

THE MAHATMA AND THE EMPOWERMENT OF THE OTHER

Relevant for: null | Topic: Social empowerment

[Mahatma Gandhi's death anniversary](#) (January 30) may have just passed, but it is not just an occasion to celebrate his life and his message once more, or to simply add to the Gandhian biography, so to speak. We should think of Gandhi as a noble spirit who continues to be among us and who contributes to the betterment of our world.

Therefore, the task before us is how we, individually and collectively, can understand and take forward the Gandhian nobility of spirit in today's world. If there is only one idea that Gandhi should be remembered for and identified with, it is the idea of empowerment of the other.

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Undoubtedly, the essence of Gandhi's political philosophy is the empowerment of the other, irrespective of gender, race, class or creed. That is why Gandhi understood democracy as a socio-political institution which seeks to empower the other by asserting its right to speak freely and to act differently. As such, Gandhi viewed the empowerment of the other as a right to express a different opinion than that of the majority and to be heard openly and transparently. One such idea is captured by [Gandhi's statement](#), that "The spirit of democracy is not a mechanical thing to be adjusted by abolition of forms. It requires change of the heart... The spirit of democracy requires the inculcation of the spirit of brotherhood... democracy is not a state in which people act like sheep. Under democracy, individual liberty of opinion and action is jealously guarded..."

In his quest to defend the otherness of the other, Gandhi invited individuals to rule themselves against their weaker natures by becoming self-governing agents. But he also looked for the creation and cultivation of a public culture of citizenship that guaranteed everyone the right to opinion and action. The empowerment of the other is a value which needs to be created and cherished. In other words, empowerment, for Gandhi, was an act of empathy and affinity, not a mode of social interconnectedness taken for granted. Therefore, as a transformative force, the empowerment of every citizen is an experience of conscience underpinning the harmony between ethics and politics.

The Gandhian appeal to the ethical is in fact a way to civilise modern politics from within, by shortening the circuit of conquest, domination and violence. By addressing the question of the otherness of the other, Gandhi was trying to cultivate the individual's capacity for ethical citizenship and empathetic friendship. From Gandhi's perspective, non-violence encouraged an awareness, which moved the individual away from a monistic egocentricity and closer to a pluralistic shared suffering.

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Moreover, this state of awareness called for a common horizon of humanity, which strengthened the process of thinking about the otherness of the other. What is so fascinating and relevant with the Gandhian approach to politics is that Gandhi understood the civilisational process of freedom-making as an inclusion of the other as the other.

As a matter of fact, we can read and understand Gandhi's seminal work, *Hind Swaraj*, as a

manifesto for the otherness of the other. Here, Gandhi introduces his readers to a new model of civilisation which takes humanity to a higher moral level. While pointing to utilitarianism as a false mode of existence which dismisses totally the otherness of the other, Gandhi suggests his own idea of moral interconnectedness and empathetic pluralism. For Gandhi, civilisation has to give primacy to moral progress of humanity, rather than just generate tendencies towards futility and violence. Truly, what is so relevant about Gandhi's view of civilisation is the strong conviction that civilisation should help humanity realise the path of righteousness and compassion, by putting morality before materialism. Gandhi was aware of the importance of pluralism of ideas and values because of the dissimilarities and differences that exist.

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Unsurprisingly, Gandhi's idea of empowerment of the other is feasible only in a political community where people have the art of listening. In other words, the art of listening, as much as the freedom of speech, is a mode of laying emphasis on the otherness of the other against all forms of tyranny. Accordingly, we can consider as tyrannical an individual or a society which refuses to the other the right to speak and the time and space to listen. If tyranny is the enemy of empathy, then the project of caring for the otherness of the other would suggest a mode of sensibility that rejects the logic of domination and conquest of the other. Through his readings of human civilisation, Gandhi showed us that he was well aware of the dangers of the conquest of the other. That is why he refuses to reject the otherness of the other in the situation of intolerance and exclusion. Gandhi did not consider social, political or even religious marginality as a curse, but more as a constructive asset which helped the individual maintain critical distance from all traditions of thought while entering a dialogue with any form of otherness.

Also read | [Gandhi has not spoken his last word](#)

Undeniably, Gandhi replaced the linear and monolithic discourse of reality with his dialogical vision of civilisation and political life. Thus, by bringing beauty out of the ugliness of modern civilisation, he forged a new form of solidarity — that of shared humanity — as a tool for the survival of the otherness of the other. As such, Gandhi's experiments with truth made him conscious not only of his similarities but also of his dissimilarities and differences with others. Seventy-three years after his death, what Mahatma Gandhi continues to teach us is that all life is interconnected, and a human spirit which remains indifferent to the otherness of the others, including the natural world, has no nobility left in it.

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