

OPINION

Relevant for: Ethics | Topic: Human Values - Lessons from the lives and teachings of great Leaders, Reformers and Administrators

Later this week, India will celebrate the 150th birth anniversary of [Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi](#), who is also accorded with the reverential moniker of “Father of the Nation”. It is indeed a poignant moment for the nation to remember an individual, who notwithstanding what his critics claim, was among the most influential thinkers to shape the independence movement that freed India from its colonial shackles.

There is much this nation can learn by recalling some of Gandhi’s contributions. Top of the heap has to be his undying commitment to communal harmony—in fact, if anything, it was his deepest disappointment that despite his heroics, he was unable to prevent the communal carnage which forever scarred the sub-continent. So was his commitment to tackle the deep divide of caste, which, tragically, in recent years has assumed destructive proportions—further straining the frayed social fabric of a nation desperate to eke out a modern narrative.

Very little though is known of Gandhi’s economic thought, excepting about how he pioneered civil disobedience by challenging the prejudiced colonial economic laws. Gleaning from the works of a few scholars, it is apparent that Gandhi did profess a vision of economic thought which was couched in his own spiritual interpretation of issues. Interesting they are, if nothing, more relevant today as an India struggles to script new economic conditions to meet the rapidly growing aspirations of its denizens.

Gandhi was someone who opposed the idea of social and economic inequality. The latter has got little resonance in public policy, with the attention being cornered by the bid to end poverty. Material growth, riding on an unprecedented surge in global economic growth, together with an era of entitlement pursued in the first decade of the millennium by the [Congress](#)-led United Progressive Alliance, dealt a significant blow to absolute conditions of poverty. At present, they are down to about 20%, compared to a little over 40% at the turn of the millennium.

However, this also coincided with the phase of incredible consumerism combined with the accrual of rentier incomes to a select few through the capture of natural resources. Given the poor state of social infrastructure—especially education and health—it is not surprising that the relative gap between the haves and the have-nots has widened even while the country as a whole is materially better off. It is precisely what Gandhi feared and had warned when he said that while there were enough resources on earth to meet everybody’s need, it was insufficient to meet everyone’s greed.

The change of regime with the arrival of the Bharatiya Janata Party-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA) has effected a recalibration of public policy. While entitlement, despite initial reservations, has continued, the NDA has pursued empowerment too. The launch of [Ayushman Bharat](#), coincidentally just a week ahead of the 150th birth anniversary of Gandhi, is one such big policy initiative. In scale and ambition, the programme is staggering by seeking to provide health insurance cover to 500 million people—or just under one in two Indians. At the moment, most Indians, as captured in a superb book by Anirudh Krishna, professor of Public Policy in the Stanford School of Public Policy, are just one disease away from poverty. As a result, while the level of poverty has remained the same, its composition keeps altering—worse, even those above the so-called poverty line are not insulated from such fiscal shocks. Providing healthcare is clearly an important step in empowerment.

Similarly, the move to universalize banking by expanding the scope of financial inclusion is contributing to a reset in the definition of a social safety net. The financial savings accruing in a formal institutional framework, as argued in a previous column (bit.ly/2xIJKLB), empowers in an incredible way. It would, however, be naive to assume that these baby steps can overcome the divide of inequality. Yet, it does give hope that status quo is being challenged while echoing Gandhinomics.

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