

The Meaning of Mahatma Gandhi



The scholar and biography



“The condemnation which a great man lays upon the world is to force it to explain him,” wrote Hegel. This is certainly true in the case of Mahatma Gandhi. He was great from many angles and perhaps not so great from others. But what stands out clearly was his spiritual zeal to transform himself into an instrument of service for the whole of humanity. With this goal, he took on the Goliath of imperialism and brought it down with a “pinch of salt.”



Gandhi's goal in his own words

In the introduction to his autobiography, Gandhi wrote, "What I want to achieve - what I have been striving and pining to achieve these thirty years - is self-realization, to see God face to face, to attain *Moksha*." (Gandhi, *Autobiography*, x) Gandhi should be understood from this perspective and then everything becomes clear. In this endeavour, he saw himself as a scientist, experimenting on himself and combining those experiments with deep reflections. When he made mistakes, he knew it and then took steps to correct himself. "As I have all along believed that what is possible for one is possible for all, my experiments have not been conducted in the closet, but in the open," he wrote. "There are some things which are known only to oneself and one's Maker. These are clearly incommunicable. The experiments I am about to relate are not such. But they are spiritual, or rather moral, for the essence of religion is morality." (Ibid., x) This is why he titled his autobiography as "The Story of my Experiments with Truth."

Gandhi, Truth and Ahimsa

It is interesting that Gandhi writes that the essence of religion is morality. In Patanjali's Yoga Sutras of Raja Yoga, we find that the first step on his eight-fold path of enlightenment is what is called *yama* and this has five moral components. These are *ahimsa* (non-violence), *satyam* (truthfulness), *asteya* (non-stealing), *brahmacharya* (celibacy), and *aparigraha* (non-acceptance of gifts) in this order. Patanjali's aphorisms are terse and there is no explanation of what is meant by any of these virtues delineated in *yama*. Gandhi's life can be seen as an expanded commentary on this verse. Indeed, Gandhi saw the first step also as the last step because perfection in all of these leads to enlightenment as a corollary. Non-violence (*ahimsa*) was for him the essential method to be followed. This resonates with the crisis of modern man and the modern world. As Martin Luther King Jr. so forcefully expressed it, humanity now faces a choice between "non-violence and non-existence."

The meaning of *ahimsa*

In fact, Gandhi understood that the practice of truthfulness lies at the core of life and everything else follows if one swears allegiance to Truth. In his essay on religious education, he wrote, “To me religion means truth and *ahimsa* or rather truth alone, because truth includes *ahimsa*, *ahimsa* being the necessary and indispensable means for its discovery.” (Brown, 51) Thus Truth is the goal and non-violence (*ahimsa*) is the means. Combining this with the Gandhian teaching of how the ends and the means are joined, we deduce that *ahimsa* is the essential virtue to be cultivated. Later, he would equate *ahimsa* with love. (Brown, 332) He would emphasize that the *satyagrahi* should harbor no hatred for the oppressor.

“Truth is God.” – Mahatma Gandhi

Gandhi defined Truth as God. He wrote, “Truth is the sovereign principle, which includes numerous other principles. This truth is not only truthfulness in word, but truthfulness in thought also, and not only relative truth of our conception, but the Absolute Truth, the Eternal Principle, that is God.” (Ibid., xi) It is not that ‘God is Truth’ but rather ‘Truth is God.’ This puts aside any academic discourse on the definition of ‘God.’ Explaining this, Gandhi wrote, “There are innumerable definitions of God, because His manifestations are innumerable. They overwhelm me with wonder and awe and for a moment stun me. But I worship God as Truth only.” (Ibid., xi)

The discovery of *satyagraha*

Putting aside his personal successes and failures in his spiritual journey, the discovery of *satyagraha* is the greatest contribution of Mahatma Gandhi to the human race. The history of the human race is largely a history of slavery, the conflict between the oppressed and the oppressor. Until Gandhi, the oppressed had either to supplicate the oppressor or engage in armed conflict. Gandhi offered a non-violent method that elevated the oppressed in the process. In his voluminous biography, Guha writes, "Before Gandhi, those discontented with their superiors had either petitioned their rulers for justice or sought to attain justice by means of armed struggle. The distinctiveness of Gandhi's method lay in shaming the rulers by voluntary suffering, with resisters seeking beatings and imprisonment by breaking laws in a non-violent yet utterly determined manner." (Guha, 9)

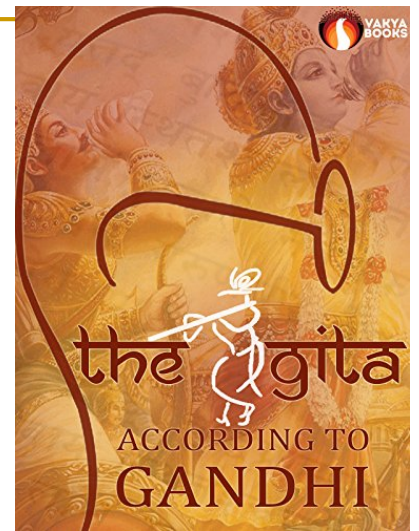
Gandhi's attitude towards world religions

But there are other aspects of Gandhi's life and thought which are worth exploring further. First and foremost was his attitude to world religions which can be thought as a contribution to spiritual philosophy. He wrote, "What a joy it would be when people realize that religion consists not in outward ceremonial but an ever-growing inward response to the higher impulses that man is capable of." (Brown, 50) This echoes Aurobindo's teaching of the higher levels of mind as well as Tagore's philosophy of education and Vivekananda's four yogas. With these attitudes, Gandhi studied the Bible and the Koran as well as the Hindu sacred texts and came to the conclusion echoing his teacher Raychandbhai that "different faiths were like so many walled enclosures in which men and women were confined. He whose one aim in life is to attain *moksha* need not give exclusive devotion to a particular faith." (Brown, 51) Gandhi believed in a universal religious education of all that sees beyond the 'dust of creeds and faiths.' (Brown, 52)

Unity in diversity

It is this view of unity in diversity that lies at the core of Gandhi's attitude towards world religions. "Let no one even for a moment entertain the fear that a reverent study of other religions is likely to weaken or shake one's faith in one's own. The Hindu system of philosophy regards all religions as containing elements of truth in them and enjoins an attitude of respect and reverence towards them all. This of course presupposes regard for one's own religion. Study and appreciation of other religions need not cause a weakening of that regard; it should mean extension of that regard to other religions." (Brown, 52)

Gandhi's commentary on the Gita



In this context, Gandhi wrote a new commentary on the Bhagavad Gita. His view of this sacred text is worthy of independent study. Next are his views on industry and the environment. Believing in the agrarian ideal of John Ruskin, he encouraged the simple life of tilling the soil, and growing one's own vegetables. This can be viewed as an environmental or ecological philosophy. Third are his views on health and diet. His nutritional philosophy of vegetarianism, as well as the connections he discovered to the practice of brahmacharya which he viewed as an essential component of *satyagraha*, are noteworthy to consider especially in the modern consumer society that we live in. Finally, Gandhi had specific views on education. These four categories are not mutually exclusive in Gandhi's thought but rather mutually interdependent. However, for the purpose of studying the evolution of his thought, we will consider these in four separate sections.

Gandhi's political philosophy

As was stated earlier, the idea of *satyagraha* as a political weapon to effect social and political change evolved in Gandhi's struggles in South Africa. However, its epic dimension did not go unnoticed by great thinkers both in India and outside of it. In 1909, a Baptist minister in South Africa by the name of Joseph Doke, wrote a biography of Gandhi and compared him to Jesus. "In Doke's eyes, the simplicity of Gandhi's life and the truthfulness of his conduct, his readiness to court death in pursuit of justice, made him closer to 'the Jew of Nazareth' than most practicing Christians." (Guha, 339) Gandhi told Doke that the New Testament and especially the Sermon on the Mount had inspired him in formulating the basic principles of *satyagraha* and its inherent universality.

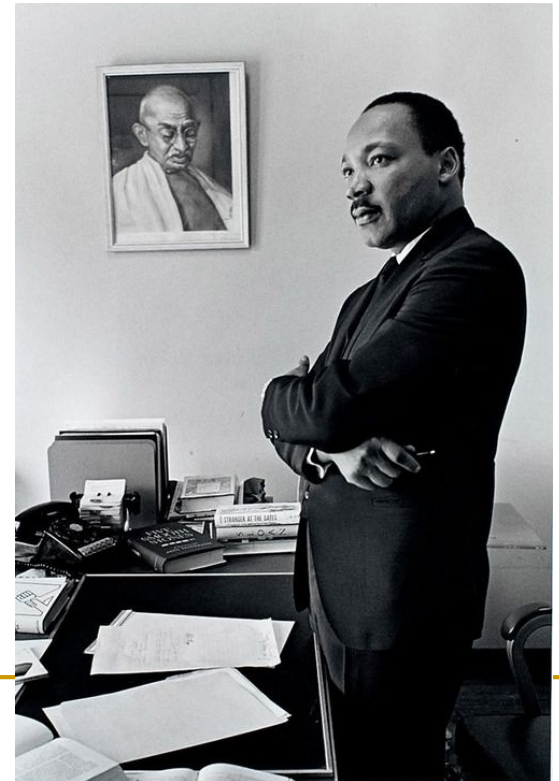
Satyagraha versus “passive resistance”

The term “passive resistance” was quickly abandoned by Gandhi because it conveyed a wrong idea that *satyagraha* is an instrument of the weak. In several articles to his followers, Gandhi delineated the rules for the *satyagrahi*. Underlining the essential idea of the symbiosis between the ends and the means, he wrote, “Rudeness has no place in *satyagraha*. Perfect courtesy must be shown even to those who may look upon us as their enemies and the villagers must be taught the same. Rudeness may harm our cause and the struggle may be unduly prolonged.” (Brown, 330)

Again and again, he taught his followers that they needed to cultivate certain basic attitudes if they wanted to follow *satyagraha*. “Whether all of us realize it or not the method of non-co-operation is a process of touching the heart and appealing to reason, not one of frightening by rowdyism. Rowdyism has no place in a non-violent movement.” (Brown, 335)

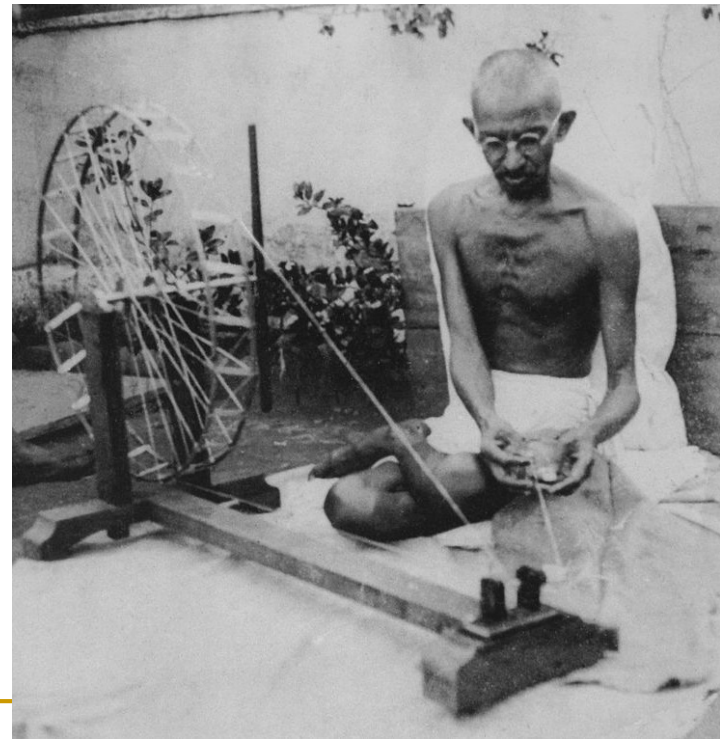
Gandhi's political legacy

It should be understood that Gandhi's political philosophy is rooted in his spiritual philosophy which we will examine in the next section. Thus, it is not limited to India's struggle for independence from British rule but has a larger domain of application. This fact, unfortunately, is not well-known even in India. And so, these essential principles must be revived again.



Gandhi's spiritual philosophy

Gandhi's spiritual philosophy evolved over time as a response to the existential crisis of man's inhumanity to man. Scholars and historians cite the Maritzburg train incident as the catalyst of Gandhi's transformation. However, on closer examination, there seem to be other factors. Before Gandhi, countless people must have been thrown off trains as a consequence of racial prejudice. What made Gandhi different?



The catalytic event

The case of Balasundaram seems to be the opening. Until then, his focus was on making a living and supporting his family. But the Balasundaram case brought him into intimate contact with the plight of the indentured labourers. He could empathize with them, and their faith in his abilities awakened his own. It is said that Gandhi used to stammer in the court room and he was hardly said to be eloquent. But this initial case and its consequent success had awakened his faith in himself. That other indentured labourers who experienced violence at the hands of their white masters had also approached him for legal help added to his self-confidence. Gandhi had an innate ability to connect himself with others and his spirituality was awakened by his own conviction that he was on the side of the 'existential right.' The thesis that this is the essential catalyst that awakened Gandhi's higher consciousness is supported by the fact that Gandhi devotes an entire chapter to the 1893 Balasundaram case in his 1927 autobiography written while he was in prison. Clearly, the episode was indelibly etched in his memory even after thirty years and was formative in awakening his innate spirit of service.

Tagore on Gandhi

The epic dimension of his struggles in South Africa and later in India was also noticed by thinkers such as Rabindranath Tagore who wrote to him saying "Our fight is a spiritual fight, it is for Man. We are to emancipate Man from the meshes that he himself has woven round him - these organisations of National Egoism. The butterfly will have to be persuaded that the freedom of the sky is of higher value than the shelter of the cocoon." (Bhattacharya, 55)



Satyagraha and swarajya

It is difficult to discern how Gandhi could discover *satyagraha* and it is tempting to make some conjectures. Gandhi's spiritual quest was definitely a vital ingredient. Fundamental in yoga is that self-improvement is a precursor for self-realization. But this means the conquest of one's own mind, *swarājya*, or self-rule. In 1903, Gandhi read Vivekananda's Raja Yoga as well as Patanjali's Yoga Sutras. (Gandhi, Autobiography, 220) The idea that the lower impulses must be subdued by higher impulses was a yogic teaching that Gandhi was well aware of. These studies, combined with a sincere study of the Gita, seemed to guide Gandhi to formulate the essential principles of *satyagraha*.

The *brahmacharya* VOW

In fact, it was clear when lower impulses arise in one's consciousness, a frontal attack often does the opposite. Therefore, it is better adopt a non-violent non-co-operative attitude and direct the energy to the higher goal of Truth or God or self-realization. The fact that Gandhi devoted two chapters in his autobiography to discuss his *brahmacharya* vow supports this thesis.

His religious quest and his political philosophy were intertwined. At the end of his autobiography, he wrote, "To see the universal and all pervading Spirit of Truth face to face one must be able to love the meanest of creation as oneself. And a man who aspires after that cannot afford to keep out of any field of life." Thus, Gandhi viewed all vocations as a means of serving humanity. He continued, "That is why my devotion to Truth has drawn me into the field of politics; and I can say without the slightest hesitation, and yet in all humility, that those who say that religion has nothing to do with politics do not know what religion means." (Gandhi, Autobiography, 420)

Truth is the goal, *ahimsa* is the means

He summarised his religion thus. Truth is God and the means to realise that is *ahimsa*, or non-violence in thought, word and deed. We must be the change that we want to see. “Without self-purification the observance of the law of *Ahimsa* must remain an empty dream. ... Self-purification therefore must mean purification in all walks of life. And purification being highly infectious, purification of oneself necessarily leads to the purification of one’s surroundings.” (Gandhi, Autobiography, 420)

There is a celestial simplicity in Gandhi’s writings that radiates humility and devotion to Truth. The words are not onerous, nor convoluted and least of all academic. We can learn much by reflecting on his writings for there is a wealth of wisdom in his every word.

Gandhi's environmental philosophy

The books by Tolstoy and Ruskin activated in Gandhi the agrarian ideal of living the simple life by tilling the land with one's own hands. He saw this ideal as the core principle of *karma yoga*. In a reply to a letter of Tagore in 1921, Gandhi wrote that "To a people famishing and idle, the only acceptable form in which God can dare appear is work and promise of food as wages." He continued that each man should work for his food, and "those who ate without work were thieves." (Bhattacharya, 89)



Edward Carpenter and Gandhi

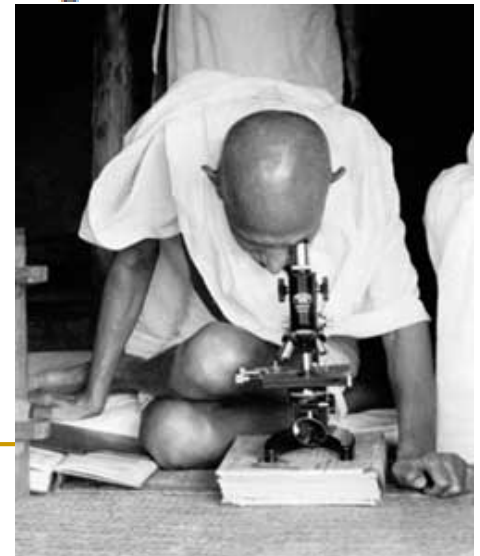
The writings of several European thinkers resonated with his own agrarian roots and he was only too happy when they extolled the simple life as the ideal. One particular work by Edward Carpenter titled "Civilization: Its Cause and Cure" is cited in Gandhi's response to a reader's questions regarding the meaning of civilization. Carpenter called modern civilization a 'disease' and this was at the end of the 19th century. One can only shudder how he would have viewed it today with the tsunami of technology at our doorstep.



Edw. Carpenter

Gandhi on technology

As far back as 1909, Gandhi wrote, “Formerly, men were made slaves under physical compulsion. Now they are enslaved by temptation of money and of the luxuries that money can buy. ... Formerly, special messengers were required and much expense was incurred in order to send letters; today, anyone can abuse his fellow by means of a letter for one penny.” (Brown, 72) It is perhaps highly relevant to study Gandhi’s writings in the context of modern civilization. He went on to define civilization as “that mode of conduct which points out to man the path of duty. Performance of duty and observance of morality are convertible terms. To observe morality is to attain mastery over our mind and passions. So doing, we know ourselves.” (Brown, 73)



Gandhi and machinery

Gandhi's reflections on the meaning of civilization led him to adopt the simple life free of machinery. "Machinery is like a snake-hole which may contain from one to a hundred snakes. Where there is machinery there are large cities; and where there are large cities, there are tram-cars and railways." (Brown, 84) In this context, it is important to understand that Gandhi measured civilization through moral progress and not material progress. "The test of orderliness in a country is not the number of millionaires it owns, but the absence of starvation among its masses ... Western nations today are groaning under the heel of the monster-god of materialism," wrote Gandhi. "Their moral growth has become stunted. " (Brown, 86)

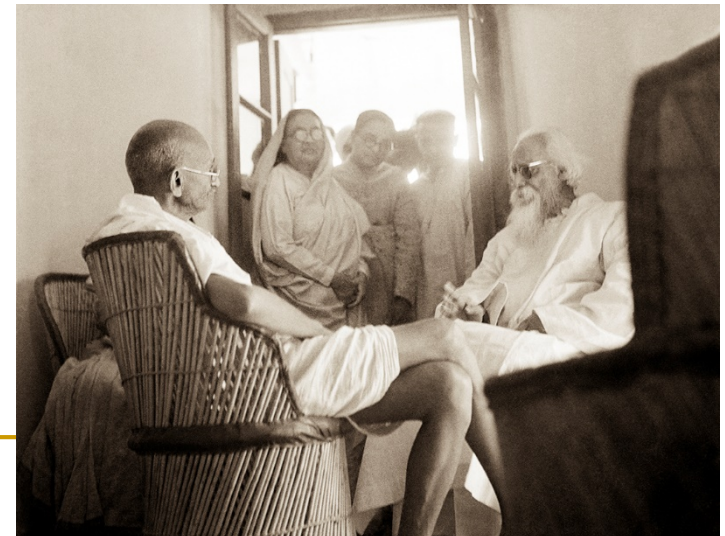
Gandhi's views on modern civilization

Gandhi's writings on modern materialism and the illusion of civilization are acerbic and harsh. But they should make us think. His agrarian solution of the simple life may have limited applicability, but now when humanity has to face the typhoon of technology, it is unclear whether these methods can work on a global scale. It seems one must combine a moral education along with the technical one that we are so eager to impart. In this education, it would appear the humanities will have to play a larger role.

Critical thinking is hardly present. With the idolatry to artificial intelligence we have well-nigh abandoned it. So perhaps the solution to the problem is not so much abolishing technology but rather in educating ourselves in the moral and ethical uses of it, just as we train ourselves in the proper use of fire as means to heat our homes or to cook our food. This is certainly the message of Gandhi at this present moment in human evolution.

Gandhi and Tagore

In this connection, the letters between Gandhi and Tagore are worth careful study. Often portrayed as being at opposite ends in the independence movement, Gandhi and Tagore were both great thinkers and so one must try to understand their definitions of words, and how they viewed concepts that usually bandied about carelessly by the common man. A key word in this context, is “non-co-operation.” At the core of the *satyagraha* movement was the idea of non-co-operation with unjust laws rooted in racism and bigotry. For Tagore, the word co-operation and not competition was the key word in human evolution. “Man became great when he found this law for himself, the law of co-operation. ... Therefore my own prayer is: let India stand for the co-operation of all peoples of the world” he wrote. (Bhattacharya, 59)



Gandhi on college education

Gandhi would not have objected to such a definition or ideal. Mingling with the masses, he knew too well that Macaulay's system of education in the Indian colleges and universities was not aimed at making great moral leaders but robots for the machinery of British imperialism. Responding to Tagore's criticisms, Gandhi wrote, "Non-co-operation in conception is not any of the things he fears ... there is no choice for India save between violence and non-co-operation." (Bhattacharya, 65)

By contrast, Tagore had been spared by Macaulay's training because his father had given him a high quality education with personal tutors who instilled him a great love of literature and music. Gandhi had no such training nor does the common man of India. Gandhi's emphasis was on moral training and he wrote to Tagore in the same letter that "my experience has proved to my satisfaction that literary training by itself adds not an inch to one's moral height, and that character building is independent of literary training." (Bhattacharya, 66)

The dignity of labour:

karma yoga versus jnana yoga

The correspondence between these two great minds is worthy of serious study because in that study may emerge solutions to our modern dilemmas. In one of his later letters to Tagore, Gandhi summarised his thought thus. “I do want growth. I do want self-determination, I do want freedom, but I want these for the soul. I doubt if the steel age is an advance upon the flint age. ... It is the evolution of the soul to which the intellect and all our faculties have to be devoted. ... A plea for the spinning wheel is a plea for recognising the dignity of labour.” (Bhattacharya, 89)

Gandhi the poet

True to his poetical instinct the Poet lives for the morrow and would have us do likewise. He presents to our admiring gaze the beautiful picture of the birds early in the morning singing hymns of praise as they soar into the sky. These birds had their day's food and soared with rested wings in whose veins new blood had flown during the previous night. But I have had the pain of watching birds who for want of strength could not be coaxed even into a flutter of their wings. The human bird under the Indian sky gets up weaker than when he pretended to retire. For millions it is an eternal vigil or an eternal trance. It is an indescribably painful state which has to be experienced to be realised. I have found it impossible to soothe suffering patients with a song from Kabir. The hungry millions ask for one poem—invigorating food. They cannot be given it. They must earn it. And they can earn only by the sweat of their brow.



The meaning of the Mahatma

What is the meaning of the life of the Mahatma? It is difficult to say. Perhaps he represents what all of us can aspire to be or become. Many of us hear about the spiritual ideal and as his letter to Tagore reveals, most of us have invigorating food and so we do not worry about the suffering humanity. Gandhi managed to awaken his spirit of service when he took the case of Balasundaram and since then, I believe, he held this image of the 'Daridra Narayana' or "God in the Poor" constantly and without a break in the firmament of his mind. It is this worship that enabled him to connect with the millions of the poorest people in India and around the world.

His message for the 21st century

There is much to extract from Gandhi's life and message that is relevant to the 21st century. This century is growing more and more to be decisive in the course of human evolution. As Martin Luther King Jr. expressed it, we have a choice between "non-violence and non-existence."

