

Gandhian Thought and Values: Relevance in Contemporary Times

Dr. Reyaz Ahmad Khanday

Department of Political Science, GDC Banihal, Jammu and Kashmir, India

“The greatness of humanity is not in being human, but in being humane.”
(M.K. Gandhi)

Abstract:

Mahatma Gandhi is one of the great luminaries among the galaxy of the great in the firmament of the history of modern India. His rare effulgence and radiance have illuminated the path not only for the people of India but for the entire mankind. Albert Einstein has rightly remarked, “Generations to come will scarce believe that such a one as this ever in flesh and blood walked upon this earth”. While Gandhi was occupied in waging liberation struggle first in South Africa and then in India, by his writings and practice, at the same time, he was evolving a philosophy or a way of life which can certainly be called revolutionary.

The nature of Gandhian thought is spiritualistic. By following the path of truth, love & non- violence, man will get real freedom which is his due and which he is unconsciously but incessantly hankering after, Gandhiji’s faith in God is as unshakable and unbreakable as the granite rocks. For Gandhi, Truth, Love and God are convertible terms. His concern was for the whole of humanity, for the whole creation, for what seems to be existing and what the human senses perceive is the manifestation of God. Gandhi touched the spiritual side of man and by his unfailing weapons of Satyagraha, which indeed embodied truth, love and non- violence, sought to convert the adversary to his side. Thus, Spiritualism is the sheet anchor and the nerve center of Gandhian thought.

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Introduction:

India has given birth to men and women who have decked the stage of life with marvelous deeds and thoughts have influenced the feelings, thinking and actions

of people through generations and have thus revolutionized the whole of ideas. One such personality is Mahatma Gandhi, the epitome of freedom struggle in India. The way Mahatma Gandhi ruled the hearts and minds of the people and gave to humanity the weapons of unprecedented and unshakable powers in the way of Satyagraha, the whole galaxy of the great dimmed in the dazzling light that the Mahatma embodied. U.S. Mohan Rao states, “In the history of mankind there have been great saints, philosophers, thinkers, scientists, statesmen and political leaders whose contributions in their own fields have been outstanding. But Gandhiji was unique, because while he was actively leading a mass struggle for freeing his country from foreign rule, he conceived Swaraj at once in individual and political terms and tried through reflections and experiment to evolve a philosophy of life which would have permanent validity”

While Gandhiji was occupied in waging a liberation struggle first in South Africa and then in India, by his writings and practice, at the same time he was evolving a philosophy or a way of life which can certainly be called revolutionary. Out of humility Gandhiji said that there is no such thing as Gandhism. If by Gandhism we mean a fixed dogma or creed which can be stated in set formulae, there is certainly nothing which can be labelled as Gandhism. Louis Fischer describes Gandhi as, “independent, unfettered, unpredictable, hence exciting and difficult”. His life was a saga of constant experiencing and perpetual experimentation dedicated to the pursuit of Truth characterized by constant growth. Many of Gandhian ideas are marked by a fundamental unity and consistency.

Nature of Gandhian Thought

Gandhianism starts with the famous line ‘Simple living and high thinking’.

The very nature of Gandhian Thought is spiritualistic. Besides all his utterances, writings, meditations and actions on the mundane affairs of life runs a silken thread of his unshakable faith in truth, love and non-violence. The spiritualistic side is the permanent side of human nature, for man is constantly struggling and endeavouring to regain that peace, to find that kingdom of heaven which is an essential part of his being. By following the path of truth, love and non-violence, man will get the real freedom which is his due and which he is unconsciously but incessantly hankering after, Gandhi’s faith in God is as unshakable and unbreakable as the granite rocks. For Gandhi, Truth, Love and God are convertible terms. His concern was for whole humanity, for the whole creation, for what seems to be existing and what the human senses perceive is the manifestation of God. Every sentient being is but a spark of that Pillar of Fire. The main reason that Gandhi achieved astounding success in his various

campaigns, was that he touched the permanent side, i.e. the spiritual side of man and by his unflinching weapons of Satyagraha, which indeed embodied truth, love and non-violence, sought to convert the adversary to his side. Thus, spiritualism is the sheet anchor and the nerve centre of Gandhian thought.

The ideas of materialistic affairs of life as the economic organisation of society, decentralisation, trusteeship, national language, machines and industry, science and technology draw sustenance from his deeply religious or spiritual conviction. The mundane affairs of life should be so governed, the material side of human life should be so led, the bodily requirements should be so met that man is enabled to secure the development of his spiritual side and thus get the spiritual freedom which alone is his goal.

Satyagraha: Quintessence of Gandhism

Satyagraha is the core of Gandhian thought. It is his most fundamental and imperishable contribution to political thought and practice. Satyagraha is a way of truth and hence truth force. Physical weapons may fail but the weapon of Satyagraha is unflinching because it has cosmic forces behind it. Gandhiji also called it the law of love. Non-violent resistance to political authority, non-cooperation with evil and fasting constitute essential parts of it but they do not exhaust its full import. The Christian tenet of overcoming evil with good comes closer to its real significance.

Satyagraha as a weapon of incalculable power was demonstrated by Gandhi first in South Africa and then in India. Its efficacy has been vindicated beyond any shadow of doubt. By it subject nations can win back their freedom without shedding a drop of blood of their opponents. Its superiority over violent means lies in the fact that it leaves no bitterness or destruction as its aftermath. On the other hand, it leaves a trail of goodwill between the one who wields the weapon of Satyagraha and the one against whom it is wielded.

The principle of returning good over evil, overcoming hatred by love, which constitutes the essence of Satyagraha is a very old principle. Gandhi described it as eternal. Socrates practised it when he preferred to drink a cup of hemlock rather than give up preaching what he knew to be truth. Prahalad practised it when he bore all the tortures he was subjected to by his father rather than surrender faith in God. Mirabai was being a true Satyagrahi in bearing all the indignities heaped upon her rather than submit to what she considered was wrong. Satyagraha was also preached and practised by Buddha and Jesus Christ. It is to be found in the writings of modern thinkers like Tolstoy, Ruskin and Thoreau who greatly influenced Gandhi. Gandhi's contribution lies in the fact

that while earlier it was applied by individuals and groups in private life, Gandhi extended the sphere of its application to public affairs. In fact his originality lies in using it on a much larger scale for the solution of social, economic and political problems.

For a Satyagrahi to be successful in his fight certain conditions must be satisfied. Since Satyagraha embodies truth force or love force or soul force, a Satyagrahi must develop truth and purity in himself. His heart must be as clean as that of a child. It should be shorn of any trace of ill will, hatred or jealousy. It is perfect self- mastery and inner discipline which entitle an individual to wield this most potent weapon against oppression and injustice. A life of rigorous self- discipline is a must, only that can a Satyagrahi appeal to and awakens the conscience of the oppressor.

Truth and Non- Violence

The greatest contribution of Gandhi to human thought and practice is his conception of truth and non- violence. While the other thinkers or ideologues would insist on class war and violent revolution for the eradication of social and economic injustice, Gandhi reposed his faith in truth and non- violence. He taught his countrymen a new way of revolt. He would meet violence with non- violence, untruth with truth, hatred with love. To Gandhi, truth and non- violence are inseparable. They are like two sides of a coin, rather a smooth unstamped metallic disc. A seeker after truth had necessarily to follow the path of non- violence even as ahimsa.

Concept of Truth (Satya) & Non – Violence

One of the greatest contributions of Gandhi to human thought and practice is his conception of Truth and Non- Violence. While the people with different ideologies would insist on class war and violent revolution for the eradication of social and economic injustice, Gandhi reposed his faith in truth and non- violence. He taught his countrymen a new way of revolt. He would meet violence with non- violence, untruth with truth and hatred with love. To Gandhi, truth and non- violence are inseparable. They are like two sides of a coin, or rather a smooth unstamped metallic disc. A seeker after truth had necessarily to follow the path of non- violence even as ahimsa could not be realised without the strict adherence to truth. According to Gandhi, truth is God because He encompassed all life within Him. Thus, truth cannot be sustained without non- violence which is the law of our being. Violence is untruth as it offends against the unity and sacredness of life. The observance of non- violence in life becomes the highest duty of the seeker after truth.

Non- Violence means non injury to anybody. It signifies non- injury in thought, word and deed, Violence is committed if one thinks ill of or utters a harsh word to anybody, though one might not have caused any physical injury. The votary of non- violence may bear self- suffering or may even be ready for self- sacrifice but he would never cause hurt to any living being on earth. Gandhi believes, “I cultivate in my soldiers the courage of dying without killing”. Non- Violence in its dynamic condition means conscious suffering. It does not mean admission to the will of the evil deer, but it means putting of one’s whole soul against the will of the tyrant”. Non- Violence is an active force of the highest order. Final victory of the practitioner of non- violence is perfectly certain. Working under this law of our being, it is possible for a single individual to defy the whole might of an unjust empire to serve his honour, his religion, his soul and lays the foundation of that empire’s fall or its regeneration. Non- Violence is the soul force or the power of Godhead within us”.

Conditions for practising Non- Violence

Gandhi lays down certain conditions or the practices of non- violence which are as under:

- i. Consciousness of the living presence of God within a human being
- ii. Perfect humility
- iii. Purity of heart
- iv. Courage
- v. Forbearance
- vi. Fearlessness
- vii. Complete abstention from exploitation
- viii. Non- Possession

Individual Freedom

Gandhi lays great stress on individual freedom. To Him individual is the supreme consideration, he is the centre of authority and value. No great progress can ever be made if the individual does not have opportunity of perfect development of their personality. Like Kant, Gandhi believed in the negative functions of the state. To Him individual is the end the state is the means. Unlike Hegel he would not sacrifice the individual at the altar of the state. That society is doomed to die natural death where individual freedom and initiatives are curbed. If the individual ceases to count what is life of society? Individual freedom alone can make a man voluntarily surrender himself to the service of the society. If it is wrested from him, he becomes an automaton and society is ruined. No society can possibly be

built on a denial of individual freedom. The state is meant to aid the individual in his all-round development.

Gandhi sees no conflict between individual freedom and social obligation. In a society organised on non- violence individuals will shun exploitation of others for the sake of themselves and would so regulate their lives, so exercise self- restraint and self- control that there will hardly be any occasion for a clash between individual freedom and social obligation. To those who have realised inner freedom or swaraj, selfless devotion to the promotion of good of all is the best means of realising their own selves. This is nothing but the revival of the ancient Hindu ideal of Dharma as the basis of social cohesion, of the proper relation between the individual and the society. By reconciling the claims of dual freedom to the requirements of social obligation Gandhi solved the eternal problem of social and political obligation and thereby made a great contribution to social and political thought.

Gandhian Concept of Rights & Duties

According to M.K. Gandhi, the conflict between individual freedom and social obligation arises in the present-day society because of an undue emphasis on individual's rights. Gandhi gave more importance to duties than rights. He says that Rights are opportunities or self- realisation through services of others and doing one's duty by them. The right to perform one's duties is the only right that is worth living or and dying for. It covers all legitimate rights. Gandhi's views on rights and duties are intimately related with his views on Swaraj. Swaraj of a people means the sum total of the swaraj (self- rule) of individuals. Such swaraj comes only from performance by individuals of their duty as citizens. In it no body thinks of his rights. They come, when they are needed, for better performance of duty. It was in his way that Gandhiji sought to resolve the conflict between the claims of an individual and those of the society and solved the eternal problem of individual freedom and versus social restraint.

Views on Decentralisation

Gandhi advocated both political as well as economic decentralisation. As Gandhi was a votary of individual freedom, centralisation is incompatible with individual freedom. If the creation of a non- violent society is to be brought about, centralisation should go for centralisation can not be sustained and defended without adequate force. Centralisation makes life highly complex and restricts individual initiative and diminishes opportunities for self- government. It also leads to depersonalisation and makes an individual insensitive to moral considerations.

Gandhi favours a decentralised system of society both in the political as well as economic fields. Gandhi believes that the realisation of truth and ahimsa and making love and sympathy and compassion the governing factors of the individual actions is impossible in a centralised system. Moral development of an individual is only possible through a decentralised system. Political decentralisation means that the village communities should be given the largest measures of autonomy in managing their own affairs. The village panchayats should be entrusted with the tasks of the development of the village in all aspects of life. Every individual should have the sense of participation in the governance of the affairs of the society. Economic decentralisation means the replacement of centralised large-scale industries by cottage industries. This is a great necessity in a non-violent society, for a great deal of violence that is witnessed in the present-day world is due to the existence of a highly industrialised system. The centralised industrialisation leads not only to the division of society into haves and have-nots but also makes men insensitive to the sorrows and sufferings of others. No real happiness can ever be thought of in a society where the accumulation of wealth alone is the be all and end all of life. The promotion of moral and spiritual values of life does not find a congenial soil in a climate polluted by the emission of greed and avarice from the chimneys of industrialism. Moral and spiritual development of man and the pursuit of higher values of life are possible only in a system of cottage industries in which the workers own the instruments of production and the manufacturing goods. The substitution of cottage industries for large scale industries is the method of ending exploitation of man by man and introducing the principles of truth and non-violence in the economic sphere. Gandhi was convinced that the moral, mental and spiritual growth of mankind was possible only in a decentralised system. If the large-scale industrialism of the present type goes unabated the humanity is destined to face annihilation as a consequence of warfare.

Relevance of Gandhism in Contemporary Times

Simple living and high thinking', means that thoughts of an individual have a great role in shaping his/ her life. That's why Gandhianism appears to be simple to everyone but in real sense practicing it in day-to-day life is difficult. For instance, remaining truthful, tolerant, non-violent and respecting others in difficult circumstances of life require a great degree commitment & determination.

Truth as the core values of Gandhian thought has been given a special importance as he himself tried to remain truthful throughout his life. 'My experiments with

Truth' testimonies the love of Gandhiji for truth. Gandhian view of truth was irreversible in different contexts irrespective of the urgency of the situation similar to the path followed by Immanuel Kant. Gandhiji believed that truth empowers an individual whereas lies weaken a person from within. This principle of truthfulness to self and to the world is not less than a blessing in this contemporary world inflicted with complexities.

The secular approach of Gandhiji have succeed to find a place in the Constitution of India, thus proving his true secular belief and creed. Gandhianism was tolerant towards all religions and the world today needs more and more religiously and faith wise tolerant people in modern societies where violence is committed in the name of religion. Tolerance in the society will help in neutralizing the ethno-centric bias in the globe that is taking place day by day on the basis of religion, caste, ethnicity and region etc.

Gandhian virtues of self-control is much needed in a materialistic world driven by the desire to achieve and acquire more. Societal values have degraded to such an extent that people don't hesitate to kill someone for the gratification of their own needs. Respect for women is one of the major ideas of Gandhian philosophy and the world is witnessing the increased level of violence, subjugation women face nowadays in society. Gandhian dream of a safe country necessities safety for women and that will come from the virtue of self-control. Adding more to this list of moral qualities of Gandhiji are punctuality, duty boundness and honesty etc and all these have to be the essence of administration for good governance and perfect service delivery to the last person standing in the queue as proposed by the antodaya philosophy of Gandhiji.

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.

Conclusion:

People still remember and cherish Gandhi and his personality who laid an incredibly contribution to Indian freedom struggle and other fields as well. Furthermore, Mahatma Gandhi is remembered for his teachings. His ideas still resonate in people's minds. Mahatma Gandhi is considered the most splendid Statesman of India. The relevance of Gandhism can be realised from the fact that his ideas and views still hold a significant position in the policies and governance of Indian nation and underline the most humane way to resolve many of the problems that plague our society.

His thoughts of Ahimsa and Truth, Swadeshi and Swaraj helped India free itself from colonial rule. Gandhi's thought was an inspiration for the society. All ideas and thoughts of great Mahatma were reached by him via life long experimentation with truths, which makes Gandhian thoughts more significant in the present era.

The emancipation of mankind from the evils and ills of contemporary lives seems to depend on some of the key principles propagated by Gandhi. Gandhi and his philosophies are always more than we even know. His political contributions offered us freedom, but his philosophies and principles enlighten our lives. Perhaps this was clear to Rabindranath Tagore and that is why he named Gandhi as Mahatma meaning a great soul. The influence of Gandhi on the course of human history is almost without a parallel. It is rightly said that Gandhi belongs not only to Indian but to the whole world; he is not only of our times but all of all times and he will continue to have relevance throughout the coming ages.

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Dr. Riyaz Ah Khanday is working as Lecturer in Political Science at Government Degree College Eidgah Srinagar Jammu & Kashmir