

IS GANDHI STILL RELEVANT? ARE THERE INSTITUTIONS THAT BUILD THEMSELVES THROUGH HIS IDEALS TODAY?

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Introduction by Editor

“Ahimsa - Non-violence is not a sufficiently correct translation of ahimsa, which is a culturally-rooted concept. ... Ahimsa is the essence of man's natural life. Ahimsa does not merely mean non-killing, non-aggression or nonviolence... it embodies the highest form of human activity. When natural life is informed by ahimsa, men and women are inspired and equipped for self-transcendence. This is the mode of recreating life incessantly in accordance with truth. In the ultimate analysis, ahimsa bridges the gap between the extension and intension of truth. It is, thus, the ideal of human activity. ...Genuine human activity demands that we transcend our theories the moment we construct them. ... We ought to learn to confront reality directly, as Gandhi did, unmediated by theoretical contraptions or constructs.”

- Excerpts from chapter PHILOSOPHY, Gandhi's Challenge to Modern Science, Prof. Sunil Sahasrabuddhey

Every large-scale, modern non-violent social movement in India are almost invariably led by Gandhian ideals. The environmental movement today in India is one of the most visible and active ones, often confronting the State with its questions, critic, resistance through people's movement within the spectrum of democratic engagement and articulating, constructing and living an alternative as well. From the Village Industries movement started by him and championed and stewarded by the “Doctor of Village Industries”; J.C. Kumarappa, the Bhoodan movement led by Vinobha Bhave, the Chipco movement, the Narmada Bachchao Aandolan to every other movement of the current

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day, almost all them have originated and articulated themselves from the Gandhian matrix of ideas and action.

Gandhi continues to inspire youngsters today not because of the widespread knowledge of Gandhian literature or clarity of his concepts - Indeed the opposite is true, despite having such a large volume of literature, he is the most misunderstood and misinterpreted political and social leader of this country – but, through the inspiring constructive work rendered by many who have been driven by the Gandhian ideals. In fact, eminent intellectual and Gandhian scholar in his own right, Ashish Nandy recently stated that “many Gandhians today haven’t read Gandhi themselves much and have only started to read him carefully after their work has been called Gandhian by others¹.” Not merely the struggles, but, also the constructive movements have found their roots in the Gandhian ideals. Localised, self-reliant, community-centric and community empowering initiatives that abound across India and have evolved exemplary models have all originated from Gandhian roots. Many have since come to influence the State policy like the Right to Information Act (RTI), as eminent environmentalist, Ashish Kothari points out in the next article.

Sunil Sahasrabudhey, in his seminar work, “Gandhi’s Challenge to Modernity” outlines the pros and cons of the various types of movements that have emerged and Gandhian influence on them for a better understanding. The same is tabulated below :

Movements in Response to Science	Their foundations	Their limitations
The People’s Science Movement (PSM)	Believe that masses are denied wealth and enlightenment as the science movement has not reached them. Encourages scientists to come out of their labs and to go to the people and spread scientific temper and culture amongst them.	PSMs view modern science as the ultimate repository of truth, wealth and enlightenment, they view people’s beliefs with suspicion and often categorise them as obscurantist.

The Appropriate Technology Movement (ATM)	Technology developed in one social, economic and cultural setting is not appropriate for others. Key features are: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Apply modern technology to improve the tools of the masses • Technologies used should depend on the degree of modern development • Development of technology to more fully utilise the resources of a particular country 	ATM recognises indigenously only to the extent of skills, called technical knowledge, but not indigenous knowledge per se.
The Ecological Movement	Environmentalists have successfully focussed on the highly destructive uses of modern science and technology.... underlines the propensity of modern science to destroy internally consistent and functioning orders.	Not succeeded in raising a debate about whether their opposition to this destruction is because it is inbuilt in the nature of modern science or is only contingently associated with it...(questions such as)...does science incorporate or give shape to destructive, polluting values?
The Peace Movement	The Peace movement is essentially anti-war... it is against a situation brought into existence by modern science.	The question...is whether violence is intrinsically built into modern science. If this is so, then is it possible to accept it as the repository of truth.

The Alternative Science Movement (ASM)	ASMs contest the claims of the unique and value-free character of science. They contend that science has been an equal companion of imperialism in the expansionist policy of the European powers, and that it became universal only when the rule of Europe became worldwide.	ASMs are often very close to Gandhi's way of thinking. But... remain intellectual movements generally, unable to establish links with popular practices, both in industry and in agriculture... trapped in theoretical constructs.
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Rajni Bakshi, in her book, "Bapu Kuti" portrays 8 such stories. In a certain way, this book with a sub-title, 'journeys in rediscovering Gandhi', in the year 1998 was one of the first ones to capture and narrate the underlying common factors of Gandhi in many of the social-political movements in India. This genre has since grown and today there are several literature that amply highlights the contribution of the Gandhian ideas into the re-imagination or alternative imagination of our society and country. Ashish Kothari and K.J. Joy have compiled the most voluminous of such a book in recent times with the "Alternative Futures" – India Unshackled, a book that compiles more than 30 eminent thinkers in four broad topics to bring their insights into imagining a future for India in over 680 pages of material.

Today, the new narrative and imagination of the "alternative" sector is more to do with the market-driven economy, which has re-defined social sector through its overemphasis on scale, marketability, nationality and optics. In this context, the following article captures some of the most powerful transformative narratives stories of recent times and more of these are available in the links provided in Vikalpa Sangam website. The new narratives for an alternative future have to emerge from these building blocks that bridge the gap between the current forms of knowledge and the newer forms that need to emerge. In unshackling these newer concepts, there is a necessity to transcend the current system. The result of being entrapped in this system though deprives us of the syntax for the new, in this is the challenge, thankfully, as the author points out, there are enough who are willing to take the challenge in creating a new future. This article is a gateway of many more articles and examples and human action stories, stories of change, promise and hope.

On Gandhi's 150th birth anniversary, there appears to be a lot of people remembering him. Conferences, media articles, a 100-member Government of India committee to oversee celebrations, and much more, seem to have brought him back to public life. Much of this, however, is tokenism; in particular State-sponsored events appear to be mere hypocrisy that Gandhiji would have been aghast at.

Yet, this does not mean Gandhi is irrelevant, nor is he dead. Through the smokescreen of official doublespeak and NGO tokenism, one glimpses myriad ways in which his inspiration and message lives on, enabling improvement in the lives of the marginalised and challenging the dominant (and destructive) notions of development and progress.

The manifestation of this continued relevance is in the daily struggles and initiatives of peoples not only in India, but around the world. Directly or indirectly, his notions of *swaraj*, *satyagraha*, and *ahimsa* live on, and become even more crucial in a world that is otherwise being torn asunder by growing inequalities, ecological devastation, and continued and new forms of deprivation from basic needs for a couple of billion people.

One of Gandhi's most important messages was to always speak truth to power. He lived this message through the notion and practice of *satyagraha*. This included many acts of resisting colonial power, and of challenging the marginalisation of Dalits and others in traditional Indian society (acknowledging here his weakness in criticising the caste system *per se*). He realised though that resistance is not adequate, especially given that vast sections of Indian society were

historically deprived and marginalised. There has to be a process of both resistance to centralised power (*sangharsh*) and of reconstruction (*nirman*); and put in another way, speaking truth to power and translating truth into practical action for improving the human condition. While his *sangharsh* is well-known, not so much highlighted are the very many programmes of *nirman* and many around him tried out. Several of these were also inspired by the Gandhian economist J. C. Kumarappa, and included production of khadi cloth, improvement in agriculture, promoting sanitation, enhancing industrial workers' lives, and so on.

Possibly one of the most ambitious of these practical experiments was the attempt to inspire direct democracy and self-reliance in the constituency of Aundh in Maharashtra. In the 1930s, the then ruler, Bhavanrao Srinivasrao agreed to hand over his powers to his 'subjects' and invited Gandhi to lay out a plan for *gram swaraj*. A constitution was framed, giving significant powers over various aspects of life to village panchayats. A series of interesting experiments followed for a few years. Ironically, the process was abandoned when, at independence, Aundh was integrated into the Indian union, as Delhi had other visions of what integration into the republic meant ².

Indeed, the Indian State has made only a few hesitant steps towards direct democracy, and moved very far from the ideal of self-reliance for communities (or the country as a whole). The 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments promised decentralisation of decision-making power to villages and urban wards, but severely curtailed it by not providing for financial and legal devolution; in any case, implementation has been halting, at

best. Kerala's process of village-level planning, and Nagaland's communitisation initiative in which a part of the State government funds (for education, health, power, roads) go directly to village councils for use, are examples of States that have come closer to the intent of the 73rd Amendment. But even they have been flawed or not sustained for long enough.

It has then been left to people's movements and civil society organisations to take up the sangharsh (resistance) and nirman (construction) agenda, at times merging the two given their inextricably linked nature. Many of these clearly (though not necessarily explicitly) take their inspiration directly or indirectly from Gandhi's message. As Ramachandra Guha (2018) notes "I spent the first fifteen years of my career working on the history of Indian environmentalism, whose main actors were influenced by Gandhian methods of analysis, critique, struggle and construction."

One of India's most iconic environmental and livelihoods movement, the Chipko andolan in the Himalaya which attempted to save forests from being axed for the industry in the 1970s, had as some of its spearheads people who were steeped in Gandhi's ideas. In the decades since then, several prominent resistance movements against dams (e.g. the Narmada Bachao Andolan), mining, or other 'development' projects that have threatened to dispossess or displace adivasis, farmers, fishers, pastoralists, workers and others, have been explicitly non-violent in nature. A series of farmers' agitations in 2018-19 have refused to take to violent means, despite many a provocation. Others have learned from Gandhi's entreaty to focus one's struggles against the system rather than individuals representing the system, by trying to work

through winning hearts including of the 'enemy' - famously portrayed by the popular Bollywood film *Munnabhai*. In this sense, many movements also borrow from other inspiring figures in history, sometimes in a seamless way that should put to shame ideologues who erect unsurmountable fences between Gandhi, Marx, Ambedkar, and so on. Nagaraj (2010) for instance cites an action by the Karnataka Dalit Sangharsh Samiti (DSS), called 'Drink Some Water from Our Hands', in which they would hold a pot of water, offering it to caste Hindus.

Outside India, perhaps, the struggle most well-identified with ahimsa is that of blacks in the USA, led by Martin Luther King. A fascinating part of this story is the role of the spiritual leader Howard Thurman, who met and was influenced by Gandhi, and in turn had a major influence on King (Blake 2019). The impact of his approach to ahimsa and civil disobedience, and respect for nature, on others like Nelson Mandela, Steve Biko, Arne Naess, and many others are also well-known.

Several initiatives have explicitly or implicitly evoked the idea of autonomy, or self-determination, in opposing the State's imposition of a particular developmental ideology. They see what Hardiman (2018) notes, that for Gandhi it was about "building swaraj from the bottom-up, rather than the top-down methods used hitherto by elite politicians" (Hardiman 2018). In this, communities have moved from sangharsh to nirman, in many different ways. Across India, several individuals who were part of the Gandhian activist Jayaprakash Narayan's youth movement, ChhatraYuva Sangharsh Vahini, have worked with village communities to build local self-reliance in areas like water, food and to struggle for Gram Sabha-based decision-making.

In 2013, the gram sabha of Mendha-Lekha (Gadchiroli district, Maharashtra), well-known for its movement towards self-governance, took the historic decision of converting all its private agricultural land into the village commons. To give this legal backing, they used the mostly-forgotten Gramdan Act, which was inspired by Gandhi's disciple Vinoba Bhave. This follows another of Gandhi's important principles, of keeping essential aspects of life support in the commons rather than be privatised: "everybody should be able to get sufficient work to enable him to make the two ends meet. And this ideal can be universally realised only if the means of production of the elementary necessities of life remains in the control of the masses. These should be freely available to all as God's air and water are or ought to be; they should not be made a vehicle of traffic for the exploitation of others. Their monopolisation by any country, nation or group of persons would be unjust."

Across India and the rest of the world, today, there are incredible examples of constructive alternatives to the currently dominant system: sustainable and holistic agriculture, community-led water/energy/food sovereignty, solidarity and sharing economy, worker take-over of production facilities, resource/knowledge commons, local governance, community health and alternative learning, inter-community peace-building, re-assertion of cultural diversity, gender and sexual pluralism, and much else³. It would be foolish to claim that all of these take inspiration from Gandhi; most probably do not, at least not directly. But the ambience of Gandhian ideas and practices appears to have influenced very many of them. For instance, the many movements towards *anna swaraj* (food sovereignty), or dozens of initiatives at

reviving and sustaining handicrafts and small-scale, labour-intensive production as a counter-trend to the mechanisation sweeping the economy, are in one way of the other infused with this ambience. The Gandhian worker (and well-known theatre personality) Prasanna, initiated Charaka, a women-run khadi cooperative that has provided dignified livelihoods to 200 women while emphasising hand labour, self-reliance, and environmentally sensitive production. Elango R., a Dalit sarpanch near Chennai, explicitly combines both Gandhian and Marxist principles in his attempt to transform the village he lives in, including providing more dignity and livelihood security to Dalit families. He has advocated a 'network economy' in which clusters of 20 or so villages can be self-reliant for basic needs; an idea somewhat differently put by another Gandhi-inspired social worker, Ela Bhatt, in her idea of '100-mile radius' self-reliance⁴.

In the health sector too, echoes of Gandhi's very strongly-articulated focus on self-healing, on facilitating the body's natural powers, on the use of herbal treatment, etc, are seen in many naturopathy and ayurvedic centres across the country. At the 1st Naturopathy Day organised in November 2018 by the Pune-based National Institute of Naturopathy, Gandhi's statements on health were the very visible foundation.

Similar echoes from Gandhian thought can be found in many alternative education initiatives. His *naitaleem* principle of integrating the hands, heart, and head rather than focusing only on intellectual advancement, is at the core of myriad examples like the *jeevanshalas* ('life schools') of the Narmada Bachao Andolan⁵, struggling to save the Narmada valley and its inhabitants from a series of

mega-dams, Marudam⁶ in Tamil Nadu, Krishnamurti Foundation school⁷ which mix mainstream with alternative, and Adharshila Learning Center⁸ in Madhya Pradesh; colleges like the Adivasi Academy at Tejgadh, Gujarat; open learning institutions like the Bija Vidyapeeth¹⁰ in Dehradun in Uttarakhand, Bhoomi College¹¹ in Bengaluru and Swaraj University¹² in Udaipur.

Rajni Bakshi in a small but potent book, *BapuKuti*, has documented several movements striving for greater democratic accountability, local self-reliance, livelihood security of the poorest, technology appropriate for the rural and urban poor, all arising from Gandhian principles and inspiration (Bakshi 2000). I recently visited the extremely humble and down-to-earth hut where the Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathana was initiated, near Bhim in Rajasthan, and marveled at how one of India's most powerful democracy movements, for enshrining

the citizens' Right to Information, was born here. A movement infused through and through with Gandhian principles and thought. Several more experiments are listed also by Horig (1998).

Of tremendous significance in many resistance and alternative movements is the exploration of autonomy, self-reliance, people's governance of politics and economy, freedom with responsibility for the freedom of others, and respect for the rest of nature. It is in many of these alternative movements that I find inspiration for building on the legacy of Gandhi ... and of many others, including Marx, Ambedkar, Tagore, Luxemburg and various spiritual luminaries, and equally important, the many indigenous and adivasi and Dalit and peasant and other 'folk' revolutionaries through history. What could be more relevant and timely, in a world driven by inequalities, conflicts, and ecological devastation?

NOTES

1. Interview with Ashish Nandy, Down To Earth - <https://www.downtoearth.org.in/coverage/environment/relevance-of-gandhian-environmentalism-56906>
2. Pant 1989; https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Aundh_Experiment
3. See for instance www.vikalpsangam.org for hundreds of examples from India
4. Cajka 2018, Shrivastava and Elango 2017, Bhatt 2015
5. www.narmada.org/ALTERNATIVES/jeevanshalas.html
6. www.marudamfarmschool.org
7. www.kfonline.org/education-centres/
8. <http://adharshilask.tripod.com/aboutadh.html>
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