

Gandhi has not spoken his last word

For those who believe in the value of nonviolence, the Gandhian legacy is still a force



RAMIN JAHANBEGLOO

The 150th birth anniversary of Gandhi provides an opportunity to reflect once again on how nonviolence can contribute to the survival of our planet. Indeed, in these turbulent decades of uncertainty and mediocrity, at a time when we celebrate our rapidly changing world without understanding it, prejudice, hatred, ignorance and strife continue to be our daily cups of tea.

Deep divisions

Despite impressive advances in science and technology and the growth of material wealth in the industrialised countries, humanity continues to be afflicted with poverty, famine, malnutrition, and lack of education and health care. Differences in race, religion and nationality continue to contribute to many regional, national and international tensions. And many countries and nations that were beacons of democracy are now seeing a rise in populism, religious nationalism and sectarian rivalries.

Undeniably, we live in a time of grave crisis and the need for nonviolent thought and behaviour is felt now more than ever before. But the central question is: how can Gandhi and his nonviolence contribute to a change in our mode of thinking and our style of living, in a world where power, money and celebrities are the new gods? This is what we have been asking on every anniversary of Gandhi's birth since his assassination 71 years ago.

Frankly speaking, Gandhi is a forgotten figure in our world, though he continues, from time to time, to be part of our salon conversations. We do not need to look far to detect the drumbeat of conformity and complacency, accompanied by the rise of populism and nationalism, in our world. We can hear it in our neighbourhoods, workplaces and even educational institutions. So, the question remains: is there a space for Gandhian moral courage and dissenting criticism? On the one side, we notice the naïve and rosy optimism of ashramic followers of Gandhi, and on the other, the cynical demagoguery of party politicians who post their pictures next to that of the Mahatma while denying people their basic rights. Honesty impels us to admit that Gandhism is neither a boutique of political charlatans who, as Socrates says, want to "sleep on undisturbed for the rest of their lives", nor simply an assemblage



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of fundamentally benevolent human beings who think of saving their conscience by being good Samaritans. On the contrary, what Gandhi teaches us is that nonviolence combines tender-heartedness with tough-mindedness. The true Gandhians who made history, such as Nelson Mandela, Martin Luther King, Jr., Abdul Ghaffar Khan and Vaclav Havel, were obstinate and stubborn humanists, who, like Gandhi himself, were severe self-critics, while being ethical benchmarks for others.

But the truth is that our world lacks Gandhian leaders. Populist leaders of today follow the masses uncritically or make the masses follow them simplistically. The trouble with our century is that few politicians think and even fewer invite the people to examine their thinking experience on a daily basis. In today's world, leaders are admired as citizens above citizens, like Bollywood actors, not because they think critically, but because they have the power to choose our destiny.

This sums up neatly with the fact that a politician usually does not think, for the simple reason that he or she wants to remain unquestioned. Unsurprisingly, we can find here a similarity between the masses and their political leaders. But this is quite far from what Gandhi teaches us in the art of politics. If Gandhi remains relevant, it is because he adopted a distinctive method which was to define politics not as the conquest of power, but as the art of organising society nonviolently. This is how he challenged classical ways of theorising and practising politics.

At issue here is not only what Gandhi said and did, but the way he said and did it. This was a conscious attempt to think against the tradition that saw politics as either a pure imitation of the West or a process of mirroring a religious mode of thought. Gandhi looked at politics with eyes unclouded by either nationalist prejudice or religious fa-

naticism. In fact, the political promise of a democratic life, through legislation by the hands of theologians or party elites who considered people immature of deciding, proved unsatisfactory and insufficient for Gandhi.

Questioning and dissent

Consequently, in order to understand Gandhi's perspective on the art of politics, one has to understand his Socratic approach of questioning and dissent. For Gandhi the quest for truth and justice, which relentlessly questions and examines anew, was an act of thinking and living dangerously. Even his assassination is proof that he was a gadfly who dared to ask embarrassing questions instead of flattering either the other political leaders or the masses. Therefore, the Socratic moment of Gandhi was his perpetual examination of convictions when everybody seemed to have been swept away by the euphoria of the masses.

The fact that Gandhi believed that "there is no religion higher than truth" shows that he remained loyal to critical thinking and considered Hindu nationalism and Muslim fundamentalism as the major threats to Indian democracy and the world. But what Gandhi saw as a danger for the future is now our present. Yet, Gandhi has not spoken his last word. For all those who believe in nonviolence, the Gandhian legacy of doubting, questioning and overcoming remains a force. What we can still learn from Gandhi is that if democracy remains a regime of questions and doubts, it should also be a community of hope that justifies the existence of gadflies, whose task is not to disappear at moments of despair, but to help the masses think and favour liberty amid the calamities that close in upon it.

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A struggle against social orthodoxy

How Gandhi's visit to Vaikom paved the way for the triumph of the Satyagraha



PAZHA. ATHIYAMAN

In the popular mind, the Vaikom Satyagraha, the struggle for the right of lower castes to walk on the streets surrounding the Mahadeva temple at Vaikom in the princely state of Travancore, is associated with Gandhi. While he was consulted at every stage of the Satyagraha, Gandhi neither led it nor participated in it. He visited Vaikom only once during the 20-month-long struggle from 1924 to 1925. Gandhi's 10-day visit was, however, a turning point, and led it to its ultimate triumph.

Visit to Vaikom

Gandhi arrived at Vaikom on March 9, 1925 at 6 p.m. rather than at 4 p.m. as planned. The delay was caused by the boats that had gone to welcome him at Ernakulam jetty. Gandhi refused this ostentation, and would not start until it was withdrawn. In fact, throughout the struggle, Gandhi did everything to dampen the spirit of his supporters.

Within an hour of Gandhi stepping on Vaikom's soil events gathered pace. Even as a welcome address was being presented, Gandhi had received a registered mail, on the dais, from the orthodox Brahmins taking exception to his views on untouchability. It was a Monday, Gandhi's day of silence, and therefore he proceeded quietly to the Satyagraha Ashram in Dr. M. Emperumal Naidu's car.

Over the next 10 days Gandhi consulted all parties. There were hectic parleys as he met Sri Narayana Guru, the Maharani Regent, the Diwan, the police commissioner, the satyagrahis, representatives of Ezhavas and Pulayars, and the recalcitrant orthodox Brahmins. His secretary, a much younger Mahadeva Desai, could barely keep pace with his master. Rajaji came down with a fever.

Preceding Gandhi's visit, the Vaikom Satyagraha had seen many ups and downs. An initially aggressive Travancore state administration later mellowed down. After being quiet in the beginning, the orthodox Brahmins had launched a counter agitation. The satyagrahis had had to face physical attacks, armed processions, smearing of lime on their eyes, refusal of temple worship to upper caste supporters of the Satyagraha, and excommunication. While they were disheartened, popular support was at an all-time high. But when Gandhi arrived there was a polit-



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ical stalemate. A motion proposed in the Sree Moolam Popular Assembly in favour of unrestricted use of public roads around the Vaikom temple had just been defeated – by a single vote.

The day after his arrival Gandhi met the orthodox Brahmins. The marathon meeting was held at Idanthuruthil Devan Neelakandan Namboothiri's home. To this day, oral stories circulate about the meeting. According to one apocryphal version, considering that Gandhi had crossed the seas and mingled with Ezhavas, he had to stand at the threshold of the Namboodiri home. While the orthodox were represented by about a dozen Brahmins, Gandhi's son Ramdas, Rajaji and others were present along with some government officials as observers. That temple streets were out of bounds for lower castes was divine punishment for sins committed in past lives, the Brahmins contended. Who are you to inflict such punishment, asked Gandhi. He asserted that untouchability and unapproachability were alien to the Hindu religion.

Three proposals

In the end Gandhi made three proposals. The first was to hold a referendum among all adults in either Vaikom or in Travancore. The second was mediation: one scholar from each side would put forth arguments and the Diwan would pronounce the verdict. If this proposal was accepted, Gandhi would nominate Madan Mohan Malaviya to represent the satyagrahis. The third was that the orthodox should produce a scriptural text that authorised the practice. Gandhi left it to the orthodox to choose. But somewhat shockingly, he further committed that the satyagrahis would be bound by any decision made, irrespective of its implications, while the orthodox were free to not accept the final decision. This seemingly defied logic. But convinced of the truth and justice of the Satyagraha, Gandhi was evidently exposing the unethical stance of the orthodox. The orthodox accepted the third proposal and produced a text called *Sankara Smriti* in their defence. Gandhi doubted the

authenticity of the text but promised to get back after consulting experts in the matter. Vallathol Narayana Menon confirmed that it was not reliable.

Gandhi next met the Maharani Regent at her Varkala camp on March 12. Even as she expressed her position in favour of opening all public roads, as head of state, the Maharani Regent said she had to heed public opinion. Gandhi was impressed by this stance.

That same evening Gandhi met Sri Narayana Guru, the unrivalled leader of the Ezhavas, at Sivagiri. Gandhi won the guru's endorsement for the Satyagraha, for the guru had just a little earlier refuted an interview given to K.M. Kesavan wherein he had stated his disagreement over abjuring violence. Evidently, Gandhi acquired clarity on the use of violence and non-violence from his discussion with the guru. Apart from a few such as Periyar, Rajaji and V.V.S. Aiyar, no outsiders or journalists were present at this meeting.

From Sivagiri, Gandhi went to Thiruvananthapuram where he met the minor Maharaja Chithira Thirunal, the Queen Mother, and the Diwan. In between meetings Gandhi consulted Periyar, the leader of the Satyagraha then, who had joined him at Varkala. Gandhi also met the commissioner of police, the Devaswom commissioner, the district magistrate and peshkar, apart from journalists and religious leaders. He also visited Trissur, Palghat, Kollam, Alwaye, Nagercoil, and Kanniyakumari where he addressed many meetings.

Gandhi's visit led the Vaikom Satyagraha to its inevitable conclusion. Within the framework of Hinduism, he explained to the orthodox Brahmins the fairness of the Satyagraha. Even if he did not succeed in changing their hearts it became clear to them that they were on the wrong side of history. Gandhi brought to their attention that public opinion was not with them. Sri Narayana Guru's endorsement of the Satyagraha following his meeting with Gandhi gave a fillip to Ezhava morale. The meeting with the Maharani Regent made clear her sympathies with the movement. The interaction with officials blunted the state suppression of the Satyagraha. As an outcome of Gandhi's visit, the Satyagraha, rather than being directed against the state, sharpened into a struggle against social orthodoxy. Though it was formally withdrawn only eight months later, Gandhi's visit had achieved a resolution that was long lasting without exacerbating social tensions.

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Gandhi and the Gita

Mahatma Gandhi put into practice teachings from the Gita in his own moral and political actions

FAISAL DEVJI

Gandhi often thought about the nature of moral and political action through his reading of the Bhagavad-Gita. For him Krishna's advice to Arjuna emphasised the superiority of duty over choice in defining such action. Arjuna's horror at killing his friends, relations and preceptors in the army of his enemies, and his desire to flee the battlefield, were rejected by Krishna as futile. Krishna tells Arjuna that such a choice is superfluous, for whether he stays or goes the war will be fought.

Gandhi argued that its futility apart, choice is also elitist because it is based on a knowledge that is unequally distributed among individuals, favouring the educated and privileged over others. Rather than choice, he based moral and political action on duty (dharma), not as something generic but specific to each person given their circumstances (swadhama). One has to discover and do one's duty rather than choose on the basis of a result which can never be fully known.

Doing one's duty therefore meant focussing not on the ends so much as the means of moral and political action (nishkama karma). And this meant inhabiting the present in such a way as to make the future more open to goodness, something Gandhi described as attending upon the incarnation of Vishnu. The present, he thought, was the true site of nonviolence and should not be sacrificed for an unpredictable future.

Rights and duties

Aside from choice, Gandhi also contrasted duty with rights, which are at the heart of liberal societies. He claimed that since rights can always be taken away, they are not inalienable and cannot define moral and political action. Duties, however, truly belong to individuals and can never be taken away. And while the primary right is that to life, the most important duty is the sacrifice of life in killing or dying.

And yet Gandhi thought that this attention to death was more likely to protect life than rights could, for it was invariably the desire to guard and strengthen one's own life that produced violence in the effort to reduce and eliminate the lives of others. Non-violence was therefore linked to the duty of sacrifice and even death, since it was defined not by life but truth (satya) as the ultimate value.

Evil depends upon goodness

In Gandhi's view, the Gita teaches us that even evil depends upon goodness. After all, the evil army of Duryodhana could only hold together by virtues such as friendship, loyalty and courage as well as sacrifice among its soldiers. This was why it contained good people like Bhishma, Karna and Drona. By withdrawing goodness from evil, then, the latter would collapse of its own accord, which was what the Non-Coopera-



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tion Movement was meant to do. Goodness can be withdrawn from evil by the nonviolent warrior laying claim to virtues such as friendship, loyalty, courage and sacrifice in a more powerful way than his or her violent enemies can. By representing these virtues that no society can do without, the votaries of nonviolence were able to convert even their enemies. It was these teachings from the Gita that Gandhi put into practice in his own moral and political actions.

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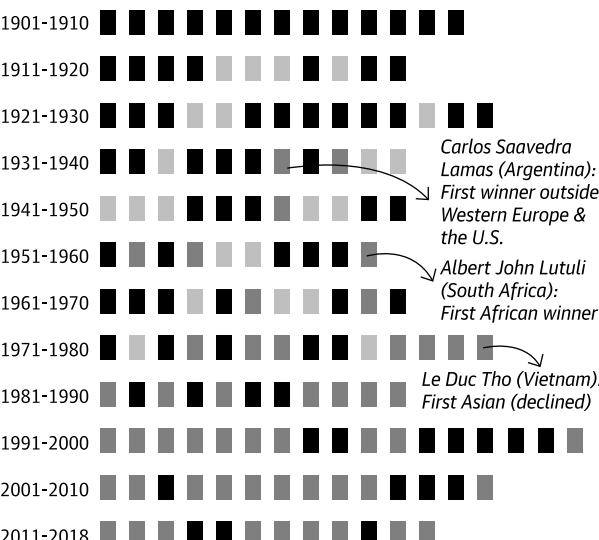


DATA POINT

Missing laureate

Despite being nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize on five occasions – 1937, 1938, 1939, 1947 and a few days before he was assassinated in 1948 – Mahatma Gandhi was never awarded the prize. Most Peace Nobels in the first part of the 20th century were secured by those from Western Europe and the U.S., a fact that may have led to this omission. By **Suman Sen and Vignesh Radhakrishnan**

Limited by geography | Peace Nobel winners from Western Europe or North America ■■, All other regions/ U.N. ■, Year when award wasn't given or nationality not specified ■



Until the 1960s, very few people who were residing outside Western Europe and North America were awarded the Peace Nobel. Oyvind Tonnesson, former Nobelprize.org Peace Editor, in a blog post has commented that "in retrospect, the horizon of the Norwegian Nobel Committee may seem too narrow"

In his memory

Table shows the recipients of the International Gandhi Peace Prize awarded by the government of India which carries a prize money of ₹1 crore

Year	Recipient	Country
1995	Julius Nyerere	Tanzania
1996	A. T. Ariyaratne	Sri Lanka
1997	Gerhard Fischer	Germany
1998	Ramakrishna Mission	India
1999	Baba Amte	India
2000	Nelson Mandela	South Africa
2000	Grameen Bank	Bangladesh
2001	John Hume	United Kingdom
2002	Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan	India
2003	Václav Havel	Czech Republic
2004	Coretta Scott King	United States
2005	Desmond Tutu	South Africa
2013	Chandni Prasad Bhatt	India
2014	ISRO	India
2015	Vivekananda Kendra	India
2016	Alkshaya Patra Foundation	India
2016	Sulabh International	India
2017	Ekal Abhiyan Trust	India
2018	Yōhei Sasakawa	Japan

Source: nobelprize.org, indiculture.nic.in

The Hindu

FROM THE ARCHIVES

FIFTY YEARS AGO OCTOBER 2, 1969

Ghaffar Khan gets big welcome

A most affectionate welcome was given to Khan Abdul Ghaffar Khan by thousands of people at the airport when he arrived this morning [October 1, New Delhi] at 8-45 on his first visit to independent India. Cries of "Frontier Gandhi Zindabad" rent the air as he alighted from the plane. The Frontier Gandhi had reached Bombay from Kabul via Beirut by Air India at 5 a.m. and he was flown to Delhi by a special I.A.F. plane. Wearing a grey "salwar" (baggy pyjamas) and a "kurta" (flowing shirt) of coarse homespun cloth and over it a cotton shawl, Ghaffar Khan acknowledged the greetings, thronged by Central Cabinet Ministers, members of Parliament and thousands of others. The Frontier Gandhi embraced many of his old friends and he was lustily cheered by the crowds which included a number of persons wearing red shirts. After a formal exchange of greetings, Ghaffar Khan was led to a specially erected platform from where he addressed briefly a gathering of more than 5,000.

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO OCTOBER 2, 1919.

Armenia.

(From an Editorial)

The cry of the oppressed in Armenia has often and for long years risen to high Heaven, but apparently the tribulations of the people of that land are to continue; for even at this time Armenians are in sore trouble. Armenia is situated at the North-East of Asia Minor and, before the war dislocated all territorial boundaries, consisted of three sections: Erzeroum and Diarbeker on the West belong to Turkey. The North, including the districts of Kars, Erevain and Tiflis belong to Russia and on the South East the province of Aserbaijan belonged to Persia. The Armenians are Caucasians and speak a branch of the Aryan language. They are an enterprising race and are successful in commerce, agriculture and pastoral occupations. They are comparatively few in number as, in Armenia the Armenians do not exceed one million. In Asia Minor outside of Armenia, there were about 1,50,000, some 4,20,000 in European Turkey and about 40,000 in Persia. The history of the Armenians can be traced back to the seventh century B.C.