

WHAT MAKES GANDHI A ‘MAHĀTMĀ’

by Dr. Pranay Deb

Abstract

Mahatma Gandhi's name is familiar to such a degree that there is hardly any person who does not consider him to be a friend of mankind. There can be hardly found any aspects of human life, where Gandhi did not contribute. His thought and activities aimed at fostering courage and fearlessness among the people against any injustice. He was a mystic and religious man in personal life, a great social reformer, one of the greatest political activist, an educationist, etc. Millions of people around this world have found in this many-splendored life a ‘spiritual power’, that has given the masses not only their unity, power to awaken themselves, but also the majesty that has made Gandhi a ‘*Mahātmā*’, the great soul (the name given by the great poet Rabindranath Tagore). This exceptional status is attributed to him due to the fact that he combined in himself some exceptional social, political, spiritual virtues. In this paper, my attempt would be to highlight some of these virtues of Gandhi's life and activities, through which he has become popular as ‘*Mahātmā*’ in this world. I have also pointed out the relevance of Gandhian thought in the present materialistic world.

Keywords: Mahātmā, Truth, Non-violence, Sarvodaya, Satyāgraha

Introduction

Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi alias *Mahātmā* Gandhi is a household name in India. He has become so to say, a part and parcel of our nation. *Mahātmā* Gandhi was born on the 2nd of October 1869. His name is familiar to such a degree that there is hardly any peasant or any factory worker who does not consider him to be friend of human kind. In one or another Gandhi has figured as a constant irritant in our way of life made of thought and action. Gandhi was undoubtedly a great life intensely lived at many different levels. A mystic and religious man in personal life, Gandhi was also a great social reformer. One of the greatest political activists the world has ever seen. Millions of people have found in this many-splendoured life a ‘spiritual power’ that has given them not only their unity, but also the majesty that has made Gandhi a ‘*Mahātmā*’. The mission of his life was service for all. He said, “My goal is friendship

with the world.”¹ His journey of life was started as an ordinary man but the goal was loftiest. “This journey through life which started from very ordinary beginnings and culminated in exceptional attainments holds a promise of becoming a greater source of inspiration for the ordinary man.”² All these attributes makes Gandhi a ‘*Mahātmā*’.

Evolution of Dynamic Force

Gandhi faced with so many bitter experiences in his early life, which laid the foundation of the mahatma. In South Africa, he collided head-on with racism. Having suffered so many humiliations, these overpowered him with a sense of mission; not only had to redeem his dignity, but that of the entire Indian people and even of humanity and as it happened.

In 1904, Gandhi happened to read a book by Ruskin ‘*Unto This Last*’. Ruskin believed that true basis of society was not wealth as the classical economics had thought but it was human companionship. This book gave a new direction to his future line of thinking and action. He came across Leo Count Tolstoy’s writing and was inspired by Tolstoy’s restless search for perfection and universal love, which was expressed by his book, ‘*The Kingdom of God is within you*’. Gandhi also studied the *Vedas* and the *Upanishads*, the *Bible*, the *Quran*. But as belonged to a religious Hindu *Vaiṣṇava* family, he was deeply impressed by the *Gītā*, which became his dictionary of daily life. There were numerous fields from which Gandhi got the inspiration in his life and for doing the activity for the human being. These are the some aspects, by which Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi had became the *Mahātmā* Gandhi.

Guiding Principles of becoming ‘*Mahātmā*’

Gandhi in his whole lifetime experimented with the Truth, as his Autobiography itself is entitled as “*The Story of My Experiments with Truth*”. For him, Truth is the ultimate

¹ Gandhi, M. K. *Young India*, 10-03-1920, p.5

² Shah, Gunvant. *Gandhi for the New Generation*, Navajivan Publishing House (henceforth cited as N.P.H.), Ahmedabad, 2010, p.45

end of life, Truth is the God, and it is the Supreme goal of life and this goal can be achieved only by means of Ahimsa or non-violence, through the selfless service to mankind.

Truth

Truth is all-pervading in Gandhi's life. According to him, "Devotion to this Truth is the sole justification for our existence. All our activities should be centered in Truth. Truth should be the very breath of our life."³ Observance of truth is not merely speaking the truth, but we must be truthful in thought, word and deed. Thus the observance of truth rules out the practice of secrecy, cunning and deception. All seekers after truth must have an abundant sense of humility to have a glimpse of Truth. As Gandhi feels, "The seeker after Truth should be humbler than the dust. The world crushes the dust under its feet, but the seeker after Truth should so humble himself that even the dust could crush him. Only then, and not till then, will he have a glimpse of Truth."⁴ There is Absolute Truth, which is God's attribute alone and which resides in every human's heart and so one has to search for it there. The pursuit of Truth must be accompanied by Non-violence in practice. If both the attributes — Truth and Non-violence — follow each other, the search will move in the right direction. This was the law, in order to which Gandhi lived his whole life and worked for the entire creation of the God.

Non-violence

The ideal of Non-violence is the basic principle of Gandhi's philosophy. He did not use the term Non-violence in the conventional sense of abstaining from killing or hurting a living being. The followers of this principle may not hurt physically or

³ Gandhi, M. K. *The Selected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, vol.III, N.P.H., Ahmedabad, 2011, p.177

⁴ Gandhi, M. K. *An Autobiography or The Story of My Experiments with Truth*, N.P.H., Ahmedabad, 2009, p.xiv

mentally even those whom he believes to be unjust. The follower of Truth and ahimsa will conquer the tyrant by love.

Gandhi regards non-violence as a dynamic force to oppose evil and redress grievances. Non-violence is an active and real fight against wickedness. It is a mental and moral opposition to immoralities. But it is the resistance of the soul and not of the body. The strength of the soul can defy the whole world in arms against it. This strength of the soul can be used even by a person who is weak in body, provided he has a strong will, which Gandhi calls Soul-Force. If mankind acquires Soul-force, non-violence is the greatest weapon; it becomes mightier than the mightiest weapon of destruction.

Sacrifice: The Power of Soul force

Gandhi in his whole lifetime followed by his Soul Force, which was termed by him as ‘*Satyāgraha*’, and suggested to all human beings to follow by this force for pursuing their supreme goal — self-realization. But Gandhi explained that, *satyāgraha* lies in the suffering and self-sacrifice. In *Young India*, Gandhi pointed out that; Satyagraha is just a new name for ‘the law of self-suffering’,⁵ “For the quest of Truth involves tapas — self-suffering sometimes even unto death. There can be no place in it for even a trace of self-interest.”⁶ Satyagraha is mainly based on love. There must be love even for the opponent. According to Gandhi, sacrifice is an indispensable companion of love. He can love who only believes in ‘giving’ and not in ‘taking’. Gandhi says, “Love never claims, it ever gives. Love ever suffers, never resents, and never revenges itself”.⁷ Gandhi feels that suffering is the surest way of getting victory in the battles of life. Gandhi in his lifetime has shown that the suffering or self-sacrifice is the most powerful weapon for a *satyāgrahi*, as he would count imprisonment willingly and deliberately so that the grievances of helpless persons might be redressed and their lot

⁵ Gandhi, M. K. *Young India*.

⁶ Gandhi, M. K. *The Selected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, vol.III, N.P.H., Ahmedabad, 2011, p.178.

⁷ Gandhi, M. K. *Young India*, 09-07-1925

improved. Gandhi took fast in many times for any unjust behavior of any individual or of social groups, as a penance.

Desireless action and the *Sarvodaya* movement

According to Gandhi, unless a person controls his senses and renounces his all desires, he cannot search after truth and is unable to practice the non-violence in his life. When we unite the inner power of love and sacrifice with the outward action, the light of desirelessness shines in it, then a person acts only for the sake of his duty, with the spirit of disinterested sacrifice. The man with desireless action seeks spiritual good, and promotes the growth of his soul, with the intention of service to society — ‘welfare of all’. This ideal can be summed up in one word ‘*Sarvodaya*’, which was introduced by Gandhi in his life of service. To realize others in oneself and oneself in others is the first lesson of ‘*Sarvodaya*’. ‘*Sarvodaya*’ means total evolution or total development without leaving even the worst person outside the sphere. No doubt the concept of ‘*Sarvodaya*’ implies the upliftment and good of all, but the upliftment of the downtrodden poor was Gandhi’s primary concern.

Non-violent Economic order toward Sustainable Development

Gandhi’s attitude towards environment is in consistent with his fundamental philosophy of life. It can be defined as ahimsa or non-violence. It leaves no room for any discrimination. It was basically based on non-injury to all living beings. Gandhi had firm conviction in the power of non-violence. He clearly declared that we cannot have an ecological movement designed to prevent violence against nature until and unless the principle of non-violence becomes central to the moral belief of human culture. It must be based on social justice and equality. He wanted to establish holistic symbiotic relationship with nature where man would lead a need based life and not greed based life.

The economic development indirectly affects the ecological balance. To get rid of this affect Gandhi's vision of economic development keeps some strict observances of certain code of conduct. There are no place for greed, violence and envy in Gandhian economic thought. He believed that an economy has to be nature-friendly. The recycling of waste is an important aspect of the Gandhian economy. It gives emphasis on recycling the throwaway material into a new product.

Gandhi's economic thought is explained by J. C. Kumarappa⁸ in a simplest way. According to him, there is no principle of economics of Gandhi. There are two life principles, which govern all Gandhi's economic, social, political and other consideration, namely, Truth and Non-violence. It is in the application of this criterion that the economic thought of Gandhi has been built up. According to Gandhi, a new set of norms is required for mankind in the midst of ecological crisis of today. The basic requirement is to realize that the modern man cannot exploit nature as he likes and if he does, it is on his own peril.

Gandhi gave emphasis on human factors in technological and economic development. He insisted on the village which is the unit of production and distribution. His model of development is village-oriented, decentralized, agriculture and eco-friendly industry with total harmony with nature. According to Gandhi, the environmental crisis arises from the greedy nature of man. Due to this nature man doesn't able to minimize his wants. Gandhi is quite aware of the fact that, the earth can only satisfy our needs, but not the greed. Exploitation and oppression are parts of what can be called 'greed economics', as greed transforms human economics into the economics of dead matter. And such, it grows and sharpens instrumental attitude towards man, nature and society. As the focal point of 'geed economics' is the celebration of bodily comfort. As Gandhi admits, "An economics that inculcates Mammon worship and enables the strong to amass wealth at the expenses of the weak

⁸ Kumarappa, J.C. *Gandhian Economic Thought*. Sarva Seva Sangh Prakashan, Varanasi, p.2.

is a false and dismal science. It spells death. True economics promotes the goods of all including the weakest, and is indispensable for decent life.”⁹

The ‘greed economics’ is unjust and it prolongs injustice in society. In order to acquire more and more one deprives others even of subsistence resources. Here what is important for Gandhi is not legality, but inculcating a sense of justice among people. So, Gandhi says, “True economics is the economics of justice. People will be happy in so far as they learn to do justice and be righteous. To teach the people to get rich by hook or by crook is to do them immense injustice.”¹⁰

Gandhi admits that, physical and economic wellbeing has no value if it is not related with morality and ethical values. For Gandhi, there is no distinction between economics and ethics. Economics that hurts the moral being of an individual or a nation is immoral and therefore sinful. Therefore Gandhi says, “True economics never militates against the highest ethical standards, just as all true ethics to be worth its name must at the same time be also good economics.”¹¹ According to Gandhi, one should not possess more than what one needs as a basic minimum. But problem arises as to how a man can overcome this character of possessiveness. Regarding this matter Gandhi suggests us that, self-transformation is the only way to overcome this problem. It requires turning inward and forbidding one’s own soul to exercise more and more on desires. That is why Gandhi says, “It is an inward change... It is the transformation of the heart. And that absolute transformation can only come by inward prayer and a definite and living recognition of the presence of the mighty spirit residing within.”¹²

The basic approach to constructive work was spiritual, as Gandhi placed very high importance on the intrinsic development of the individual and the society for realizing spiritual goals inherent in every person’s soul. His all movements attempted to the discovery and enrichments of the soul of India. He made his life of simplicity and purity, divorced from the luxuries of life, uncompromising with truth, Gandhi

⁹ Gandhi, M. K. *Sarvodaya*, Navajivan Publishing House, Ahmedabad, 1954. P.32.

¹⁰ Gandhi, M. K. *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi (CWMG)*. 4:73.

¹¹ Gandhi, M. K. *Young India*, Navajivan Publishing House, Ahmedabad, October 13, 1921, P.325.

¹² Gandhi, M. K. *CWMG*. (1979 Reprint), 31: 45.

became the torch-bearer for hundreds of millions of human beings in India and throughout the world. This slight man, thin, wan, was a spiritual giant of this century, and is called as ‘*Mahātmā*’, the name given by Rabindranath Tagore.

Relevance of Mahatma’s greatness in the present world

On 30th January 1948 while walking to playground, for prayer he was shot by Godse silencing the voice of the voiceless Indians. But such voice can not be silenced which comes from a person’s mouth but arises out from the heart of millions and as such he produced many ‘Gandhi’ or ‘Mahatma’ in this world. The name of Mahatma Gandhi transcends the bounds of race, religion and nation-states and has emerged as the strong voice of the 21st century. In the post-Gandhian period so many great persons, social activists, politicians, economists, environmentalists, scientists, etc., were very much inspired by Gandhi. Some of leading persons are — the Tibetan spiritual leader Dalai Lama, who puts Gandhi’s success in right perspective; the South African freedom fighter Nelson Mandela, who took Gandhi’s method to end apartheid in South Africa, without bloodshed; Dr. Martin Luther King a Negro leader of America fought for the emancipation of the Negroes by Gandhian method; the Democratic U.S President Barack Obama saw Mahatma Gandhi as an inspiration and had a portrait of the apostle of peace in his office. Every Indian should feel proud of the birth-day of the ‘Father of the Nation’ (2nd October) has been declared as the ‘International Day for Non-violence’.

In the present world, in this materialistic age, where economics has become all important and nuclear power a must; when there has been deep erosion of moral values in our public life; people are getting more and more divided into national, religious and ethnic compartments. In such a desperate situation men found a direction to look to Mahatma Gandhi. Now Gandhi is becoming more and more relevant in the modern day world to offer a multi-purpose solution to the problems of world and the relevance of Gandhian thought will remain luster as long as the mankind will exist. But it is our task to materialize Gandhi’s ideal in reality, and only by this way

Gandhi's dream will be fulfilled. Gandhi once said, "I am indeed a practical dreamer. My dreams are not airy nothings. I want to convert my dreams into realities as far as possible."¹³

Mahatma Gandhi realized that the foundation of Indian economy rests on the rural base, the tiller and his crafts are backbone of this system. Thus we saw Gandhi's all constructive programme was based on the principle of self-reliance, to make every individual or every village as self-sufficient. He was not against industrialization but he pleaded for the technology that would supplement and complement man-power and animal power. That was the way to safeguard unemployment and starvation. In the educational field Gandhi felt that education should not only increase knowledge but develop the culture of heart, it should inculcate the value of manual labour; when in the present day education is constructing some selfish-egoistic human only. To solve the present environmental havoc, a Gandhian way of treatment is badly needed for the present society, as he said; we should work non-violently in partnership with nature and conserve natural resources, we should use the natural resources according to our needs only, not for fulfilling our greed. After all Gandhi's non-violence message is the inspiring ideal which can prevent any nuclear war and can save us from the present clashes. To date, India and Pakistan despite numerous clashes have shown tremendous restraint in preventing a nuclear war. Finally I can say, to sustain our life in this world, we have to minimize our desires and needs as less as possible, and we have to live a life in simplicity and austerity, as Gandhi shown. Thus we find, Gandhism has ever more relevance in this world. I would like to conclude with a tribute to Mahatma Gandhi that Albert Einstein gave: "Generations to come, it may be, will scarce believe that such one as this ever in flesh and blood walked upon this earth."¹⁴

¹³ Gandhi, M. K. *Harijan*, 17-11-1933, p.6.

¹⁴ Einstein, A. *Out of My Later Years*, Philosophical Library, New York, 1950, p.240.

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