Relevance of Gandhi in Modern Time*

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We came across this article by Shri Rajen Barua as we were browsing the internet for any fresh material on Gandhi and Gandhian thought. He is an Engineer of Assamese origin, who has now settled in America and is staying at Houston. He is also the Chairperson/Head of an organization named as Friends of Assam and Seven Sisters (FASS). This was an interesting coincidence because we had recently come in contact with the Guwahati based workers of FASS. Readers of Ishani may recall the report we had carried on the visit of Shri Garvin Brown to Guwahati. This visit was organized by FASS.

This article by Shri Barua has a special significance. We were attracted to it because there are only a handful persons in Assam of these days who write about Mahatma Gandhi or Gandhian thought. Shri Rajen Barua’s name suggested that he must be from Assam. We read his article with interest and decided to publish it in Ishani. We immediately got in touch with Shri Barua and informed him about our appreciation of his article and also our desire to publish it in Ishani. His response was prompt and positive. He was happy to hear from us that we liked his article and we intend to publish it.

Mr Barua mentions in his article that Gandhi is greatly ignored or neglected in present day India. His contention is partly true. As elsewhere in the world, India too has started paying more serious attention to Gandhi. The more important part of Shri Barua’s article is how he is witnessing from America the kind of enthusiastic search almost all over the world for understanding Gandhi. Mr Barua himself is of course convinced of the greatness and relevance of Gandhi.

According to my understanding of Gandhi or Gandhian approach, I find that Shri Barua’s work with FASS is on Gandhian lines. FASS is pointing out all good that is visible or taking place in North-eastern States. It is also pointing out the lapses or aberrations. But on the whole, the good outcome of all this effort is the generation of goodwill between individuals related to the North-east and also between the inhabitants of North-east and the NRIs of North-eastern origin. Ishani greatly appreciates this work and wishes everyone connected with FASS well.

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Looking at the present state of affairs in India, the birthplace of Gandhi, one would probably surmise that Gandhism, whatever the term may mean, cannot have any relevance in modern times. Gandhi is called the Father of the Nation, who single-handedly stood up against the mighty British Empire, without any arms, and brought her independence. However, today, just after 60 years of his assassination, Gandhi is remembered in India mostly on his birthday which is celebrated as a national holiday rather as a ritual. India is not following any of Gandhi's teachings which are mostly confined to text books. As a military super power in Asia, India is definitely not following the teachings of Ahimsa (non violence) in dealing with its neighbours, be it Pakistan, Bangladesh (East Pakistan) or China; nor is it practicing non-violence in dealing with its numerous insurgencies be it in Kashmir, Punjab, Central India or in the North-eastern states of Assam, Manipur, Nagaland or Mizoram. Since independence, the country has witnessed many violent communal riots in this multi-communal country. Two of our country’s prime ministers, two more Gandhis, Indira Gandhi and Rajib Gandhi (not related to Mahatma Gandhi) were assassinated by our countrymen in broad daylight. Gandhi’s message of 'swabalambi', self sufficiency with home spun 'khadi' cloth is not used even as a social slogan. Statistics show that the country is definitely not following ‘sarvodaya,’ a broad Gandhian term meaning 'universal uplift' or 'progress of all' reaching the masses and the downtrodden. India today has the unique distinction of having the richest man in the world while at the same time about 30 per cent of its population lives in poverty. To say the least, Gandhism is under severe test in India.

From the above, it would however be wrong to presume that Gandhism is dead in the world. Like Buddhism, which is mostly prevalent outside the country of its birth, Gandhism today is alive and well outside India. In fact today there is hardly any country in the world where some activities are not going on along Gandhian lines. There are very few countries in the world where something or the other in the name of Gandhi is not being organized. In short there is a global non-violent awakening after Gandhi. The name of Mahatma Gandhi transcends the bounds of race, religion and nation-states, and has emerged as the prophetic voice of the 21st century. Gandhi is remembered for his passionate adherence to the
practice of non-violence and his supreme humanism, in every corner of the world.

One would wonder, what may be the relevance of Gandhi in this all-pervading materialistic, agnostic and consumerist culture? What is the significance of Gandhi to the modern world and what is the secret of his success? Gandhi has been a great light for the Tibetan leader Dalai Lama who puts Gandhi’s success in right perspective. He said, “Many ancient Indian masters have preached ahimsa, non violence as a philosophy. That was mere philosophical understanding. But Mahatma Gandhi, in this twentieth century, produced a very sophisticated approach because he implemented that very noble philosophy of ahimsa in modern politics, and he succeeded. That is a very great thing.”

And that is precisely the greatness of Gandhi and that is the message of Gandhi to the modern world. In the past century many places in the world have been drastically changed through the use of brute force, by the power of guns -- the Soviet Union, China, Tibet, Burma, many communist countries in Africa and South America. But eventually the power of guns will have to be changed by the will of the ordinary people. As Dalai Lama said, “We have a big war going on today between world peace and world war, between the force of mind and force of materialism, between democracy and totalitarism.” To fight these big wars the common ordinary people in this modern age need Gandhism.

If we try to analyze the secrets of Gandhi’s success, we would probably find Faith and Action and Populism as the three most important aspects of his life. Gandhi’s extraordinary communion with the masses of ordinary people was another of his secrets. In contrast to many of our present day leaders of this highly democratic world, Gandhi was a true leader and friend of the people.

Disaku Ikeda, the Japanese Buddhist leader who takes great inspiration from Gandhi has this to say about him. “His activism is not mere action but contains many aspects of a spiritual ‘practice’ that is inspired by the inner urging of the conscience.”

The phenomenal success Gandhi registered in far away South Africa
fighting for human rights and civil liberties has great significance, when we find that later his teachings were adopted not only by Nelson Mandela, the South African freedom fighter, but it was also subsequently revealed that the former South African president De Klerk was greatly influenced by Gandhi’s principles.

From Dalai Lama to Desmond Tutu and from Martin Luther King to Nelson Mandela, all were inspired by Mahatma Gandhi, all in their own different ways.

Dr. Martin Luther King was very much inspired by Gandhi. Like Gandhi, King liked Thoreau’s idea -- that men should not obey evil or unjust laws; and he found that Gandhi had won freedom for his country from British rule acting on that principle. Like Thoreau, Gandhi believed that men should gladly go to jail when they break such laws. He told the people of India to resist the British by peaceful means only. They would march, they would sit down or lie down in the streets, they would strike, they would boycott (refuse to buy) British goods, but they would not resort to violence. There is great resonance of the historic Salt March at Dandi with the courageous Montgomery Bus Boycott against racial segregation in United States. Dr King said, ".......If humanity is to progress, Gandhi is inescapable. He lived, thought, acted and was inspired by the vision of humanity evolving toward a world of peace and harmony."

Barack Obama, the Democratic candidate for the US Presidential nomination, sees Mahatma Gandhi as an inspiration and has a portrait of the apostle of peace in his office. He commented, "In my life, I have always looked to Mahatma Gandhi as an inspiration, because he embodies the kind of transformational change that can be made when ordinary people come together to do extraordinary things."

Aung San Suu Kyi, the Burmese leader under house arrest, derives great deal of inspiration from Gandhi. From Gandhi she learnt that for a doctrine of peace and reconciliation to be translated into practice, one absolute condition needed is fearlessness. Aung San Suu Kyi knows this. One of her essays opens with the statement that "it is not power that corrupts, but it is fear." It is from Gandhi that Jawaharlal Nehru and all the Indian leaders striving for independence learnt how 'not to fear' the
British gun. Nehru also described him as "A powerful current of fresh air ... like a beam of light."

And so Gandhism is alive and well in the modern world. He has inspired and will continue to inspire many political, social and religious leaders all over the world. Whether it is Joan Baez, the Czech human rights activist, or Cesar Chavez, the social activists in California, or Joanna Macy, the activist, or Mubarak Awad, the non-violent Palestine leader and many others, they all get different inspiration from Gandhi in their fight.

Thich Nhat Kanh, the Vietnamese Buddhist leader takes great inspiration from Gandhi's action which stresses on the process more than the end. Nhat said, "I think we may fail in our attempt to do things, yet we may succeed in correct action when the action is authentically non-violent, based on understanding, based on love." That is Gandhism.

Gandhi left many valuable sayings for the modern man to fight for goodness in society in a non-violent way. "Good," Gandhi said, "travels at a snails pace." "Non violence," Gandhi said, "is a tree of slow growth. It grows imperceptibly but surely." And then "Mere goodness is not of much use," Gandhi stated. "Goodness must be joined with knowledge, courage and conviction. One must cultivate the fine discriminating quality which goes with spiritual courage and character." The modern man can also take great wisdom from what Gandhi said about the seven social sins: Politics without principles; Wealth without work; Commerce without morality; Education without character; Pleasure without conscience; Science without humanity; Worship without sacrifice.

Was Gandhi a Saint? Gandhi objected when people called him "a saint trying to be a politician." He said he would rather be "a politician trying to be a saint." Gandhi was not a Saint. He was a common man, but a common man in the modern world in the footsteps of Buddha and Jesus. He said, "I have nothing new to teach the world. Truth and Non-violence are as old as the hills." It may be said that, after the great Buddha and Jesus, Gandhi once again demonstrated that non-violence could also be an effective instrument of social change in modern times. Gandhi successfully demonstrated to a world, weary with wars and continuing
destruction that adherence to Truth and Non-violence is not meant for individual behavior alone but can be applied in global affairs too.

If we say that the twenty-first century is the century of the common man, then we see that Gandhism has even more relevance in this age, and Gandhi will inspire generations of individuals fighting for goodness of the society. I would like to conclude with a tribute to 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".

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