth for tooth' in its goriest and deadliest form today. And yet, it is hard to forget that lone man, a "half naked fakir" who could stand up to the might of the British Empire and get them to Quit India; to leave it 'to anarchy or to the Gods!' All the injustice and extremism today are like festering sores, and the only balm of relief is to revisit and practice Gandhian values such as truth, non-violence, and secularism. Gandhi was a charismatic leader, but his mass appeal was never based on appeasing any specific community or spreading hate against any section of society. While political parties have always been subservient to the masses and the masses have followed certain political

figures without question, people like Gandhi had the courage to fight mob mentality. He always considered mobocracy as an unacceptable way of conducting politics and organizing a society. One may ask that; if Gandhi was all that history says he was, then why did India suffer partition and carnage? Also, why do corruption and animosities stain the country even in 2019? In the age of social media and instant gratification, there is perhaps no place for ethics, camaraderie, honesty, peace, and non-violence? Gandhi was criticized for not solving all the issues of our times. His failure to accomplish an ideal world speaks volumes of what he inspired us to expect from him. In his journey, he both failed and prospered. It proves that he wasn't perfect — which is exactly what he always tried to say! In the age of social media and instant gratification, there is perhaps no place for ethics, camaraderie, honesty, peace, and non-violence? Until the day these values continue to mean something to us or matter to our existence, then whether you like it or not, Mahatma Gandhi will remain relevant. He, as a human being, may lose his relevance someday, but his legacy and thoughts can never become irrelevant. (2)

### Conclusion

On ethical and behavioural part Gandhianism has much significance today because society is witnessing the degradation of values. Gandhian virtues of self-control are much needed in a materialistic world driven by the desire to achieve and acquire more. Gandhiji and Gandhianism are always more than what we know. Gandhiji's political contributions offered us Independence but his ideologies enlighten India as well as the world even today after so many years. Perhaps this was known to Nobel Prize winner Rabindranath Tagore in those days and he had rightly called Gandhiji as Mahatma. Every individual, thus, should follow the key Gandhian ideologies in their day to day life for a happy, prosperous, healthy, harmonious and sustainable future.

### Notes and references

(1) The Hindu, January 30, 2017.

(2) Om Parida, "The relevance of Gandhianism in today's world", The Times of India, October 1, 2019.