



Mahatma Gandhi – The Soul of India

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Abstract:

Remembering the Mahatma attempts to trace the ideological and philosophical journey of Mahatma Gandhi and their impact on the Freedom Movement of India. The word 'weapon' has its own destructive connotations; but Gandhi redefined the idea of weapon through his constructive mantras of truth, non-violence and satyagraha. The present articles argues that even while the three-fold weapon of the Mahatma shook the unshakeable empire, Gandhi's vision was fixed on the self-reliance that India should achieve post-independence. That self reliance would come through embracing such ideals such as grama swarajya, cottage industries, prohibition, basic education, tolerance and harmony etc. Thus the article explicates how Gandhi and his thoughts assimilated the fight for Independence on the one hand along with his vision for a free, self reliant, spiritual India on the other hand.

Key words: *weapon, satyagraha, self reliance, freedom struggle, vision*

The Government of India advertisements without Gandhi's spectacles look deficient. The Clean India Drive that made waves recently is in reality an expansion of the village cleanliness campaign which Gandhi undertook in 1918. Very few would deny the fact that during the Freedom Movement, Gandhi made his mark on the minds of the common folk of India through his constructive programmes. It remains a marvel that a frail, unarmed Gandhi withstood the imperialist, colonial powers through the powerful virtues of truth, non violence and *satyagraha*. An extraordinary spiritual power transformed a promising lawyer into a world leader, a *Mahatma* (great soul), who fought relentlessly against injustice, oppression, racial discrimination through an extraordinary weapon called the *satyagraha*. With the nonchalance to reject awards and honors with a political philosophy of non cooperation, to boycott British schools, colleges, courts and foreign goods, to stiffly oppose liquor shops, to break section 144 and make salt in Dandi, to refuse paying taxes as part of his Civil Disobedience Movement, to sell literary works banned by the colonial government – these are acts of supernatural inner strength that only Gandhi could muster in those turbulent times. Rural self-reliance through the ideal of *grama swarajya* or local self-governance was one of the visionary and constructive actions of Gandhi. It was a vision that fostered, above all, empowerment of the masses. It was Gandhi's firm

belief that if the seven lakh villages of India became self reliant it would percolate into self reliance of the entire nation.

In his autobiography *My Experiments with Truth* Gandhi describes himself as an orthodox Hindu. But we rarely find instances of Gandhi offering prayers in a temple. Gandhi, who was greatly influenced by the modern, Western thoughts, also imbibed the liberal values of Rajkot and England. These influences spurred Gandhi to attend the Centennial Celebrations of the French Revolution in France in the year 1889. In 1890 when Gandhi went to South Africa, he began an extensive reading of Ruskin and Tolstoy. Gandhi even translated Ruskin's *Unto the Last* into Gujarati under the title *Sarvodaya*. Similarly, Gandhi's peace and non-violence are ideals greatly influenced by Tolstoy. Gandhi, who strongly condemned both capitalism and imperialism, viewed capitalism as a heritage of modern western civilization and linked imperialism to war and bloodshed. It is for this reason that Gandhi makes an outright rejection of modern western civilization. This outright rejection also can be seen as an advocacy of the immensity of Indian civilization. An Indian civilization without the minds of capitalism and imperialism as a result of its simple living was for Gandhi a way to advocate the magnitude of the Indian civilization. *Hind Swaraj* is an important work that Gandhi wrote in South Africa in 1909. The views expressed by Gandhi in the book were however revisited by him subsequently. For instance in the book Gandhi acknowledges the *varna* system but later denied it, and by around 1940 he completely rejected the *varna* system. Similarly, in *Hind Swaraj*, Gandhi propagated that the position of women was at home; he reviewed this view by around 1940 and in fact, advocated equal status to women in all walks of life. He opined thus at a later stage: "It is not about equality of men and women. All the tasks that men do, can be performed by women. But man cannot perform all the tasks that a woman can." Gandhi's revisited views on equal status for women can be broadly seen as a rejection of all types of discrimination and also as an attempt to rejuvenate Hinduism from some of its dogmatic stances. Gandhi gave priority to a monotheistic form of worship. He wanted Hindu religion to be monotheistic. He also desired to blend Hindu religion and tolerance. He realized the need to revive Hindu religion on the models of Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Keshab Chandra Sen and Justice Ranade. He inspired the followers of Hinduism to inculcate modern values in their outlook. Rama for Gandhi was one invested in ideals and *Ramarajya* was a welfare state. Thus, his vision of religion was an extension of humanism.

When Gandhi returned from South Africa, the Indian National movement was in its genesis. The founders of the nationalist movement Dadabai Naoroji, Ramesh Chandra Dutt and others were writing extensively about the economic oppression under the colonial rule. They felt that India not only need education but also liberal ways of thinking as professed by social reform movements such as the *Brahmo Samaj*. In 1828 Raja Ram Mohan Roy gave a clarion call that caste system acts as a deterrent to love for the country and hence he believed that caste system should be rejected. However, it was Gandhi who played a pivotal role in making the nationalist movement a movement of the masses by giving it thrust as the fight for economic rights and against economic oppression. The moderate Congress leaders were successful in intellectually explicating how

the Britain had oppressed India. However, they were not able sow those intellectual seeds into the minds of the common masses of India. Hence the whole moderate period looked like an elitist, upper caste struggle. In this backdrop, the arrival of Gandhi on the scene gave a new impetus to the movement. The Congress that hitherto was an organization of the affluent, educated and intellectual classes suddenly transformed into an organization of the ordinary masses, laborers etc. Gandhi's involvement in the movements in Champaran, Kheda and Ahmedabad made the peasants and laborers put their trust in him. His association with the peasant community made him a darling of the nationalist movement and endeared him to the common folk.

In the freedom movement, Gandhi gave utmost importance to assimilating social reforms and religion. Gandhi, keenly aware of the sensitive religious context of India, never tried to cross the religious frameworks, even while working for the Hindu-Muslim unity. He knew that religion was akin to opium. Therefore he never transgressed the religious frameworks. The most momentous period in Gandhi's life was in January 1948, the last month of his mortal life. The whole of India was seething in communal tensions and Gandhi stuck to his staunch beliefs. He had resisted partition strongly and was ready for any sacrifice to ensure that India was one nation, that is, without partition. A model village according to Gandhi's *Grama Swaraj* was a village with proper sanitation and hygiene, places of worship, use of indigenous goods and materials, houses with backyards to grow vegetable and for cattle rearing, roads without dust and wells. In addition, a place to hold a general meeting, common lawns, cooperative dairy farming, primary and middle schools where skills are imparted and a Panchayat. The village should grow its on grains, vegetables, fruits and *khadi*. In other words, the village should be self-reliant-self-governance. In 1936 in Seva Gram Gandhi said: the service of the rural people is the manifestation of God. The service of humankind is the path to God and that there is not greater God than humanity. In other words, Gandhi viewed humanity and service of human beings as true religion and godliness. Though he professed to be an orthodox Hindu, Gandhi seems to be closer to Buddhism in his insistence on moral values rather than worship. Non violence makes him closer to Jainism and his idea of service as supreme makes him closer to Christianity. Being born in India, gaining his life experience in the west, being under the influence of poet Roy Chand and having Christian and Buddhist friends gave a blended quality to the thinking of Gandhi and also lent solidity to his precepts.

Gandhi, who said that freedom is for India and not for the Congress, overlooked party affiliations when he suggested to Prime Minister Nehru that efficiency should be the benchmark for Cabinet formation and not party affiliations. Hence, in Nehru's first Cabinet there were three ministers who opposed the Congress during their entire lifetime. In the cabinet there was representation for five important religious denominations of India. On the day of the first Independence Gandhi was not a part of the Delhi festivities. When asked on Aug 14, how the historic day should be celebrated it is said that Gandhi replied that when people around are dying of hunger, when divisive and destructive events are happening all around how could he celebrate the historic moment. When the *Hindustan Times* reporter asked Gandhi for his Independence Day message Gandhi curtly replied that his mind was sapped. Gandhi has been accorded fulsome praises and honor from some quarters

and at the same time has borne the brunt of severe enmity and criticism from other. Either way the Mahatma has sustained the curiosity and interest of millions even today. Gandhi became Mahatma due to his value-based principled life. He made the freedom struggle the movement of the masses, freed the Congress from elitism to make it reach the grassroots. He was the brainchild behind several futuristic ideas such as rural hygiene, prohibition, eradication of untouchability, cottage industries, basic education, women empowerment, religious tolerance and harmony. Through such measures he strived to create a society based on social justice, indigenusness, unity and self reliance.

Through the powerful weapons of truth, non violence and satyagraha, Gandhi, the half naked fakir was a relentless thorn in the flesh for the empire where the sun never set. His teaching and life makes him a Mahatma not only to India but to the whole world. At a time when divisive voices are gaining traction, when technology is ruling the world, when wisdom and rationality are losing hold, the ideas and ideals of Gandhi can offer a persuasive and lasting solution to the woes of the modern world.

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