

TRUTH ABOUT THE LAST PERSON

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

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I wish to begin this reflection with two images. One of a pair of sandals, now somewhat withered with age, and use, which lies in a glass cage in the Constitution Hill Museum in Johannesburg. These sandals reflect the attraction that its maker had for the minimalism of the Trappist aesthetics as also fondness for the material, leather. M K Gandhi, as a prisoner, made these in South Africa and gifted them to General Jan Christian Smuts. It tells many stories, but the story I wish to bring to attention is Gandhi the sandal-maker.

The other image is of Gandhi sitting cross-legged, peering with his left eye into a microscope raised with a fat volume. If the image is not cropped we see an open (note) book and a somewhat amused Pyarelal Nayyar by his side. Gandhi was examining leprosy germs.

These two images are reminders of what we have chosen to forget about Gandhi, of the various silences that surround the man. Among the many things we have chosen to forget about Gandhi is his lifelong work with leather and his desire to shod every feet with leather chappals. We would prefer Gandhi the spinner of fine, “pure” yarn. Leprosy, one of the oldest infectious diseases in human history has created for all cultures its “untouchables”. The leper and the leather worker are subject to the most enduring — albeit from different grounds — forms of exclusion and humiliation. They are Gandhi’s “last person”.

Silence was dear to Gandhi. He liked debate, even acrimony, but in that he wanted his silence. Each Monday he observed silence, and at times weary and unable to see his way in the darkness that surrounded him and us, he retreated into long periods of silence. Silence for him was not withdrawal from engagement. It was a mode of communion and of communication. His silence was both going inwards and reaching out.

Our silence, our amnesia about various aspects of Gandhi is a well-crafted manoeuvre. And in this the Indian State, since its inception, and Gandhi’s institutions after Gandhi, have been collaborators. The first of this has been to render Gandhi’s institutions into “anti-thought” establishments. Serious intellectual challenges posed to Gandhi’s thought and life practices are met either by a petrified silence or disdain arising out of certainty of the perfectness of the Master. This has created a deep and lasting inability to be morally innovative or ethically responsive. This is most deeply felt in the realm of political economy. In a world where the ethical in the economic, the normative in the market have been rendered illegitimate, Gandhi’s concern with the last person finds place only in a regime of subsidy, instead of in the creation of enabling institutional structures. The move away from Trusteeship to Philanthropy captures this predicament.

Gandhi’s lifelong quest was to create a possibility of collective non-violence, Ahimsa, not only as personal ethic but as political imperative, and as political economy that recognises the violence of poverty and deprivation. Gandhi like no other after him recognised the transformative potential of seva. Seva is derived from saha and eva meaning “together with”. Understood thus, seva is the epitome of fellowship, of a state of communion with self, other beings and the divine. It is an act of being with others, being that is non-acquisitive, being that seeks only to serve so that pain is alleviated, suffering made bearable, joy experienced and divine made immanent. In this sense, seva is the complete opposite of servitude and slavery, where both self and self-volition

are denied. Violence is the perfect opposite of seva. Seva as service, as care, as non-acquisitive selflessness is a necessary condition for Ahimsa. Violence unto the others occurs when they are pushed outside the realm of care and of seva. Seva is no longer part of lokniti and much less of rajniti. And memorials by their very nature cannot perform seva. Bereft of seva our capacity to deal with violence that surrounds us is enfeebled.

Disobedience of what is repugnant to one's conscience is imperative for any form of lokniti, rajniti and hence of citizenship. This right of disobedience is predicated upon it being "civil", that is, non-violent and upon its relationship to conscience. This right requires fundamental obedience — for Gandhi, not to the state, not to the nation, and certainly not to law or courts — to truth and non-violence and a recognition of the right of others to be equally adherent to their conscience. (Let us recall Gandhi's seven days of fasting in 1934 for an assault by his followers on Pandit Lalnath who opposed Gandhi's work on eradication of untouchability.) That the state and its apparatus, the courts, will be unable and unwilling to recognise this, is writ in the very nature of conscience. The modern state and law do not recognise conscience as a category and hence to seek amelioration of conscientious objection from them is to constrict the realm of the conscience. Our reliance upon law to expand the realm of autonomous moral action is for this reason deeply flawed. So long as we are willing to undergo the punishment for our conscientious disobedience, we retain the right to disregard the injunctions of law. But this right is not absolute, it accrues to those who engage with fellow beings through seva, that is, constructive work.

Gandhi reminded us and continues to do so that India is united in its poverty and deprivation, its structures of humiliation and violence. His legacy is this awareness. To the extent we remain conscious of this, we become tuned to his silence and would have less need to create silences around him.

The writer has recently published an annotated critical edition of M K Gandhi's autobiography

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