

Emergence Of Gandhi In India : A Review Of Values And Concepts

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In Indian freedom struggle, the emergence of Mahatma Gandhi was a turning point for India and rest of the world. Gandhi with his unimaginable qualities led the crusade in India from the front and showed new grammar of life.

The Inspiration of Mahatma Gandhi's life has been what is commonly called religion, religion not in the sense of subscription to dogmas or conformity to ritual, but religion in the sense of an abiding faith in the absolute values of truth, love and justice and a persistent endeavour to realize them on earth. Once asked to state his view of religion. He expressed it in these words: "I often describe my religion as Religion of Truth of late, instead of ranging God is truth. I have been saying Truth is God in order more fully to define my religion.... Nothing so completely describes my God as Truth. Denial of God we have known. Denial of Truth we have not known. The most ignorant among mankind have some Truth in them. We are all sparks of Truth. The sum total of these sparks is indescribable, as yet unknown Truth which is God. I am being daily led nearer to it by constant prayer."

Gandhi was convinced that all religions aim at the same goal. The inner life, the life of the spirit in God, is the great reality. All else is outside. We make much of the accessories of religion, not of religion itself, not of the temple of God in the human spirit but of the props and buttresses which we have built round the temple for fear that it should fall. These details are moulded by the external conditions and adapted to the traditions of the people.

Gandhi recalls us to the age-old tradition of India, the tradition not of mere tolerance but of profound respect for all faiths, and warns us that we should not squander away the spiritual patrimony which generations of our ancestors have built for us with so much assiduity and abnegation. When he was asked to define Hinduism, he said, "though he was a Sanatani Hindu he was unable to define Hinduism. As a layman (who was not learned in the science of religion) he could say that

Hinduism regarded all religions as worthy of all respect." "Tolerance," says Gandhi, "implies a gratuitous assumption of the inferiority of other faiths to one's own, whereas ahimsa teaches us to entertain the same respect for the religious faiths of others as we accord to our own, thus admitting the imperfections of the latter." Gandhi does not claim exclusive validity for Hinduism and does not grant it to other religions. "It was impossible for me to believe that I could go to heaven or attain salvation only by being a Christian... It was more than I could believe that Jesus was the only incarnate Son of God." Truth belongs to God and ideas belong to men and we cannot be certain that our ideas have assimilated the whole truth. Whatever our religious ideas may be, we all seek to climb the hill and our eyes are fixed on the same goal. We may choose different paths and follow different guides. When we reach the top, the roads leading to it matter little if only we keep on ascending. In religion what counts is effort.

In January 1928 Gandhi said to the Federation of International Fellowships: "After long study and experience I have come to these conclusions, that (i) all religions are true, (ii) all religions have some error in them, (iii) all religions are almost as dear to me as my own Hinduism. My veneration for others' faiths is the same as for my own faith. Consequently the thought of conversion is impossible... Our prayer for others ought never to be 'God, give them all the light Thou hast given to me,' but 'give them all the light and truth they need for their highest development.' My faith offers me all that is necessary for my inner development, for it teaches one to pray. But I also pray that everyone else may develop to the fullness of his being in his own religion, that the Christian may become a better Christian and the Mohammedan a better Mohammedan. I am convinced that God will one day ask us only what we are and what we do, not the name we give to our being and doing." At the prayer meeting on January 21, 1948, Gandhi said that he "had practised Hinduism from early childhood. His nurse had taught him to invoke Rama when he feared evil spirits. Later on he had come in contact with Christians, Muslims and others and after making a fair study of other religions had stuck to Hinduism. He was as firm in his faith today as in his early childhood. He believed God would make him an instrument of saving the religion that he loved, cherished and practised."

Even though Gandhi practised this religion with courage and consistency, he had an unusual sense of humour, a certain light-heartedness, even gaiety, which we do not associate with ardent religious souls. This playfulness was the outcome of an innocence of heart, a spontaneity of spirit. While he redeemed even the most fugitive and

trivial moment from commonness, he had all the time a remote, a far-away look. The abuses and perversities of life did not shake his confidence in the essential goodness of things. He assumed, without much discussion, that his way of life was clean, right and natural, while our way in this mechanized industrial civilization was unnatural, unhealthy and wrong.

Gandhi's religion was an intensely practical one. There are religious men who, when they find the troubles and perplexities of the world too much for them, wrap their cloaks around them, withdraw into monasteries or mountain-tops and guard the sacred fires burning in their own hearts. If truth, love and justice are not to be found in world, we can possess these graces in the inviolable sanctuary of our souls. For Gandhi, sanctity and service of man were inseparable. "My motive has been purely religious. I could not be leading a religious life unless I identified myself with the whole of mankind; and this I could not do unless I took part in politics. The whole gamut of man's activities today constitutes an indivisible whole; you cannot divide social, political and purely religious work into watertight compartments. I do not know any religion apart from human activity. My devotion to truth has drawn me into the field of politics; and I can say without the slightest hesitation, and yet with all humility, that those who say that religion has nothing to do with politics do not know what religion means." Many of us who call ourselves religious maintain the stage-set of religion. We practise mechanically its rites, acquiesce passively in its dogmas. We conform to the forms as such conformity brings us social advantages or political privileges. We invoke the name of God and despise our neighbours. We deceive ourselves with empty phrases and mental clichés. For Gandhi religion was a passionate participation in the life of spirit. It was intensely practical and dynamic. He was keenly sensitive to the pain of the world and longed "to wipe every tear from every eye". He believed in the sanctification of all life. "Politics divorced from religion" was, for him, "a corpse, fit only to be burned."

He looked upon politics as a branch of ethics and religion. It is not a struggle for power and wealth, but a persistent and continuous effort to enable the submerged millions to attain the good life, to raise the quality of human beings, to train them for freedom and fellowship, for spiritual depth and social harmony.'

Once Gandhi said My life is dedicated to the service of India through religion of non-violence, which I believe to be the root Hinduism." He ordered the suspension of the movement of non-cooperation when he saw that his people were not to conform to his high standards. By his

withdrawal exposed himself to the derision of his Opponents. "Let opponent glory in our humiliation and so-called defeat. It is better to be charged with cowardice than to be guilty denial of our oath and sin against God. It is a million times better that I should be the laughing stock of the world than that I should act insincerely towards myself... I know that the drastic reversal of practically the whole of the aggressive programme may be politically unsound and unwise but there is no doubt that it is religiously sound." What is morally wrong cannot be politically right. On the evening of August 8, 1942, when what is known as the "Quit India" resolution was passed by the All-India Congress Committee Gandhi said: "We must look the world in the face with calm and clear eyes, even though the eyes of the world are bloodshot today." When the naval disturbances started in Bombay he scolded those who organized it: "Hatred is in the air and impatient lovers of the country will gladly take advantage of it, if they can, through violence to further the cause of independence. I suggest that it is wrong at any time and everywhere But it is more wrong and unbecoming in a country whose fighters for freedom have declared to the world that their policy is truth and non-violence." He had great faith that the spirit of violence "is a survival which will kill itself in time. It is so contrary to the spirit of India." "I have striven all my life for the liberating of India, But if I can get it only by violence, I would not want it." The means by which freedom is attained are as important as the end itself. An India made free through immorality cannot be really free. He conducted the struggle with the established government in India as in South Africa, without any trace of racial feeling, with civilized dignity. The transfer of power on August 15, 1947, marked the end of the struggle. It ended in a settlement reached in a spirit of good temper and friendliness.

Freedom for Gandhi was not a mere political fact. It was a social reality." He struggled not only to free India from foreign rule but free her from social corruption and communal strife "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 shall be no high class and low class of people; an India in which all communities shall live in perfect harmony. There can be no room in such an India for the curse of un-touchability or the curse of intoxicating drinks and drugs. Women will enjoy the same rights as men."

Political freedom does not represent the fulfillment of a nation's dream. It only provides scope and opportunity for the renewal of a nation's life' A free India must be made a country of discerning people, cherishing the values of true civilization, peace; order, goodwill between

man and man, love of truth, quest of beauty and hatred of evil. When we scramble for power over our fellows, for power to make money, for power to make life more ugly than it is, it means that we have lost the grace of life and the dignity of civilization.

Anxious to make the Indian society a truly free one, Gandhi put at the centre of his constructive programme the spinning-wheel, the removal of un-touchability and communal harmony. Freedom is a mockery so long as men starve, go naked and pine away in voiceless anguish. The charkha or the spinning-wheel will help to redeem the common man from the evils of poverty and ignorance, disease and squalor. "Political freedom has no meaning for the millions if they do not know how to employ their enforced idleness. Eighty per cent of the Indian population are compulsorily unemployed for half the year; they can only be helped by reviving a trade that has fallen into oblivion and making it a source of new income." Gandhi stressed the use of the spinning-wheel as an occupation supplementary to agriculture. Gandhi struggled to retain the traditional rural civilization which expressed the living unity of a people harmoniously interacting on a certain soil swayed by a common feeling about life, the earth and the universe. The ambitious spirit of man feels itself strong and free in the villages with their open spaces and green belts rather than in overcrowded cities with their darkness and squalor, foul smell and stagnant air, fevers and rickets. In the village community men feel that they are responsible individuals effectively participating in its life. When these villagers move to towns they become restless spiritless and hopeless. The peasant and the weaver are displaced by the mechanic and the business man, and to compensate for the boredom of life exciting amusements are devised. No wonder the spirit of man becomes lost in this wilderness of living. If we are to humanize society and bring moral significance to acts and relationships, we should work for a decentralized village economy where machinery could be employed so long as it does not disturb much the fundamental framework of society and the freedom of the human spirit.

Gandhi does not reject machinery as such. He observes: "How can I be against all machinery when I know that even this body is a most delicate piece of machinery? The spinning-wheel is a machine; a little toothpick is a machine. What I object to is the craze for machinery, not machinery as such. The craze is for what they call labour-saving machinery. Men go on 'saving labour' till thousands are without work and thrown on the open streets to die of starvation. I want to save time and labour, not for a fraction of mankind but for all. I want the concentration of wealth, not in the hands of a few, but in the hands of

all. Today, 'machinery merely helps a few to ride on the backs of millions. The impetus behind it all is not the philanthropy to save labour, but greed. It is against this constitution of things that I am fighting with all my might. The machine should not tend to atrophy the limbs of man... Factories run by power-driven machinery should be nationalized, state-controlled. The supreme consideration is man"

As a religious and social reformer, Gandhi pricked us into a new awareness of the social evils from which we have been suffering. He exhorted us to rid religion of the many accretions with which in its long history it became encumbered, notably un-touchability. Hinduism has paid a heavy price for its neglect of social responsibilities. The Constitution of India aims at establishing an equitable social order in which ideals of virtue and freedom will inspire economic and political, social and cultural institutions.

Gandhi strove for a free and united India. The hour of his triumph proved to be the hour of his humiliation. The division of the country was a grievous wrong we have suffered. Our leaders, in a mood of frustration, tired of communal "killings", acquiesced in the partition of India against their better judgment and the advice of Gandhi. However, the price of partition did not yield communal peace, but actually increased communal bitterness. The New Delhi celebrations on August 15 was unattended by Gandhi. He excused himself and was engaged in his lonely trek in the villages of Bengal, walking on foot, comforting the poor and the homeless, entreating them to remove from their hearts every trace of suspicion, bitterness and resentment. The large migrations, the thousands of people wandering to and from weary, uprooted, heavy laden, the mad career of communal violence, worst of all, the spiritual degradation all around, suspicion, anger, doubt, pity, grief, absence of hope filled Gandhi with deep sorrow and led him to devote the rest of his life to the psychological solution of this problem. His fasts at Calcutta and Delhi had a sobering effect, but the evil was too deep to be cured so easily. On his seventy-eighth birthday, October 2, 1947, Gandhi said: "With every breath I pray God to give me strength to quench the flames or remove me from this earth. I who staked my life to gain India's independence do not wish to be a living witness to its destruction."

It is said that non-violence is the dream of the wise, while violence is the history of man. It is true that wars are - obvious and dramatic and their results in changing the course of history are evident and striking. But there is a struggle which goes on in the minds of men. Its results are not recorded in the statistics of the killed and the injured. It is the struggle for human decency, for the avoidance of physical strife which restricts

human life, for a world without wars. Among the fighters in this great struggle, Gandhi was in the front rank. His message is not a matter for academic debate in intellectual circles. It is the answer to the cry of exasperated mankind which is at the cross-roads- which shall prevail, the law of the jungle or the law of love? All our world organizations will prove ineffective if the truth that love is stronger than hate does not inspire them. The world does not become one simply because we can go round it in less than three days. However far or fast we may travel, our minds do not get nearer to our neighbours. Gandhi had the faith that the world is one in its deepest roots and highest aspirations. He knew that the purpose of historical humanity was to develop a world civilization, a world culture, a world community. We can get out of the misery of this world only by exposing the darkness which is strongly entrenched in men's hearts and replacing it by understanding and tolerance. Gandhi's tender and tormented heart heralds the world which the United Nations wish to create. This lonely symbol of a vanishing past is also the prophet of the new world which is struggling to be born.' He represents the conscience of the future man.

Gandhi has paid the penalty of all who are ahead of their time, misunderstanding, hatred, reaction, violent death. "The light shineth in darkness and the darkness comprehendeth it not." The struggle between light and darkness, between love and hate, between reason and unreason which is at the heart of the cosmic is shown up by this most moving tragedy of our age. We made Socrates drink death; we nailed Jesus to the Cross; we lighted faggots that burnt the medieval martyrs. We have stoned and killed our prophets. Gandhi has not escaped the fate of being misunderstood and hated. He has met his death facing the forces of darkness, of ultimate unreason, and through it has increased the powers of light, love and reason. Who knows if Christianity would have developed had Jesus not been crucified? Years ago Romain Rolland declared that he regarded Gandhi as a "Christ who only kicked the Cross." We have now given him the Cross also. Gandhi's death was a classical ending to his life. He died with the name of God on his lips and love in his heart. Even as he received the bullet wounds he greeted his murderer and wished him well. He lived up to what he preached.

Possessed and inspired by the highest ideals of which human nature is capable, preaching and practising fearlessly the truth revealed to him, leading almost alone what seemed to be a forlorn hope against the impregnable strongholds of greed and folly, yet facing tremendous odds with a calm resolution which yielded nothing to ridicule or danger, Gandhi presented to this unbelieving world all that is noblest in the spirit

of man. He illumined human dignity by faith in the eternal significance of man's effort. He belongs to the type that redeems the human race.

If Gandhi was able to rid himself of all rancor and hatred, to develop that flame of love which burnt up all impurities, if he feared no evil even though he walked in the valley of the shadow of death, if he represented to us the eternal voice of hope, it is because he believed in the heritage of India, the power of the inward life of the spirit. When problems material and spiritual crowded upon him, when conflicting emotions shook him, when troubles oppressed him, he retired at will into the retreats of the soul, into the secret corridors of the self to gain strength and refreshment. His life has revived and refreshed our sense of the meaning and value of religion. Such men who are filled with spiritual poise and yet take upon themselves the burden of suffering humanity are born in the world at long intervals.

We have killed his body, but the spirit in him which is a light from above will penetrate far into space and time and inspire countless generations for nobler living.

That is why it is stated for Gandhi - 'It is very difficult to believe that such a man in flesh and bone, ever marked on earth.'

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