

Reading Gandhi as a lesson of political maturity

His appeal to conscientious politics and nobility of spirit continues to be a strong ethical response to political issues



RAMIN JAHANBEGLOO

Nearly 74 years after his death, Gandhi remains the most widely known political leader of modern India. Gandhi's stature as a major historical figure was confirmed by his successful non-violent movement against British rule in India. Yet, what makes Gandhi so relevant and meaningful for our world is that his political legacy and his philosophical significance continue to inspire millions of people around the globe – to fight against inequality, injustice and historical wrongs.

An imperative

Accordingly, what distinguishes Gandhi from all politicians in today's world is not only his simplicity and honesty – which have become rare characteristics for many men and women who pretend to represent our wills and wishes around the globe – but also his belief in the moral growth of humanity. In a world such as ours which suffers from an immaturity of politics and politicians, either in tyrannical situations such as Afghanistan, Myanmar, Syria, etc. or in democracies such as the United States, Spain, Poland, India, etc. reading Gandhi as a lesson of political maturity is an ethical imperative. As such, and not strangely, Gandhi believed in no divorce between politics and ethics.

For Gandhi, politics was essentially an ethical mode of conduct.

He never pretended to be a teacher of truth. However, others took him to be a guru, and there is no doubt that his attempts to encourage people to experiment with the truth were both philosophical and pedagogical.

Culture of patience

Therefore, as a practitioner of empathetic humanism and a pluralist thinker, Gandhi was an exemplar of a lifelong process of listening and learning. He actually played the role of an exemplar in prescribing "patience" as a means to understand and approach the other. The dialogical nature of Gandhi's culture of patience finds its roots in the idea of epistemic humility as a necessary methodology in approaching and understanding other cultures and religions. As such, the entire Gandhian thought in the realm of religion and politics revolves around this concept of epistemic humility. That is why Gandhi had a profoundly ethical view of religions.

In other words, he recognised neither the infallible authority of prophetic texts nor the sanctity of religious traditions. At the same time, he was the foremost critic of the epistemological arrogance of modern rationality and its authoritarian practices in terms of colonial thinking and imperialistic domination. It is on account of his overriding concern for the self-respect of individuals and nations that Gandhi joined the two notions of truth and non-violence to that of the term Swaraj.

Gandhi believed that all individuals irrespective of their religion, race and culture had the right to self-governance. Accordingly, what we can call the Gandhian moment of Swaraj was actually for



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him a constant experimentation with modes of cross-cultural and inter-faith understanding and dialogue.

In other words, the capacity to engage constructively with conflicting values was an essential component of Gandhi's practical wisdom and empathetic pluralism. As a matter of fact, Swaraj as a space of self-realisation was where the ethical and the political joined in the Gandhian political philosophy. For Gandhi, politics, like spirituality, was a space to examine and experience Truth, which he considered not as a given process, but as an effort of re-evaluation and reformulation of reality.

A self-transcendence

In this sense, Gandhi did not consider freedom as a mere political act, but he defined it primarily as an ethical enterprise. That is why Gandhi argued, "I am but a seeker after Truth. I claim to have found a way to it. I claim to be making a ceaseless effort to find it. But I admit that I have not yet found it. To find Truth completely is to realize oneself and one's destiny, i.e., to become perfect. I am painfully conscious of my imperfections, and therein lies all the strength I possess, because it is a rare thing

for a man to know his own limitations." We have here a process of individual self-transcendence that Gandhi also applied to the idea of civilisation, since he considered civilisation as an exercise of human maturity.

Gandhi firmly believed that the anthropological and ethical origins of such a state of maturity resided in the spiritual capacity of human beings. But he also underlined this move towards maturity as a process of learning to be responsible towards oneself and the others. As a result, everything Gandhi did and wrote during his lifetime was an attempt to bring into the open his own journey of intellectual and political maturity. He, therefore, used the concept of maturity not only in the social context, but also as an expression of character building which he distinguished from literary training.

As he asserted, "Literary training by itself adds not an inch to one's moral height and character-building is independent of literary training." Therefore, according to Gandhi, character-building was an art of developing a sense of autonomy and having authority over one's self.

In other words, maturity for Gandhi was a state of mind and a mode of being, where one had the capacity to form one's life in a social sphere. It was on the basis of this act of maturity that Gandhi established his political anthropology and pedagogical premises. He believed that an autonomy formed by a mature judgment prepared a life according to morality. Gandhi, therefore, approached pragmatic politics as a form of character-building and not necessarily a struggle for getting elected or grasping power.

Gandhi's acknowledgment of the moral imperative of maturity and his devotion to democratic transparency continues to distinguish his political psychology from most of the other discourses in Indian and world politics. As such, Gandhi's suggestion to us in relation to moral excellence and spiritual maturity presents itself at the same time as an invitation to self-respect and self-restraint.

A continuing relevance

As he argued, "Where there is egotism, we shall find incivility and arrogance. Where it is absent, we shall find a sense of self-respect together with civility... He who holds his self-respect dear acts towards everyone in a spirit of friendship, for he values others' self-respect as much as he values his own. He sees himself in all and everyone else in himself, puts himself in line with others. The egotist keeps aloof from others and, believing himself superior to the rest of the world, he takes [it] upon himself to judge everyone and in the result enables the world to have the measure of his smallness."

Therefore, it goes without saying that by reading Gandhi closely and correctly, we can get to the conclusion that, despite all his shortcomings, his appeal to mature and conscientious politics and nobility of spirit continues to be a strong ethical response to the political issues and challenges of our time. Maybe, that is why, Gandhi remains our contemporary, while he belongs to our future.

Ramin Jahanbegloo is Director of the Mahatma Gandhi Centre for Non-violence and Peace Studies at the O.P. Jindal Global University, Sonipat, Haryana