

## Gandhi's Spirituality and its Relevance in a Globalized World

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Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, also popularly known as the “father of the nation” contributed immensely not only to the Indian freedom struggle, but also to spiritual, philosophical and moral thought. He himself followed a set of beliefs and principles, that included non-violence, celibacy, self-confessions and ascetic living. Interestingly, his spiritual life philosophy seems to be inspired by combination of various schools of thought, rather than just one religious philosophy. This also translated into his political beliefs and actions. Since Gandhi was born and brought up in Colonial India, his thoughts were often influenced by both Modern European thinkers, as he was a follower and believer of reason and rationality, as well as Christian thought. At the same time, he was also inspired by Ancient Indian philosophy, as found in the Vedas, Bhagavad Gita etc. His school of thought, was hence a blend of various Western and Eastern religious philosophies, which constitutes what would now be considered “Gandhian” thought. This essay aims to explore some of Gandhi's major spiritual beliefs, their sources, and how they manifested in his politics. It argues that Gandhi's spiritual influences empowered him to understand and embrace the importance of context, and hence he could be the leader that he was, successfully leading mass campaigns. It also shows that Gandhi adopted and foresaw the new ideals that the progressive regions in the world were adopting and adapted those ideas in a balanced way to his own context. This is especially with regards to democratic nations and their constitutional principles. This makes Gandhi not only a spiritual or political, but even a Cosmopolitan leader who foresaw globalism, that was soon to influence how the world worked, and accurately preached ideals that could help one embrace these changes and make the best of them (Jahenbegloo). His spirituality enabled and empowered him to go beyond his comfort zone and explore moral and political domains where few had earlier stepped into.

The link between Spirituality and Politics has not been explored adequately, or as much as it deserves to, because Political philosophy, thought, and leaders have invariably been inspired by some form of spirituality. This is especially true with regards to leadership, for even modern psychology, organizational behavior and management studies show that the most powerful, effective and influential leaders often carry with them a strong foundation of spiritual principles and values (Swanson). Religions and spiritual traditions also have a rich literature on moral values like integrity, truth, righteousness etc. that go hand in hand with effective leadership. For example, a spiritual value like oneness and unity can also be powerfully used in a political context, while advocating for coexistence between communities. Hence, the two- spiritual values and leadership are highly correlated. Gandhi is a figure who many can identify with since after many urban Indians have moved abroad to work, or “brain drain” as we call it, lose touch with

their “culture” and the generation that has grown up working in Multinational companies, across countries often complains about purposelessness. Here, Gandhi’s life can be inspirational, because not only was he a political leader, but before that, he was an ordinary Indian whose global exposure pushed him to think beyond himself and work for the betterment of his community. As borders shrink, businesses realize the importance of diversity and inclusion, people travel more often for work, and Gandhi’s example of showing cross- cultural adaptability and being able to harbor human connection becomes very inspirational. They can even be considered 21<sup>st</sup> century skills that are now desired and valued very highly. One could also claim the opposite and say that Gandhian values are “too ideal” and not practically applicable to ordinary people’s lifestyles, but I’d contest this by saying that that’s true of only some of his values, such as celibacy, austerity and penance etc., which he also did not consistently apply in his daily life. These were merely experiments, that he took up occasionally, and mostly towards the end of his life, and reflect something much deeper- the importance of discipline and self-control. What is great is that his accounts don’t claim otherwise, since he is completely honest even about his moral failures and weaknesses. Hence, Gandhi’s example is relevant for everyone, from growing children to political leaders.

This is an important subject to explore also because his ideology may have not been novel, but it’s combination of principles from various practices, and their unique direct manifestation in politics was. Previously, Indian spiritual thinkers and leaders restricted themselves to the thought and philosophy domain, and did not always venture into social or political issues such that they were active political participants. King Ashoka was an exception, but he adopted Buddhism or Buddhist spiritual beliefs much after becoming King. However, Gandhi’s spirituality was intertwined with his politics from the beginning, though it may have become more prominent in the latter part of his political career.

### **Multi- Religious Context**

Though Gandhi was not religious in his younger days, he slowly developed respect and regard for religions, mainly through the influence and example of his father. Hindus, Jains, Parsis, Buddhists and Muslims used to visit his father both for religious as well as political discussion. It was in 1888, when he arrived in London to study law, that he read Bhagavad Gita, the most precious book of Hinduism. Here, Gandhi also came into contact with the books on Theosophy, The Bible, especially the New Testament and 'The Light of Asia' by Sir Edwin Arnold. Even at that time he began to identify the unifying teachings of the Gita, the Light of Asia and the Sermon on the Mount in the Bible and thus he started to practice an

inter-religious spirituality. With this background, Gandhi continued his experiments with religion and God (Gandhi 27).

Because his own spiritual ideology had borrowed from elements of Christianity, Buddhism, Hinduism, and even Islam, he could appeal to a lot of different people, since his basic premise preached peace, his ideals that were universal to most religions, and could be appreciated by ordinary people. This even led him to adopt secular beliefs, and he founded the concept of “Sarvodaya”, which means 'the well-being of all'. His openness towards ideas- moral or traditional, was noteworthy. This is what made him adjustable in political matters, while at the same time strict or rigid about his own spiritual principles. He took his philosophy with himself wherever he went, rather than getting influenced by the environmental culture around him. His, along with Ambedkar’s secular views helped shape the laws in India that promised the sustenance of plurality and multiplicity. Further, as more countries adopt secular constitutions and laws, allowing a multiplicity of religions, this is a perfect example of embracing all philosophies as equal.

### **Ahimsa or Non- Violence and Satyagraha**

At the time when Gandhi was a young lawyer, he was struggling with injustice in South Africa, and learnt about Leo Tolstoy’s doctrine of non-violent resistance to evil. This had an impact in shaping his philosophy of *satyagraha*. This concept of not responding to evil by evil became Gandhi's peaceful weapon in the fight against the British rule. Interestingly, Tolstoy in his turn was inspired to develop his non-violence doctrine after closer acquaintance with the Indian culture during his student years at the faculty of Eastern Philology at Kazan University (Ryzhova). Hence, what Gandhi understood as non-violence at that time, seemed to be from a western source, but the concept’s roots lay back in his own country. This also shows how ideas on print could carry themselves to far off lands and finally reach people whose cultures they were actually originated in.

Gandhi took the religious principle of ahimsa (doing no harm) common to Buddhism, Hinduism and Jainism and turned it into a non-violent tool for mass action. Gandhi also found the teaching of the Prophet of Islam fully compatible with the principle of Ahimsa or non-violence (Chittilapilly 117). He used it to fight not only colonial rule but social evils such as racial discrimination and untouchability as well.

Gandhi called it "satyagraha" which means 'truth force.' In this doctrine, the aim of any non-violent conflict was to convert the opponent; to win over his mind and his heart and persuade him to your point of view. Gandhi was firm that satyagraha was not a weapon of the weak - "Satyagraha is a weapon of the strong; it admits of no violence under any circumstance whatever; and it always insists upon truth." His

vocabulary too increasingly underwent a radical change, at times becoming merely an obverse of the language of violence. He began to talk of ‘non-violent warfare’, ‘peaceful rebellion’, a ‘civilized form of warfare’, a ‘war bereft of every trace of violence’, and ‘weapons’ in the ‘armoury’ of the satyagrahi, all intended to ‘compel’ and ‘force’ the opponent to negotiate. Gandhi’s political realism triumphed over his moral idealism, and, despite his claims to the contrary, the satyagraha was not always a purely spiritual method of action (Parekh 39). In a world where International Relations, diplomacy, and world peace has become a priority for nation states, the principle of non-violence goes a long way, since it attempts to deter war under any circumstances. The United Nations too uses many such principles so that countries have dialogue and mediation, rather than succumbing to violence.

He led several non-violent movements against the British, some of which include Champaran, Non-cooperation, Quit India Movement, Salt march etc. His commitment towards non-violence was so high that he aborted a movement at the peak of its momentum because some individuals took violent actions during it. Gandhi called off the non-cooperation movement because of the Chauri Chaura incident, which saw the death of twenty-two policemen at the hands of an angry mob. Such was his integrity- he could not allow his movement to have any trace of violence.

Many black American leaders had gone to India from the early 1930s to seek his advice and study his method. He was so impressed with their commitment that he remarked that ‘it may be through the Negroes that the unadulterated message of nonviolence will be delivered to the world’. The American civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s under the leadership of Martin Luther King confirmed Gandhi’s hope. This was one an example of one of the most tangible influences Gandhi had for a social movement in another country. His ideas had travelled across continents and contributed to the success of other struggles against oppression, thus making him globally influential.

It is recognized that Gandhi’s conception of nonviolence as a moral and political ideal place him in the cosmopolitan tradition. From Gandhi’s perspective, nonviolence is an ontological truth that follows from the unity and interdependence of humanity and life. Gandhi develops the idea of nonviolence as a perspective of universal reciprocity, which rests upon an awareness of a fundamental interconnection between one’s self and other beings. As such, Gandhi’s nonviolence is experimental and pluralistic, but it also approaches Truth as self-realization and self-awareness (Jahanbegloo).

A critique of Gandhi’s cosmopolitan sentiment could be the understand of Gandhi as “anti- west”, owing to his onslaught against western civilization in “Hind Swaraj”, but his writing so was aimed at uniting

Indians against their oppressor and reinvent their self-faith. He admits at various points that there's a lot to learn from the west, but opposed the fetishizing of technology, science and the mindless imitation of everything Western by Indians (Hardiman). Hence, his ideals would very much be in accord with Cosmopolitanism.

### **Political Economic views**

Gandhi presents the Sarvodaya ideal as an alternative to the systems of capitalist economy and Marxian socialism. Unlike Marx, Gandhi does not subscribe to violence as a means of achieving economic equality. The Sarvodaya ideal is built on the principle of ahimsa. He did not want to build a social structure that would "rise on the ashes of the blind, the deaf and the dumb" (125). Hence, he defined his socialism as "even unto the least." (Prabhu and Rao 246)

The most distinctive feature of Sarvodaya doctrine is its emphasis on the primacy and the inevitability of the moral and spiritual values. The moral order is the basis of social order. Man can be trained through self-sacrifice to care for the common good. Every effort of social transformation should begin from the level of the person. Hence, individual transformation is the first step in a new world order. Unlike capitalism and communist socialism, Sarvodaya does not merely concern itself with the goal of material progress. Neither does it subscribe to the violent method of achieving social equality "by cutting off the prince's head." According to Gandhi, this blessed state of social order cannot be attained through violent and untruthful means. Hence, he appeals to truthful, non-violent and pure hearted socialist society in the world. Thus, through the social, political and economic transformation of the society, Gandhi strives to establish a non-violent pattern of Sarvodaya society, which is a happy blending of secular and spiritual (Prabhu and Rao 207). Interestingly, many of the world's countries, while democratic, prefer a mixed economic system of society that allows free market capitalism but has policies on affirmative action and laws on ethical business and trade. Few countries recognize themselves as fully capitalist or communist.

### **Self-Reliance and Swaraj**

For Gandhi, Swaraj referred to a state of affairs in which individuals were morally in control of themselves and ran their lives in such a way that they needed no external coercion. They freely did what was right and resolved their differences and conflicts themselves. They possessed an uncompromising sense of independence and self-respect, and found it shameful to turn to an external agency to discipline them or to regulate their social relations. Hence, Gandhi's view of human nature was also rather positive.

For Gandhi, Swaraj presupposed self-discipline, self-restraint, a sense of mutual responsibility, the wisdom neither to dominate nor be dominated by others, and a sense of dharma (Parekh 50).

Although the word "Swaraj" means self-rule, Gandhi gave it the content of an integral revolution that encompasses all spheres of life- personal, familial, regional etc. (Gandhi 722). For example, Gandhi wore cloth which was homemade, and he encouraged others to make their own clothing through spinning through Charaka. This initiative caught on gradually & Charaka became the symbol of Indian flag. He spun his clothes- the traditional Indian dhoti and shawl woven with a charkha. He believed that if people of India could weave their cloth, then India would not be burdened through imports from England. Further, he didn't wear expensive clothes. He made a conscious effort to dress simply, so that he could appeal to the poor masses of the country, which also went a long way for him to be able to impact such a huge number of people. This further shows Gandhi's ability to adapt from one context to another, especially contexts that vary vastly- both economically and culturally.

He talked about decentralization of power through this same principle of Swaraj, as applied to the context of village development. Adopting Swaraj meant implementing a system whereby the state machinery is virtually nil, and the real power directly resides in the hands of people. Gandhi said: "Power resides in the people, they can use it at any time." This philosophy rests inside an individual who has to learn to be master of his own self and spreads upwards to the level of his community which must be dependent only on itself. Gandhi explained his vision in 1946: "Independence begins at the bottom. A society must be built in which every village has to be self-sustained and capable of managing its own affairs. It will be trained and prepared to perish in the attempt to defend itself against any onslaught from without. This does not exclude dependence on and willing help from neighbors' or from the world. It will be a free and voluntary play of mutual forces." (Murthy 189). This idea of decentralization also took stage in various democracies across the world, where there is a federal system of government. It was adopted by various newly- independent erstwhile colonies too. It is once again pluralistic because it implies that if one can rule themselves, they can also be a part of the larger whole, which is the nation. This further expounds on the value of oneness and unity, which ultimately makes Gandhi cosmopolitan.

## **Conclusion**

Gandhi clearly understood various contexts and could adapt to various cultures easily, as he found purpose everywhere he went. He was exposed to spirituality in London, that made him see humanity as one. In South Africa, he led a non-violent struggle. In India, he fought against the British and led mass

movements. Not only that, within India he shifted between a lot of contexts. He understood different religious communities, varying ideological factions, along with rural/ urban differences, with his emphasis on rural Swaraj. Though some parts of Gandhi's ideology were similar to that of many modern thinkers and reformers in India, such as Rabindra Nath Tagore, Swami Vivekananda etc., what was different was that he actively brought these views to politics. It was condemnable that he got killed by the faction that couldn't bear to see him respect all religions and their representation equally, despite him being an active seeker of Hinduism too. He still gave a great example to Indian citizens, as they could learn a lot from him about openness, acceptance, adjustment, cross- cultural perspectives, as these values are more relevant now than ever in this globalized world. Future research should work on exploring moral and spiritual beliefs of other leaders, even if they were not as vocal about them as Gandhi, for they can tell us a lot about their deeper ideological and political perspectives.

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