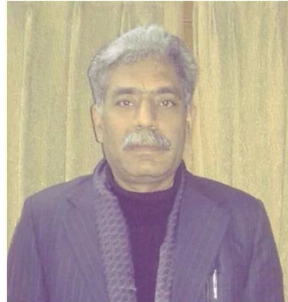




Keynote Address
on
Relevance of Mahatma Gandhi in Contemporary Society



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Mahatma Gandhi popularly known as Bapu or Father of the Nation is tallest among the leaders of the world of the 20th century ever produced. He is remembered all over the world for his love of peace, non-violence, truth, honesty, pristine purity, compassion and his success in using these instruments to bring together the entire population and helping the country to attain independence from the colonial power and show the new way to the world. Gandhi was a creative man and responding to the challenges of his time and setting example for present and future generations. Albert Einstein, the great scientist rightly said that "Generations to come will scarce believe that such a one as this ever in flesh and blood walked upon this earth" Gandhi changed the course of history and created history. He was a man of principles, great convictions and always practiced what he preached. There was no dichotomy between theory and practice and between public and private life. He left an everlasting impact on the world at large because he always spoke and understood

the language of the masses, socially deprived and downtrodden. Even after sixty-three years of his death Gandhi continues to attract the attention of scholars, social activists, media, policy makers and dreamers not only in India but throughout globe.

Present world is passing through a critical phase of human history and is in search of an alternative. Liberalisation, privatisation and globalisation are not only reshaping the economy of the people and nation but fundamentally reshaping culture, ideology, attitude and life style of the people across the world. Everywhere one can see the fundamental change. Small is being replaced by mega. Invisible became visible. There is a mad race for materialistic development resulting in alienation of people from society and nature and resorting to violence of different type. Everywhere structural violence has increased. Service and need is replaced by greed. Ethics and honesty is no longer pivotal in public life. There is crisis after crises, corruption after



corruption and ultimately people are sufferer. Marxism provided an alternative to Capitalism. Due to inherent contradiction Marxian experiments failed. Liberalism and neo-liberalism are also not able to solve the human miseries. People hope lies in Gandhism which provide an alternative.

The Gandhian principles are capable of mitigate the greatest challenge of the modern age. The most urgent need of today is the abolition of human suffering. Gandhi's philosophy becomes pertinent in the present world due to the complexity of human behaviour. His philosophy, laying stress on the goodness of human nature, unity of mankind, service of man, application of moral principles considered valid for individuals to group life and inter-state relations, the non-violent process of change, social and economic equality, economic and political decentralization, tries to resolve the various kinds of tensions that disturb domestic and international harmony. It is capable of strengthening the forces of love, creativeness and joy of life and beauty. It takes an integrated view of man and emphasizes his spiritual nature. Gandhi provides an answer and an alternative, which is above all, a ray of hope, a vision for future and a blue print for individual, state and society. The interpretations of Gandhian thought and perspective needs to be reiterated again and again till the masses learn to adopt and practice it in their thought and deed.

Gandhi provides solution to the contemporary dilemmas and conflicts arising out due to failure of developmental paradigms and failure of leadership. Even the welfare state is not responding as it was expected. The tragedy of modern India is that the important aspects of the Gandhian philosophy are not given serious

attention. The ruling elite never realized that Gandhi was much ahead of time. The quest of humanity for social justice and sustainability will remain a dream until and unless humanity realizes what Gandhi meant when he said, that economics is untrue which ignores and disregards moral values. Gandhi in his various speeches and in his articles written throughout the freedom struggle spoke highly of democratic decentralization and rural development. In the 22nd July, 1946 issue of Harijan, Gandhi stated that 'Independence must begin at the bottom'. He said, "the swaraj of my dreams is the poor man's swaraj. The necessities of life should be enjoyed by you in common with those enjoyed by the princes and the moneyed men. But that does not mean that you should have palaces like theirs. They are not necessary for happiness. You or I would be lost in them. But you ought to get all the ordinary amenities of life that a rich man enjoys. I have not the slightest doubt that swaraj is not Poonr Swaraj until these amenities are guaranteed to you under it".

Gandhiji found the picture of his free India in its essentials embodied in a song that was sung at one of his evening prayers in Banghi Colony, New Delhi. What emerged was a picture of the India of his dreams. It was as follows:

We are inhabitants of a country
where there is no sorrow and no
suffering,
Where there is no illusion nor anguish,
no delusion nor desire,
Where flows the Ganges of love
and the whole creation is full of joy,
Where all minds flow in one direction,
and where there is no occasion for sense
of time,
All there wants satisfied;



Here all barter is just,
Here all are cast in same mould,
Here is no lack nor care,
No selfishness in any shape or form,
No high no low, no master no slave;
All is light, yet no burning heat,
That country is within you-
It is Swaraj, Swadeshi,
The home within you-
Victory! Victory! Victory!
He realizes it who longs for it.

India achieved independence on 15 August 1947. Indian man became a citizen from a subject. But, in Gandhi's words, we did not get freedom, that is, Swaraj (self-rule). He wanted not only a new citizen for India but for the rest of the world who would be 'visionary'. His vision was to consider the whole world a single 'family'. His philosophy and goal of development had to be inspired by 'Sarvodaya' (development of all). His principles and methods were to be based on 'Truth and Nonviolence'. He was to wage a relentless battle against injustice. He was to use 'Satyagraha' (self-suffering) to change the heart of the opponent.

Such a new man will be able to replace hatred with love, competition with cooperation, and interdependence will be his basic principle of life. He will bring peace, tranquility, and harmony in the world. The new man will tell India and the world that we need not adopt war or flee, or be subservient to resolve conflict and difference. He will tell us that we can match our soul force against the physical force and wear the other down with goodwill. It is possible to have the 'new man' by internalizing and practicing Gandhi's thoughts, words, and deeds. Salvation for a strife-ridden world lies in having Gandhi's 'New Man' who

will consider the whole world a joint family.

The objective of the governance in India was set by the Pandit Jawahar Lal Nehru in his soul-stirring speech in the midnight of August 14-15, 1947. It was "**ending of poverty and ignorance and disease and inequality of opportunity**". Mahatma Gandhi also prescribed a set of stiff yardsticks for judging the efficacy of public policies in a system of good governance. He said, "**Will it restore to him (the poorest and the weakest man) control over his own life and destiny? In other words will it lead to Swaraj for the hungry and spiritually starving millions?**" To achieve these objectives the Directive Principles of State Policy was provided in the Constitution, which are not justiciable but nonetheless are fundamental to the governance of the country. But the Indian state has without a doubt failed in its responsibilities towards its citizens over the last 60 odd years.

To reestablish and reaffirm the faith Gandhi wrote Hind Swaraj. Hind Swaraj is a manifesto for a new world order based on supremacy of ethics and morality over matter. It represents voice of the voiceless, voice of the common man of India, and even of the common people of the whole world. Hind Swaraj raises fundamental questions. India's encounter with Britain was not political and economic but civilizational. Even today, the situation is no different from the one when Gandhi wrote Hind Swaraj. Hind Swaraj is a Gandhi's response to the immediate, contemporary problems arising out of inner and outer conflicts at individual, state and society level. Hind Swaraj also provides a vision, strategies, blueprint to future and an alternative to



solve the contemporary problems. Future hope lies in Hind Swaraj. In fact Hind Swaraj is the Gandhian bible; it is the sacred book the Father of the Nation gave to country, truly the Gita of the nationalist era. Through Hind Swaraj Gandhi wanted to establish **self esteem of individual and moral regeneration of India**. In other words Gandhi through Hind Swaraj wanted to transform (a) **India as a nation and polity** and (b) **Indians**. Hind Swaraj is a **source book for evaluation of India and Indians**. It is a manual of action for people. Hind Swaraj is a critique of excessiveness of materialistic western society. It is a pointer to down side of modern civilization i.e colonialism, neo-colonialism, violence, alienation etc. It is also a pointer to Political democracy because political democracy without social democracy is not a democracy at all. Criticism on Railways, Lawyer and doctors must be seen as down side of colonialism and neo-colonialism. Hind Swaraj provides an alternative how a oppressed class can fight. It provides a way to fight against oppression, injustice, extremism, violence etc. It also provide alternative to individual, society and state. One can honestly say that Indians love to talk about Hind Swaraj but not understood it properly nor transformed its idea or philosophy on ground. It is a source book for evaluation of India and Indians in the post independent India.

Among the tributes received in New Delhi within hours of Mahatma Gandhi's assassination on 30 January 1948 was one from Sarojini Naidu who said: **"May the soul of my master, my leader, my father, and rest not in peace. Not in peace my father does not rest. Keep us to our pledge. Give us strength to fulfill our promises to our heirs, your**

descendants, guardians of your dreams, and fulfillers of India's destiny."

The force of her words reminds us that we should not rest till we are able to internalize in ourselves the twin principles of Truth and Nonviolence in our thought and action. We should be optimistic and hope that we would be able to overcome the present crises facing the world.

According to Gandhi, real democracy should have meaning not for a few but for all including the poorest and even for the maimed, the blind, and the deaf. He did not believe in mere lip sympathy for the ideal which comes so easily to most present day politicians and leaders. The entire social order should be such that this ideal should be achieved in practice. A genuine democracy calls for a higher degree of seriousness of purpose and a sense of urgency. Gandhi realized that once people are awakened, they would become a revolutionary force. Their minimum expectations would have to be satisfied, otherwise they would explode. This explosion could take many unpleasant and ugly forms.

Today one of the basic questions is whether the rulers and political parties have a high level of seriousness or a sense of urgency. The answer is obviously "no." Despite many laws, the whole electoral process and system in India is becoming less and less an honest mirror of public opinion. This is true of all other parts of the world as well. Even criminals are acquiring political respectability. This power is assuming more and more credible forms. The situation in other countries is not bright either. The voters are bribed and often elections are rigged. The candidates are merchandised



rather than elected. One of the saddest aspects of election times is that politics overrides all human considerations.

Of course, in order to come out of the present malaise and dilemma, the only remedy lies in adopting Gandhian path to resolve conflicts. Arnold Toynbee has rightly observed: "At this supremely dangerous moment in human history, the only way of salvation for mankind is the Indian way Emperor Ashok's and Mahatma Gandhi's principles of non-violence and Sri Ramakrishna's testimony to the harmony of religions. Here we have an attitude and spirit that can make it possible for the human race to grow together into a single family and in the Atomic Age this is the only alternative to destroying ourselves."

Politicians in India, instead of giving moral leadership for which people are yearning and waiting, are only occupied in maintaining a system which is poisoned by collective bad faith and polluted by individual self-interest. People are served by deception and craftiness instead of by vision and imagination. The duty of a citizen is not merely to vote but to vote wisely. He must be guided by reason and by reason alone. He must vote for the best man, irrespective of any other consideration and irrespective of the party label. The right man in the wrong party is any day preferable to the wrong man in the right party. Time has gone when 'Congress' was a word to conjure with.

Indians by and large, are "low arousal" people. They tolerate injustice and unfairness with feudalistic servility and fatalistic resignation. On 15 August 1947 India achieved Independence. But Gandhi was not

present in New Delhi. At that time, he was working among the poor people of Bengal. The reason for his absence was simple. He had two dreams in his life. The first dream was liberation of India from the British rule, while the second was liberation of Indians from oppression and injustice, from inequity and inequality, from discord and disharmony. To quote his own words: "I shall work for an India in which the poorest shall feel that it is their country in whose making they have an effective voice, an India in which there should be no rich class and no poor class of people, and an India in which all communities shall live in perfect harmony. This is the India of my dream." His first dream was fulfilled but the second was not. According to the Mahatma, the true time for celebration would be when the second dream is fulfilled. Gandhi was a leader of his people, unsupported by any authority; a politician whose success rested, not upon craft or guile, but simply upon the moral grandeur of his soul; a fighter who pushed back the mightiest empire on earth without the use of force; a spirit of profound wisdom and captivating humility, armed with only an iron will and inflexible resolve; and a frail man who confronted the brutality of military strength with the dignity of a simple human being. To the Mahatma, Truth was God and non-violence was religion. At his memorable trial for sedition in 1922,, he said: "*Non-violence is the first article of my faith. It is also, the last article of my creed. In non-violence bravery consists of dying, not in killing*" His compassion and humanity were as boundless as the universe. "*Gather together,*" he said, "*under one banner all men from all religions and races of India and infuse into them the spirit of solidarity and oneness to the*



utter exclusion of all communal and parochial sentiments." And again: "My Hinduism is not secularism. It includes all that I know to the best of Islam, Christianity, Buddhism, and Zoroastrianism. Truth is my religion and Ahimsa (the principle of nonviolence) is the only way of its realization." Gandhi held the view that the life of a good citizen was the life of Karma action in the service of the country. "My writings should be cremated with my body," he said. "What I have done will endure, not what I have said or written."

The hatred and fanaticism which consumed the body of the Mahatma did not touch his great soul. Indian systems and ideologies may be relevant at one time and irrelevant at others. But teaching of this great and benign lamp of wisdom and humanity are for endless time. He gave us the priceless gift of self-respect and the sense of dignity as a nation. **The last interview which the Mahatma gave was in the early afternoon of 30 January 1948 to Margaret Bourke an American from the Life Magazine.** She asked him whether he would persist in his theory of nonviolence in the event of a nuclear attack on a city. The Mahatma's reply was that if the defenseless citizens died in a spirit of nonviolence, their sacrifice would not go in vain. They might well pray for the soul of the pilot who thoughtlessly sprayed death on the city. This was his last message of compassion to mankind. He completely identified himself with the Indian masses. He observed: *"We must first come in living touch with them by working with them and in their midst, we must share their sorrows, understand their difficulties and anticipate their wants. With the pariahs*

we must be pariahs and see how we feel to clean the closets of the upper classes and have the remains of theirs to be thrown at us. We must see how we like being in the boxes, miscalled houses, of the labourers of Bombay. We must identify with the villagers who toil under the hot sun beating on their bent back and see how we would like to drink water from the pool in which the villagers bathe, wash their clothes and pots, and in which their cattle drink and roll. Then and not till then shall we truly represent the masses and they will, as surely as I am writing this, respond to every call."

The Indian masses responded to the Mahatma's call in a spirit of total surrender. He said to them *that "real Swaraj will come not by the acquisition of authority by a few but by the acquisition of the capacity by all to resist authority when it is abused."* He repeatedly used to mention that through realization of freedom for India, we would try to carry on and fulfill the mission of the universal brotherhood. He was really involved in achieving the broadest good of humanity at large.

Gandhi shows the way to harmonize the values of artha and moksha, secularism and spirituality, power and justice. Purusharthas, as interpreted by Gandhi, provide a set of values and ideals within which public discourse in India can (and should) be conducted. He presents a balanced view of life. Wealth, power, pleasure, aesthetic beauty, ethical integrity and freedom of the spirit, the purusharthas, are goals that all Indians seek. Gandhi explains how and why that seeking should be the basis of modern India's public philosophy.¹



The concept of purushartha has three related meanings. First, it means any human striving, secondly, it refers to human striving directed towards overcoming fate and karma. And thirdly, it refers to any one of the four canonically recognized aims of life, viz., dharma (ethics and religion), artha (wealth and power), karma (pleasure) and moksha (liberation from samsara, the cycle of birth, death and rebirth).²

Gandhi himself beautifully sum up, he alone is religious, he alone is happy and he alone is wealthy, who is sincere in himself, bears no malice, exploits no one and always acts with a pure mind. Such men alone can serve mankind.

The present problems, according to former Prime Minister P. V. Narasimha Rao, can be traced to a single source: the near complete alienation between the political establishment the bureaucracy, and the money elite on the one hand and civil society on the other. The former seeks self-aggrandizement: the politician through the electoral system and the bureaucrat through manipulating rules, regulations and procedures, and the moneyed elite, thanks to a promiscuous relationship it built up with former in the exploitative system.

Citizens find the state has progressively abandoned its writ to goons and hoodlums. The district collector, the corporator, the MLA, the MP, and the minister no longer command the respect they once did. In the eyes of the common citizen, courts and Parliament serve merely to lend a measure of legitimacy to fraud and crookedness and profligate wheeling-dealing.

The leaders of the ruling as well as of other parties, out of their self-interest, fail to understand the basic fact that no party in the country can survive, let alone thrive, if politics is merely a matter of vote banks. In India the political situation has become so grave that politics has been criminalised to such an extent that crime is becoming politicized.

There are three factors responsible which have distorted a rational development of citizenship India. One is poverty, creating the need for economic security at any price and its corollary, the widening gap between the rich and the poor; the second is the galloping population growth; and the third is the 'conflict between ethnicity and the doctrine of unity. In reconciling the implications of these pressures upon the public psyche, a self-centered society has emerged. This society seems unable to look farther than narrow self-interest, self-promotion, and selfish ambition. This is the rule rather than the exception which leaves a particularly heavy burden on all disinterested citizens who are acutely aware that we shall have no nation worth the name in the near future unless we can do something to restore the confidence of the people in a life-style that shows concern for others.

There is not a single one of us that is not enriched by our composite culture-, whether it is in music, food, or dress, to take a few everyday examples. For example, the image of the unseen thread in the garland is an excellent metaphor for what nationality or internationality can be linked to. If the thread is cut at one point, the garland ceases to exist. How is the thread to be



safeguarded? I suggest that we need to shift to a language, of a different kind in order to answer this question. The nation of world can only survive if there is a new socio-economic order where the biggest gulf of all, that is, the one between the rich and poor, is removed to cease the yawning gap between one citizen and another.

The moral authority of most of the politicians has almost disappeared, since they are seen as opportunists, in league with criminals and crooked businessmen. It is, therefore, not possible for politicians to impose discipline in a society which sees them as examples of indiscipline. The common man is alarmed at the moral sickness that is enveloping the world and lowering our ethical standards. Money power seems to have an all pervasive effect. One hopes that we do not reach a level where indifference by contagion or where lassitude slowly engulfs the nation and after a certain point of conditioning violence becomes acceptable, scandal becomes routine, and militant resistance turns into a film script. Education must be shaped as a potent weapon to reverse the process from seeking pleasure, acquisition, and violence to self-control, sharing, and compassion. We Indians must first integrate ourselves to achieve our ultimate motto of Vasudhaiva Kutumbakarn (the world is one family).

Political parties ought to work for the unity and integrity of India. Unfortunately, all parties with rare exception have used caste, religion and language, to their electoral advantage. Unfortunately, during the last five years or more, situation has emerged, particularly in India, wherein it is difficult to say whether a particular

offence of misdemeanour is opposed or tolerated. The space economic offenders and scamsters opposed now, but the very fact that they had been allowed to accumulate over the years proves that they were not only tolerated but perhaps encouraged as well.

India's success will be measured not by homogenizing a heterogeneous situation, but by the success with which diverse societies can be harmonized and co-exist and become mutually reinforcing and supportive; where traditions and modernity are appropriately blended, and where man-made capital does not become destructive of the natural capital. Both models have their specific constituencies in India.

Summing Up

We must go back to the spirit and ideals of those halcyon days when we practiced the philosophy of nation first and foremost; when we spoke the language of the heart; when we breathed the air of idealism; when we walked hand in hand on the path of selfless service and sacrifice; when all sons and daughters of the motherland prided themselves in being "*Indian first, Indians last and Indians always.*" The need of the hour is that leaders and people of the country be inspired by the ideals and teachings of Mahatma Gandhi. We need a man of values at the head of a government. We need a philosopher king, whose head is clear and whose heart is in the right place. If this be true, then Gandhi is of relevance. If the policies of tomorrow are to be freed from the corrosiveness of purely personal ambition and raised to the level of serving great causes – such as liberating men from poverty, disease and hunger, both of body and mind -



then Nehru is of relevance. If kindness, magnanimity, gentleness, and concern for others are the virtues which should inform public life, then Gandhi is of relevance. With the passage of time, Gandhi will be of greater relevance, and not merely to my country, but to the world at large. I have no doubt that so far as my own countrymen are concerned, more especially the younger generation to whom Gandhi is a mere name, they will, in the fullness of time and in the measure they address themselves to the real problems of India's historic transformation. The relevance of Gandhi remains undiminished today. In fact, his ideas and approach to political, economic and social issues are more relevant now than even in his life-time. The policy makers, politicians, intellectuals and scientists must remember in thought and action the Talisman of Mahatma Gandhi:

"I will give you a Talisman. Whenever you are in doubt, or when the self becomes too much with you, apply the following test.

Recall the face of the poorest and the weakest man whom you may have seen, and ask yourself, if the step you contemplate is going to be of any use to him? Will he gain anything by it? Will it restore him to a control over his own life and destiny? In other words, will it lead to swaraj for the hungry and spiritually starving millions? Then you will find your doubts and yourself melting away."

We shall like to conclude that Gandhi's spoken words, writings, and work done by him will resonate for centuries to come. At the same time we must remember the seven social sins which

Gandhi wrote in Young India of 22.X.1925.

*Politics without principles
Wealth without work
Pleasure without consciences
Knowledge without character
Commerce without morality
Science without humanity
Worship without sacrifice.*

What breath is to life, Gandhi is to humanity and civilization. As long as there is strife, hostilities, ethnic cleansing, religious unrest, internal conflicts and threats of military occupation, people will turn to Gandhi. His usefulness will not end unless conflict ceases, radical discrimination ends, women are empowered and poor live with dignity.

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