

Revisiting Gandhi

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Pravin Kumar & Sohan Raj Tater

REVISITING GANDHI

(Essays in Honour of Sri Chand Rampuria)

Editors

Anil Dutta Mishra
Tara Chand Rampuria

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1

Understanding Gandhi

JAI NARAIN SHARMA

“Who indeed can claim to know and understand the mind of the great?” is a famous saying of the renowned poet Bhavbhuti. Gandhi was a great man; nevertheless, he had laid bare his mind in its fullness before the world. But to unravel its mystery and understand it objectively, as pointed out by Bhavbhuti, is certainly a difficult task. It is further compounded by the fact that Gandhi has become a part of our national being. We respond to his name, achievements and memory rather emotionally. It may be explained in terms of his too closeness to us, both in respect of time and space. Too much of proximity usually stands in the way of an objective understanding. Emotion is not intelligence. Enthusiasm is not understanding. Emotion is helpful and good in its own sphere. But when it overpowers our intellect we lose our perspective and fall victims to a sort of optical illusion. We get ourselves bogged in utter confusion. Emotion divorced from and unrestrained by intellect degenerates and issues in blind adoration, dogmatism and fanaticism.

The utter cynical and contemptuous disregard for Gandhi and his philosophy, on the other hand, is equally emotional. The fount is the same. It is not intellect but emotion that rules such a judgment or rather the lack of it. Both the extreme points of view—gushing adoration and angry condemnation—though apparently opposed to each other have a common bond of kinship in their allegiance to emotion as the determinant in their evaluation.

Gandhi was a many-sided personality. The outward simplicity of his life and his single-minded devotion to truth cloaked innumerable deep currents of ideas, disciplines, loyalties and aspirations. He was at once saint and revolutionary, politician and social reformer, economist and man of religion, educationist and *satyagrahi*; devotee alike of faith and reason, Hindu and inter-religious, nationalist and internationalist, man of action and dreamer of dreams. He was a very great reconciler of opposites and he was that without strain or artificiality. He loved greatly and accepted unreservedly that truth can reside in opposites. No one has yet understood objectively his complex and magnificent personality. We have all come too much under the spell of the astonishing integration and unity of the man within himself. It was Rabindranath Tagore who once wrote that those disciplines are the most complex, which finally lead to the utter simplicity of a great song. One has only to look at those who learn music to see the daily grind of hard discipline through which they must pass before they bring out a soulful song. Gandhi's life was one long and ceaseless saga of endeavour in which he added, bit-by-bit and piece by piece, to his stature culminating in the advancing fullness of his personality. There was nothing mystic or miraculous about his development and growth, from a common man into the unsurpassed Mahatma of our history. It is open to each one of us to see how he advanced, step by step, gathering innumerable fragments of truth one by one and piecing them together in the crucible of his life, ready to look at facts, understand their significance, face any consequence in the pursuit of a cause, suffer any penalty for a mistake, recover lost ground again, but always advancing, open-minded and without fear and dedicated selflessly to reach and hold the truth of a matter at any cost. He was, therefore, not born a Mahatma. He grew into one. He was a common man who pulled himself up to most uncommon heights. He was no god, but became a god-man. Gandhi knew this about himself and that was why he called his biography, "The Story of My Experiments with Truth".¹ Experimentation was one of the deepest passions of his life. He experimented with food, health and cure, clothes and dress, politics and economics, education

and reform, organization and revolution, ethics and spirituality, with almost everything that his life knew as part of life. With relentless logic and courage he broke new ground in every direction and yet had the depth and width of mind to separate defeat from success, the false from the true, the unreal from the real and to integrate all his aims and achievements into the unity of his personality.

Gandhi did not systematize his thought. It was not in his nature, too. He did not assign himself the task of setting up an intellectual and academic discipline. He was not a theorist; he was primarily an actionist or a Karma-Yogi. "I am not built for academic writings. Action is my domain."² For him, the means to knowledge was not contemplation but action. As he himself had said: "There is no such thing as 'Gandhism' and I do not want to leave any sect after me, I do not claim to have originated any new principle or doctrine. I have simply tried in my own way to apply the eternal truths to our daily life and problems.... Well, all my philosophy, if it may be called by that pretentious name, is contained in what I have said. You will not call it 'Gandhism': there is no 'ism' about it."³ This natural disinclination or aversion for founding any 'ism' and sect helped him to grow into a continuously evolving personality.

Gandhi concerned himself mainly with prescribing practical cures for the evils of the world and as such he had necessarily to be pragmatic in his approach. Belonging to the most modern type of mass leader. Gandhi had to move millions of men. A practical idealist which he was, he undertook for himself the responsibility of translating his life-philosophy into action. As a practical man, he was concerned with taking care of the present. One step was enough for him. As he wrote: "I know only the moment's duty."⁴ This pragmatic approach characterizes his political philosophy. But some commentators of Gandhi's Philosophy, who find in him a spiritual leader above everything else and who ignore the historical significance of Gandhi, do not share this view. But any analysis which takes into account the role of Gandhi in its totality can never brush aside his incomparable political realistic acumen. This sense of native realism was reflected

in his pragmatic approach. He had no inclination for determining the distant goal by definitions in advance; rather his prime concern was centred upon action in the immediate present. As he himself wrote: "I have purposely refrained from dealing with the nature of Government in a society based on non-violence when society is deliberately constructed in accordance with the law of non-violence, its structure will be different in material particulars from what it is today. But I cannot say in advance what the Government based wholly on non-violence will be like".⁵ The compulsion of practical politics makes a mass leader pragmatic. For a mass leader has to move about in the essentially pragmatic world. Gandhi's credit was that his pragmatism did not degenerate into opportunism, as has been usually the case with other lesser men. He was not that much of a pragmatist to deviate from his basic principle of Truth.

The essential characteristic of Gandhi's personality and of his life was its continuous growth and evolution. He always felt that he was experimenting with Truth. The title of his autobiography is significant. Louis Fischer says of Gandhi: "He allowed truth to lead him without a map. If it took him to an area where he had to discard some intellectual baggage or walk alone without past associates, he went. He never impeded his mind with stop signs."⁶ Acharya J.B. Kripalani correctly notes that usually Gandhi tried to solve problems as they arose, in consonance with his basic principles of morality, the genius of his people, their historical background and the existing circumstances of the country.⁷ His political philosophy, being grounded on certain basic principles, evolved and grew out of practice. This growth and evolution of his dynamic personality has often been misunderstood. It has been alleged that he was inconsistent. True, he did not appear to be consistent. He wrote:

"I am not at all concerned with appearing to be consistent. In my pursuit after Truth I have discarded many ideas and learnt many new things. Old as I am in age, I have no feeling that I have ceased to grow inwardly or that my growth will stop with the dissolution of the flesh."⁸

"I have never made a fetish of consistency. I am a votary of Truth and I must say what I feel and think at a given moment on the question, without regard to what I may have said before on it. As my vision gets clearer, my views must grow clearer with daily practice. Where I have deliberately altered an opinion, the change should be obvious. Only a careful eye would notice a gradual and imperceptible evolution."⁹

Speaking of his growing experience he wrote:

"At the time of writing I never think of what I have said before. My aim is not to be consistent with my previous statements on a given question, but to be consistent with truth as it may present itself to me at a given moment. The result has been that I have grown from truth to truth; I have saved my memory an undue strain; and what is more, whenever I have been obliged to compare my writing even of fifty years ago with the latest, I have discovered no inconsistency between the two. But friends who observe inconsistency will do well to take the meaning that my latest writing may yield unless, of course, they prefer the old. But before making the choice they should try to see if there is not an underlying and abiding consistency between the two seeming inconsistencies."¹⁰

Gandhi explained why he had to change his views. He modified his views according as the circumstances demanded. To quote him:

"People say that I have changed my view, that I say today something different from what I said years ago. The fact of the matter is that conditions have changed. I am the same. My words and deeds are dictated by prevailing conditions. There has been a gradual evolution in my environment and I react to it as a satyagrahi"¹¹.

This evolutionary character comes in the way of an objective understanding of him and his philosophy.

Further, in a very large sense, the rather rapid decline

in the academic acceptance of Gandhi, especially in India, is also due to another error in understanding. This error arises primarily from the unscholarly dependence of Indian intellectuals on Gandhi anthologies—a species of popular books which retail the epigrammatic utterances of Gandhi without recourse to historical methods. Books and articles have been, and are being, written on Gandhi without any attempt to consult the sources from which the anthologies have ostensibly been compiled. The situation is made infinitely worse when one anthology draws on another anthology, often shortening and distorting the original text still further, so that what we have is something like an oral tradition on Gandhi. Most of our present knowledge of Gandhi is based almost entirely on this ‘oral tradition’, screened from the unsuspecting reader’s eyes by means of the scholarly subterfuge of footnotes which make a pretence of having consulted the original texts.

Gandhi often confessed that he grew ‘from truth to truth’; in other words, his earlier utterances need to be understood in the light of his later ones, not vice versa. Not having had the time or the training for the systematic development of his thought, Gandhi’s ideas are in the main of an existential kind: they grew as he grew up. The anthologies do little to help understand this development or to trace the progressive nuances of his thinking. Indeed, the popular notion that Gandhian Thought is holistic, rather than heuristic, is one of the tragic gifts of the passing anthological era in the study of Gandhi.

A third major fallacy in the study of Gandhi is the belief, shared by pundit and peasant alike, that he had propounded a separate and distinct body of doctrine in the social, political and economic fields. It is thus that we fragment his teaching and miss the wood for the trees. We may talk of a social, political or economic philosophy of Gandhi and produce a surfeit of quotations, especially from the Gandhi anthologies, to prove our case. But it would be more opposite to speak of the philosophy of Gandhi—in the more generalized sense—and to show how his social, political and economic ideas are derived from and are accidental to, the core of his teaching.

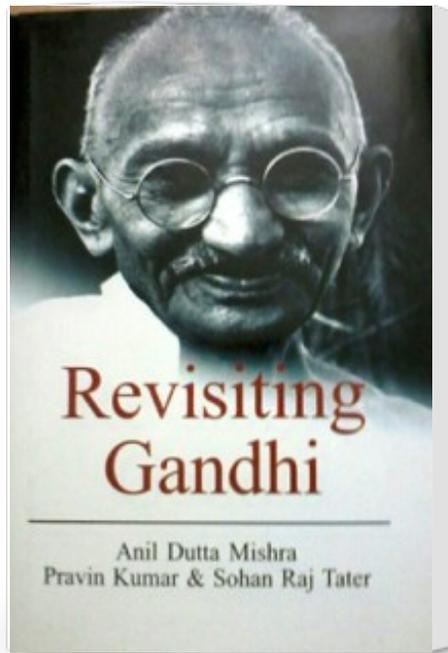
The core of the Gandhian teaching consists of one

concept—and no other. It is truth. The whole structure of Gandhian thinking can be picturized in terms of an ancient Indian symbol—the *urdhvamulam avakshakham vriksham* first mentioned in the *Taittiriya Aranyaka* and recurring in at least three Upanishads, the *Katha*, *Svetashvatara* and *Maitri*. The *Katha* Upanishad elaborates it as the eternal *ashvattha*, an idea which the *Bhagavadgita* later took over and popularized. The root at the top is truth and the branches that proliferate below are the social, political and economic ideas that Gandhi put out in such profusion during his nearly fifty years of public life. Gandhi's mind roamed far and wide, but the meanest of his ideas can be traced back to the fount of truth. The development of Gandhian ideas is achieved deductively. He begins with truth and everything else follows as a matter of course.

Chief among the ideas that Gandhi derives deductively from truth is non-violence—a much abused word. For impenetrable reasons, ever since the passing of Gandhi and often during his lifetime as well, the concept of non-violence has come to play a much more important part in the interpretation of his teaching than the concept of truth. This is nothing short of tragic and it is this mis-emphasis which has led to the present erosion of Gandhi in the world marketplace of ideas. To add insult of injury, having distorted the seminal quality of Gandhi's emphasis on truth, we then go on to question the rationality of his thinking and to dismiss him as irrelevant and utopian. We vivisect his ideas, dividing them into conventional categories, and pronounce their irrelevance to our time and, indeed, to the human condition in general.

Bereft of truth, untethered to truth, the Gandhian teaching is indeed a jumble of unrelated ideas, falling apart like a necklace of pearls of which the thread has snapped. The *sutra* of truth is the thing. It is truth that holds the Gandhian teaching together and gives meaning and significance to the meanest of his ideas. And yet, the interpreters of Gandhi have carefully spirited away truth from his teaching and put in its place a thing called 'non-violence'. When Gandhi spoke of non-violence, he spoke of it in tandem with truth and not as a separate entity. In fact, Gandhi spoke of truth-and-

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