

Walking with others on a tightrope

January 30 marks the 70th anniversary of the [assassination of Mahatma Gandhi](#). Once again the ideas of non-violent resistance and self-transformation are brought before the public arena. But more than ever, this is an opportunity to evaluate the theoretical and practical status of M.K. Gandhi in India and in the world.

Gandhi everywhere

It is practically impossible to live in India and not to see or hear references to Gandhi. Gandhi is by far the most recognisable Indian put on currency notes. He is also honoured all over the country with statues erected in the middle of town squares and his pictures posted on the walls of business offices and shops, even restaurants. But this does not mean necessarily that Gandhi is well read and understood by all Indians. A quick look at everyday Indian politics and the debates in the press and elsewhere shows that the spirit of Gandhi is no more fully present in his native country. Though his name is pronounced by all politicians and managers, when it comes to his teachings, young, middle class technologists, corporate lawyers and businessmen in India consider Gandhi an old-fashioned figure with his preference for an austere, simple lifestyle.

On another New Year's Day: Mahatma Gandhi's 'khorak' a 100 years ago

Despite being misread and misunderstood, Gandhi's legacy lives on over 70 years after his death. Today, for many non-Indians, the name "Gandhi" is synonymous with non-violence and civil resistance. As such, Mahatma Gandhi continues to be studied and taken seriously by all those around the world, (including Indians) who are engaged in the struggle for freedom and democratisation. Over the last seven decades, political and spiritual leaders and civil activists, from Martin Luther King Jr., Nelson Mandela, the Dalai Lama through to Aung San Suu Kyi, from young militants of Otpor in Serbia to the freedom fighters of Tahrir Square in Egypt, have increasingly incorporated the Gandhian philosophy of non-violence in their protest repertoires, realising the ways in which it challenges the ruling elite's power and domination.

More interestingly, there has been a new interest in Gandhi among political theorists in the West. For the past seven decades, very few theorists considered Gandhi's seminal work, *Hind Swaraj*, as a major work in modern political thought next to Machiavelli's *The Prince*, Hobbes's *Leviathan* and Mill's *On Liberty*. But a new interest in Gandhi the political philosopher is emerging among the comparative political theorists. Actually, his relevance to contemporary debates becomes even more pertinent by analysing his philosophical and political contributions in a comparative perspective. Moreover, it reveals the multidimensional aspect of Gandhian thought while providing a sharp contrast between his approach to ethics, pluralism and autonomy and many challenges of our contemporary world, including lack of empathy, legitimised violence and exclusion.

An ethics of empathy

As such, what the comparative analysis of the Gandhian thought reveals to us is that unlike many contemporary liberal political thinkers, who put rights before duties, empathy and cross-cultural understanding are the 'hallmarks of the Gandhian view of everyday politics. The heart of Gandhi's ethics of empathy is to look within oneself, change oneself and then change the world. That is to say, at a more fundamental level, for Gandhi, cultures and nations are not isolated entities, because they all play a special role in the making of human history'. Therefore, 'Gandhi rarely speaks in terms of linear world history. His goal for every culture (including his own) is the same as his goal for every individual: to experiment with Truth. This is a way to open up the world to a harmonic exchange and a transformative dialogue among cultures'.

No material to probe Gandhi assassination again: SC

At a more philosophical level, in Gandhi's view, every culture should learn from others. As a result, politics for Gandhi is a matter of non-violent organisation of society with the aim of becoming more mature and more truthful. At the same time, Gandhi is always concerned with cooperation among nations in terms of mutual understanding, empathic friendship and non-violent partnership.

Last but not least, Gandhi is a thinker and a practitioner who is constantly experimenting with modes of comparative and cross-border cultural constellations. As he affirms, "I do not want my house to be walled in on sides and my windows to be stuffed. I want the cultures of all the lands to be blown about my house as freely as possible. But I refuse to be blown off my feet by any." This statement of Gandhi has a particular relevance to the cultural situation in our globalised world. Gandhi's 'house' can be understood as a metaphor for an autonomous and democratically self-organised system within a decentralised community of 'houses' where communication between equally respected and equally valid cultures can take place. In other words, this capacity to engage constructively with conflicting values is an essential component of practical wisdom and empathic pluralism of Gandhian non-violence.

It also involves a belief in the fact that an understanding of moral views is possible among all people of all cultures because they all participate in the same quest for Truth. This why Gandhi affirms, "Temples or mosques or churches... I make no distinction between these different abodes of God. They are what faith has made them. They are an answer to man's craving somehow to reach the Unseen." Consequently, the Gandhian non-violent approach to plurality is a way of bridging differences and developing inter cultural awareness and understanding among individuals and nations. As a result, Gandhi suggests a view of civilisation deeply rooted in an ethics of non-violence. However, his ontological and political demands for an ethical approach to human affairs are not of an utopian nature, but more of a dialogical sensibility. Maybe that is why Gandhi's response to the phenomenology of violence is not the exclusion of certain historical self-consciousness but a mutual recognition among subjects of history. As a matter of fact, the pluralistic and inter-cultural recognition in the Gandhian vision of democracy can determine our sense of who we are and the value accorded to the common world we live in. That is, for Gandhi, one's sense of freedom is never a matter of simple self-introspection. Rather, understanding oneself as an autonomous self-consciousness requires the recognition of the otherness of the other. For Gandhi, recognition is the mechanism by which our democratic existence, as self-transformative beings, is generated.

Importance of dialogue

The point here is that in Gandhi's political philosophy, the experience of freedom derives from the diverse modes of participation in common concerns and community-engendering values spelt out in terms of a dialogue with the otherness of the other. Actually, Gandhi's message would be that dialogue with the other would save the self from its own tyranny. In short, what all this means is that with Gandhi, human conscience finally returns to earth, to the here and now, after centuries of temptation looking for salvation in eschatological constructions.

Gandhi knew well that one cannot be a friend of Truth without living on the edge. For him, therefore, thinking and living became one. But, thanks to his comparative and dialogical attitude, he always thought differently and lived marginally. His opening up to the world went hand in hand with his act of being free. While listening to his inner voice, he also had an acute sense of the world. Gandhi preferred to walk with others, even on a tightrope, rather than walking alone on a rigid, inflexible and impenetrable ground. This is his legacy, which is needed now more than ever.

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