

## GANDHI IN THE 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY

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### Introduction by Editor

*"Is Gandhi relevant today?" is a question that is often asked among the educated Indians. One needs to look around at the phenomena that is all around us today to understand where the relevance is being felt the most, the three big phenomena that are having the greatest impact today in our midst are,*

*(a) climate change and its consequent global warming,*

*(b) global rise of inequality and its consequent divisive and violent narratives and*

*(c) the indiscriminate and intrusive use of technology and its destruction of the value of human life and the emergence of (what is known as) the 'post-truth' world.*

*Did Gandhi have a solution for any of these? Is there something that he said or did, which can contribute to the world today addressing these challenges? The fact is yes and so is the renewed interest globally on Gandhi even as we try to*

*Let's look at the responses for Climate Change – global economy and its guzzling of fossil fuel is seen as one of the prime contributors. Several solutions on the local economic concepts today borrow from the Swadeshi concept that Gandhiji espoused and further elaborated by the Doctor of Village Industries, J.C. Kumarappa. Gandhi famously said that India cannot go the western path of consumption and there is not enough for any man's greed, but enough for everyone's need.*

*Trusteeship that he spoke of is seen as a model for corporate governance and increasingly spoken of in the context of the raising global inequality. The vulnerability felt by some and the threat felt by others in the unequal space today is a testimony to the apprehension that Gandhi had*

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*for the ownership model and the Trusteeship model that he posed as its antidote. "Trusteeship is founded on the sovereignty of truth and incessant striving after its completeness... The theory of trusteeship is an inclusive, non-violent worldview that regards every human being as an active, contributing agent for the promotion and progress of all <sup>1</sup>". Today, the world debates and has set for itself addressing of inequality as one of its Sustainable Development Goals (SDG #5). However, there is very little in terms of comprehensive model available anywhere for this because the foundational economic paradigm is rooted in violence rather than non-violence <sup>2</sup>.*

*In a 'post-truth' world, one of the biggest beginning points of understanding Gandhi can be the pursuit of truth. "I worship God as Truth only. I have not yet found Him, but, I am seeking after Him. I am prepared to sacrifice the things dearest to me in pursuit of this quest. Even if the sacrifice demanded be my very life, I hope I may be prepared to give it. But as long as I have not realised this 'Absolute Truth', so long must I hold by the relative truth as I have conceived it. That relative truth must, meanwhile, be my beacon, my shield and buckler. <sup>3</sup>"*

*The relevance of Gandhi pans several domains of human activity and includes limited to that of politics, environment, economics, philosophy, spirituality, humanism, communication, public policy, technology, ethics, institution building, women's rights, religious harmony, among others. With such a multi-faceted person who was continuously in his own journey to discover the truth within himself, the challenge often is not the question of 'is Gandhi relevant?' as much as 'what are we looking for in any persona in history or our own history towards?'*

*In the following article, Rajan Venkatesh, a multi-faceted personality himself, juxtaposes some of the most prominent predictions/pronouncements of Gandhiji in the contemporary context and in the process expands on the scope of where to look for the relevance of Gandhi within the vast literature that he has left for us to contend with.*

"I hope the fragrance of the non-violence of India would permeate the whole world. I often wonder if that hope will materialise." (H, 27-7-1947, p253)

Every once in a while, the goings-on of this modern world lead us all to a state of deep despair. This is happening more often these days, with alarming reports of pollution, climate change, corruption, exploitation and violence; our collective consciousness seems to shudder and struggle, staring at a feeling of inevitability.

It is at such times that the human spirit, made attentive by acute circumstance, looks around for help, for inspiration, for an answer.

And then one arrives at Gandhi.. at least that has been the hope for many, including this writer, but that hasn't quite happened in the last few decades, has it? It would appear that the world has been looking everywhere else but towards him.

The Western mind, being outwardly vigorous and action-oriented, has been looking for an evil 'other' to attack and destroy (be it rogue profiteers, politicians, priests or polluters). Its world is the universe, and its imagination takes it to the future... to colonising Moon and Mars, to asserting the supremacy of the human race. Stephen Hawking and the dreamers of Hollywood, both subscribe to this view. Both scientist and entertainer are of the same mind, from the same source; the methods of the imperialist are embedded in their ideas.

The Indian mind, being tentative, introspective, looks the other way; it has a tendency to look at the past: to its saints, seers, gurus. Gautama Buddha, Adi Shankara, Ramana Maharishi and

J.Krishnamurthi are available for intellectuals, while Chaitanya, Mirabai, Tulsidas, Kabir, Namdev, Tukaram, Ramdas, etc., are still praised and prayed to in the homes of the masses. But over the last century or so, the inwardness of the Eastern mind has given way to indolence - the masses are wallowing in apathy, their seers and saints are only names and sounds and pictures on walls; no one is studying or following their ideals anymore. The elite meanwhile, while superficially debating philosophy, have surrendered their thought process to the outward ways of the West, and are trapped in an imitation of their coloniser.

Can Gandhi ever come into such a picture... that would not seem possible if West and East were stuck in a permanent status-quo. But what if things were to start moving? What if human conscience, nudged by dire circumstance, got stirred by an insight that the human being needs to change? to transform himself completely, because the status-quo is actually a path to hell.

There is a feeling, the beginnings of a sense of vibrancy, that is what is happening now. Nineteen years into the 21st century, both western as well eastern efforts seem to be tiring and stretched to the limits. The pitfalls on the beaten path are all too obvious; there is no rainbow and no treasure here; rather, the inevitability of human-created catastrophe seems to be stirring the conscience of man.

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Let me share a contemporary story:

One day last summer, 20th of August 2018, to be precise, a 15-year-old girl Greta Thunberg,

skipped school and sat down outside the Swedish parliament - she called it a 'school strike for climate'. Her parents tried to dissuade her. Classmates declined to join. Passersby expressed pity and bemusement at the sight of the then unknown 15-year-old sitting on the cobblestones with a hand-painted banner. "The first day, I sat alone from about 8.30am to 3pm – the regular school day. And then on the second day, people started joining me. After that, there were people there all the time," she recalls.

Other school children joined her strike, first in her city and then throughout Europe and then quickly in other parts of the world. Within a year, more than 270 towns and cities in 71 countries had school children participating in the 'school strike', demanding action on climate change.

In January, young Greta Thunberg arrived in Davos to continue her climate campaign at the World Economic Forum. She told a Davos panel: "Some people, some companies, some decision-makers in particular, have known exactly what priceless values they have been sacrificing to continue making unimaginable amounts of money. I think many of you here today belong to that group of people." Later in the week, when some global leaders tried to condescendingly allay her fears, she warned them that "I don't want you to be hopeful. I want you to panic. I want you to feel the fear I feel every day.. I want you to act as if the house was on fire—because it is." She's young, yes, and she is also mature in a way many adults aren't.

Greta's action has now intertwined with those of other environmental action groups, an example of which was the week-long protests on the streets of London in mid-April this year.

Thousands of citizens gathered in response to a call for 'civil disobedience' - they occupied arterial roads, stopping traffic and explaining to the motorists as well policemen what was at stake, and why such action was necessary.

The whole movement has taken the form of a peaceful, non-violent protest to put moral pressure on the powerful governments to declare a climate change emergency and put an action plan in place. Significantly, those participating appear to be socially committed citizens, many of whom have vowed to practise environmentally responsible behaviour in their personal lives.

Sounds a bit -Gandhian?

British citizens resorting to 'civil disobedience' against their own British government! to many formerly colonised peoples, that certainly would feel like comeuppance, a just punishment of fate.

To this writer, what is significant, though, is that the western intellect seems to have run through its pocket of enlightenment ideas, that it is groping desperately at the outer edges of its imagination.

Imperialism has been tried. Colonialism has been tried. Dictatorship has been tried (and supported). Marx has been tried.. the flavours of Socialism and Communism have been tried. Capitalism is being tried through its clever mask Democracy, which is heading towards brute centralism, elitism and oligarchy.

Evidently, none of these thought-constructs is working.. our Western brothers and sisters are groping for breath within the tight confines of rationalist enlightenment thinking. It appears

now that they may be anticipating a release from all that, and are preparing for an expansion of the imagination, of consciousness.

Meanwhile, in the East, in India in particular, after a hundred years of looking westward for its food for thought, the nation finds itself saddled with deeply flawed systems of economics, governance and education. And this is no secret, everyone knows why they are flawed, that these systems aren't ours, that they were set up by colonialists to plunder us - but the hold of inertia has been too great, so far, but that too may be changing. The after-effects of being second hand people imitating Western ideas is beginning to be felt. Even as the nation is split between cosmopolitan India and traditional Bharat - the division is more psychological than geographic - the question of the sorrow of the modern world is being felt by this muddled consciousness.

When cosmopolitan dudes reawaken to yoga, meditation and traditional methods, when successful city slicks line up their fancy cars outside Ayurveda hospitals, when the hitherto three-step path of the premium educated gets a fourth step: IIT --> IIM --> USA --> FOG (at the FEET OF GURU in Rishikesh or Coimbatore), when fine young minds question whether they should send their toddlers to the present school system at all, when qualified urban gentlemen and ladies, in the thousands, voluntarily quit their city jobs and lifestyle to settle down in villages and small towns across the nation, getting reattached to land and community, when young couples in small towns begin to reject the offer to move to the metropolis, then, certainly, one has that vibrant feeling that things are moving.

If the resurgent Western mind is riding on

the shock of climate change, the resurgent Eastern mind is brought awake by the futility of it all, but both appear to be drawn to the source, i.e., of human consciousness, of human behaviour in and for society.

That is certainly the minimum that Gandhi demands.

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How do we know that Gandhi is the man to go to? He was a long time ago, right? the world has changed, right? Such doubts are bound to come up. If the key question is whether his vision can indeed help us now, then one can take Gandhi's descriptions and predictions of and for the modern world, made 75 to 100 years ago, and revisit and measure them against what has actually transpired in our world.

- "The future of industrialism is dark.. It is, I am afraid, going to be a curse for mankind. Exploitation of one nation by another cannot go on for all time. Industrialism depends entirely on your capacity to exploit, on foreign markets being open to you, and on the absence of competitors..." (YI, 12-11-1931, p355).

Gandhi warned repeatedly against what the West considered the core of its civilisation, viz., unbridled industrialism and capitalism. Today, the truth of runaway neo-liberalism, exploitation and inequality is being felt deeply all over the world.

- "God forbid that India should ever take to industrialism after the manner of the West. If an entire nation of 300 million took to similar economic exploitation, it would strip the world bare like locusts" (YI, 20-12-1928, p422) (Indian population

stood at 300 million in 1928, it is 1.25 billion now - editor).

A telling comment by Gandhi on the material destruction of the planet because of a consumptive industrial society - indeed, now that the populations of India and China have started to imitate the West in consumption, the resulting environmental and climate crisis is getting so severe that one is fearful of imagining the ultimate consequences.

- "Don't you see the tragedy of the situation, viz., that we can find work for our 300 million (through self-employment in traditional rural enterprise), but England can find none for its three million and is faced with a problem that baffles the greatest intellects of England" (YI, 21-11-1931, p355).

Gandhi warned about centralisation of industrial economy and how it would destroy community, its local modes of production, and render millions unemployed. The truth of this stares us in the face: In India, after 75 years of imitating Western industrialism and pumping money and subsidies into modern organised industry, it contributes to only 12 per cent of employment. Since traditional livelihoods were destroyed along the way, some 20 million are waiting for jobs today, while more than one million youth cross the age of 18 every month, adding to the immense pressure on society.

- "The fashion nowadays is to take for granted that whatever America and England are doing is good enough for us... Do we wish to copy this method of defending ourselves? Even if we do, have we the financial ability? We complain of ever-growing military expenditure. But if we would copy

America or England, we would have to increase the burden tenfold.." (YI, 22-8-1929, pp276-7).

Sadly, this too has come true. The burden of expanding military expenditure (profited by Western weapons corporations) is an unbearable reality not only for India, but a hundred other nations in the world. In the Indian budgetary allocations for 2019-20, we saw that the highest expenditure of 15.5 per cent went to Defence, while Agriculture (which involves some 55 per cent of the population) got 5 per cent, Education got 3.4 per cent, and Health got 2.3 per cent of the budget allocation.

- "As I look to Russia, where the apotheosis of industrialisation has been reached, the life there does not appeal to me... In modern terms, it is beneath human dignity to lose one's individuality and become a mere cog in the machine. I want every individual to become a full-blooded, full-developed member of the society" (H, 28-1-1939, p438)

Gandhi's observation on Soviet socialism is a fine comment on the balance of livelihood and freedom for a meaningful society. His heir Jawaharlal Nehru however, went the socialism way, which had its own consequences.

- "Once we were satisfied with traveling a few miles an hour; today we want to negotiate hundreds of miles an hour; one day we might desire to fly through space. What will be the result? Chaos." (YI, 21-1-1926, p31). "I wholeheartedly detest this mad desire to destroy distance and time, to increase crude appetites and go to the ends of the earth in search of some satisfaction" (YI, 17-3-1927, p85).

The psychological aspect of frenzied industrial (and now technological) activity is a

significant point facing humankind. Science and technology has become wholly subservient to commerce, it is drugged by the smell of profit, and so the most irresponsible and reprehensible 'innovations' are being introduced, from space tourism to mass media manipulations. Even a hundred years ago, Gandhi saw this basic human weakness as a serious matter to be addressed - the 'mad desire leading to chaos' - and this was a central focus in his 'Truth & Ahimsa' experiments.

Very few people among the intelligent, learned sections of society in the 1920s and 1930s subscribed to such views about what at the time was considered the 'great industrial revolution'. Rabindranath Tagore and Sri Aurobindo were of course of the same cultural cloth as Gandhi and had their own critique of the European way; interestingly, in the West too, a few scholars, for eg., Romain Rolland and Will Durant, understood Gandhi's message and took it to their countrymen. But largely, the influence and appeal of Western technology and economic thought was so powerful, and the colonial footprint so wide, that 'the modern way' was thrust into almost every part of the globe.

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Gandhi's clairvoyance is quite remarkable. It is not the clairvoyance of the lay astrologer, but rather that of a seer who understands cause and effect.

The most important thing for him is the human being, whose potential he saw in the soul which can achieve the highest state of wisdom and compassion. To realise that potential is to undergo a process of awareness and self-purification, to rise above the base tendencies of fear, greed, violence,

etc. - and Gandhi maintained throughout that this is the primary function of the human being.

The next important thing for him is the local community (the village) and the human being's behaviour in his society - that of brotherhood and service. He felt that one should accept with gratitude whatever has been received from one's ancestors; one ought to strengthen the good aspects of that culture and work towards perfecting the weaker aspects of it - not to reject tradition in favour of nihilistic liberty.

The third important thing for him is related to livelihood, which should be an action involving what he called 'bread labour', with no exploitation of others, producing things useful for the community. Even for those in educational or artistic pursuits, and for the wealthy, he advocated setting aside an hour or two every day for physical work, in and for community.

For him, these three things - the self-spiritual, the social-cultural, and the social-economic - all moving together, constituted the path of Truth & Non-violence. It is this movement that could realise for us real freedom as well as a peaceful society. "I do not believe that the spiritual law works on a field of its own.. on the contrary, it expresses itself only through the ordinary activities of life. It thus affects the economic, the social and the political fields," he said. (YI, 3-9-1925, p304).

In pursuing this path, which is synonymous with the path of morality and justice, one may encounter systemic obstacles, usually in the form of stubborn or repressive government. Gandhi prescribed methods of 'non-cooperation' and 'civil disobedience' as the righteous way to counter it,

which he describes as "Satyagraha - the purest type of constitutional agitation." (YI, 15-12-1921, p419).

He explains: "A Satyagrahi is nothing if not instinctively law-abiding, and it is his law-abiding nature which exacts from him implicit obedience to the highest law, that is the voice of conscience which overrides all other laws." (SW, p465). "Satyagraha is essentially a weapon of the truthful. A Satyagrahi is pledged to non-violence and, unless people observe it in thought, word and deed, they cannot offer Satyagraha. (A, p345).

So, to walk the path of Gandhi, the inward journey is the starting point, and that can be of interest to the eastern mind, culturally attuned as it has been to inward inquiry. The soul (or consciousness), morality, ethical behaviour, non-attachment to things, awareness, meditation and prayer, these have been part and parcel of one's upbringing. But this has mostly been a personal quest, and so the resurgent Indian spirit one sees today is diffused across the nation, doing its thing individually, shaping its character, striving for excellence, exploring tradition and sustainable living, participating in local affairs, educating community, and grappling the modernity monster through its natural traits of passive resistance and voluntary suffering. This Indian spirit may or may not have been wholly ignited by the Gandhi flame, but the flame is there.

The resurgent Western mind, meanwhile, appears eager to establish ethical behaviour in a spiritually vacuous society. In accordance with its own tendency, it is externally courageous, quick to form a community of opinion and action, and acts to fight, to put pressure, on those in power. We don't know for certain if Gandhi's Satyagraha, with

its combination of grit and righteous morality, has appealed to some of them, but nevertheless, a righteous intensity is very much there, especially in Europe.

An important part of Gandhi is his reference to ethical and relevant social systems of economics and governance, and our Western brothers and sisters may have an important role in contributing in this regard. Europeans are naturally skilled at making systems; after all, the present global system which is choking the human spirit is also devised by them! It's deficient by design, it has put profit before humans and the planet, and that is what happens when a society is inherently efficient in designing structures, but there's confusion on what the function of that system is to be. If the functional aspect, the purpose, can come from Gandhi, as inspiration if not as doctrine, then one feels the West can begin to re-shape and re-create a more humane system. It is their need as much as the world's.

The reason why they will be effective is that the world, including India, is imitating if not outright copying their systems and methods. With globalisation and open-door policies, one need not even copy; the same corporate players from the West strut around on the world stage, they bring Western system designs and they corner key contracts everywhere. Denying them, or evicting them, or bringing about alternate designs is presently beyond the administrative capacity of third world governments; they are so used to being imitators that they have stopped believing that they can think for themselves. Sometimes the dependence on technology is a real impediment, because having gone deep down a technology hole, one is totally dependent on its makers.



But when Europe begins to have an introspective look at its systems and technologies, and it makes fundamental changes in its designs, then that can have an impact all over the world. There is evidence of this happening, and it would be worthwhile to see it, for as Gandhi said, "...in these days of rapid intercommunication and growing consciousness of oneness of all mankind, we must recognise that our nationalism must not be isolation and unaffected by what is going on in other parts of the world. We should therefore range ourselves with the progressive forces of the world". (ABP, 17-9-33).

Facing public protests and outrage, Europe has, over the last decade, reversed hundreds of privatisations of public utilities - water, electricity, public transport - in a wave of what is called 're-municipalisations', where the municipality repossessed control and operations of their utilities. The reasons given for this has been non-performance and increase in cost, but the human element, the outrage over exploitation of a public resource for profiteering, as well as ill-treatment of the poor and denial of service to them, is what prompted people to wholeheartedly support the move.

Climate change is a subject which has stirred the European conscience like none other - to the extent that many say they are voluntarily willing to give up comforts and conveniences, an unheard of thing in the modern world; such is the determination there to save the environment. Take the case of renewable energy, where the European Union has an official target of minimum 20 per cent of energy from renewables by 2020, and 32 per cent by 2030. Eleven EU nations have already surpassed their targets for 2020. In the process, France and Germany have been pressured into committing to shut down coal and nuclear power plants. In another example,

the Netherlands' parliament voted to support a motion stating it wants only sustainable, zero-emission vehicles to be sold on the Dutch market from 2025, just six years from now. If this works, no new diesel or petrol cars will enter the Dutch market from that point forward.

All of this is happening because people, ordinary citizens including a 15-year-old school-going girl, are standing up and making demands in the name of society, of humanity; they are using the methods of strikes, non-cooperation and civil disobedience, and so far it has been without violence, without seeking political gain.

But these are not the type of decisions the Indian government can take easily, as we are dependent on imported technologies and the systems that come with it. And that shall be the case till India wakes up to her own wisdom and capabilities and puts emphasis on local needs and appropriate technologies to meet those needs locally. A declared goal of self-sufficiency shall certainly be a much needed Gandhi-inspired step for the nation.

Meanwhile, while supporting the West in their crises-inspired action to change technological systems, India has a lot to do too. It is not only the historical home of Gandhi, it also houses the cultural memory and traditions which nurtured Gandhi and which shaped his thoughts and gave him his insights. That is still alive in India. All European efforts at dismantling gross systems are more an undoing of wrong, they are a significant but small steps; where Europe will need help and guidance is in what should replace these monolithic systems and processes. Their efforts cannot be complete without touching the heart of Gandhi: gram swaraj.

The microcosm of Gandhi's gram swaraj is the independent village republic, with industrious families involved in diverse livelihoods, together producing most of the needs of its residents; a village largely self-administered by its own volunteers doing service, including maintaining records and statistics, running its own schools, and with its own security arrangements. A truly independent village republic in harmony and cooperation with neighbouring village units, a strong and intelligent participant in the affairs of the larger State - that is Gandhi's gram swaraj.

That such a society comprising more than a hundred thousand reasonably well-managed and self-sufficient village units has actually existed in this region, is something of a surprise even to today's urban Indians, leave alone the Europeans who simply cannot comprehend it. Modernity has long ago wiped out the villages and small communities in Europe and the USA; the small farmer is a rarity, and the small artisan or craftsman is practically non-existent. But Indian villages, with their social and environmental ecosystems, do still exist, they are still functional - not as the ideal, but the minimum to build upon is there, that is what Gandhi felt. The significant thing about the Indian village, apart from its self-containing character, is that it is in continuity with tradition, however broken down that may be. It still holds the breath of this civilisation - its religiosity, its core beliefs about human consciousness, the importance of striving for this summit of consciousness. The cultural content of Bh rat that this tradition brings still provides fragrance to all.

The resurgent Indian mind which seeks a better world through Gandhi's inspiration is today

busy trying to keep these villages alive, striving to keeping its spirit alive. Not to preserve it as a museum piece, but to somehow keep the breath going, even as the village is getting sucked into the labyrinth of modernity all around it. Their knowledge, exposure and understanding of gram swaraj is a key to the West unlocking its Gandhi potential.

The strengths of East and West seem complementary. Where one is lacking, the other seems to be well endowed. Neither seems to be wholly ready to embrace Gandhi's way, yet, but together, it seems that the resurgent minds of East and West could have a good teamwork, if they so wished. After all, the human being at the core is the same everywhere, insecure and alone, but craving for love and security, while externally, the systemic problems are also similar; modern industrial systems and modern economic ideas have been established almost everywhere - even China is competing with the USA on its capitalistic trade model! - and therefore a large part of the modern crises, the ecological destruction, the poverty and inequality, the stress and sorrow in society, are common to all.

Gandhi once said this of his work and the world: "I do want to think in terms of the whole world. My patriotism includes the good of mankind in general, my service of India includes the service of humanity... If I can say so without arrogance and with due humility, my message and methods are, indeed, in their essentials for the whole world." (YI, 17-9-1925, p.329)

For all the predictions of East being East and West being West, through Gandhi the twain shall meet (with apologies to Kipling).

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**NOTES**

1. P.205, "Founding Principles of Gandhi's Subversion", Peter Gonsalves, SAGE, 2012 -
2. "Systematic and organised violent conflicts are most likely in economies where inequality is high and wealth is mostly immobile, that is, in societies where those worse off would benefit substantially from expropriating all assets", - "Economic Roots of Civil War...", Boix, C. (2008). *Economic Roots of Civil Wars and Revolutions in the Contemporary World*. *World Politics*, 60(3), 390-
3. Autobiography, xiii

Source code of quotes given in parentheses:

A: Autobiography

H: Harijan

YI: Young India

ABP: Amrita Bazar Patrika