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## Understanding the Life and Philosophy of Gandhi

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*Was Gandhi a Mahatma or a mass leader who was political strategist par excellence? Or is it wrong to even think in terms of such a dichotomy? Reflections on understanding a remarkable personality.*

### 1 Introduction

One can legitimately ask if there is scope for another essay on Gandhi. So much has been written on this iconic man; so many facets of his remarkable life, both in the public realm and private, have been widely discussed and published. One may therefore feel that there is nothing left to be said about his life and philosophy. However, one must also admit that rather than bringing clarity to his life and philosophy, these enormous works have created much confusion and ambiguity.

In the preface to his 2006 book on Gandhi, Rajmohan Gandhi, a grandson of Mahatma Gandhi, expressed the same sentiment:

*In India we think we know him [Gandhi]. No face is more familiar. He looks at us from currency notes, postage stamps and billboards. We feel we can sketch the spectacles, the bald head, the loincloth, the pocket-watch. But familiarity is not knowledge. We think we also know what he stood for. Yet the obvious and predictable Gandhi may be very misleading, and the beliefs of the real man may have been quite different from what we think (Rajmohan Gandhi 2006: x).*

During the last years of his life Gandhi also said, “I am a much misrepresented man if I am also a somewhat esteemed man”(M K Gandhi, *Collected Works* 1958 onwards, Vol 96, p 169).

I agree with Rajmohan Gandhi’s argument, but unlike him I cannot make a claim that this essay has been “started as an exercise to delineate the ‘true’ Gandhi” (Rajmohan Gandhi 2006: ix). The attempt here is rather straightforward and simple. It tries to explain how as a student of the life and thoughts of Gandhi for nearly 10 years, I have encountered difficulties while reading, understanding, making sense of the life and philosophy of Gandhi, and how I have tried to resolve them for myself.

Therefore, this essay is not an effort to present any guiding principles to understand the “true” Gandhi but it makes some suggestions that need to be kept in mind while reading Gandhi in order to develop a comprehensive understanding of his life and philosophy.

### 2 The Mixture was the Essence

We find two diametrically opposing views of Gandhi’s moral stature. One has it that ethically speaking, he was nearly perfect. For those who believe that he was nearly perfect, Gandhi was basically a Mahatma, a spiritual and moral leader, and to them, “the greatness of Gandhi is more in his holy living than in his heroic struggles” (Radhakrishna 2007: 1). They hold that more than anything else, the high moral level of his conduct was the truly remarkable feature of his many achievements. We find a second opinion that is perhaps as near the truth as the first: Gandhi was a shrewd politician and it would be wrong to see him as only a person of high moral stature. For those who believe that he was a shrewd politician, Gandhi remains basically a political strategist, a mass leader. They hold that to stress Gandhi’s exemplary moral character tends to force the discussion away from his phenomenal achievements and their continued relevance today.

Those who insist that Gandhi was basically a Mahatma argue that he involved himself in political struggles only as long as it aided his spiritual progress and that, at their core, his struggles were a search for truth. The word “political strategist” might therefore fail to explain this spiritual essence of Gandhi’s struggle. It would diminish the status of Gandhi—from that of a spiritual leader to that of a strategist—social reformer or strategist—politician. On the other hand, those who hold that Gandhi was basically a political strategist argue that “in fact, his philosophy of life had only a limited impact on the people. It was as a political leader and through his political strategy and tactics of struggle that he moved millions into political action” (Chandra 1989: 506).

Politicians are not expected to be moral, and spiritual persons are not expected to be political. But the manner in which these two are closely intertwined in Gandhi's thought and actions made him unique.

I argue that scholars have created a false dichotomy between “Gandhi the Mahatma” and “Gandhi the Politician” because usually these two are considered as different as chalk and cheese. Politicians are not expected to be moral, and spiritual persons are not expected to be political. But the manner in which these two are closely intertwined in Gandhi's thought and actions made him unique. For him it was not enough to strategise against an opponent, it was also important that the action be carried out on the highest moral ground. Therefore, the key to understanding the life and philosophy of Gandhi is to understand that Gandhi gave his political actions an internal moral basis, and he used his political actions for his internal growth (“moksha”). It means that Gandhi evolved as a unique combination of a Mahatma who had a highly moral and spiritual position that was necessarily political, and a shrewd political strategist who had a political position that was necessarily moral and spiritual. Hence, the mixture was the essence. Indeed, Ernest Barker, a political philosopher, was right in his assessment when he wrote; “what he [Gandhi] was to the world, and what he could do for the world, depended on his being more things than one.” Further, he said, Gandhi could mix “the spiritual with the temporal and could be at the same time true to both” hence “the mixture was essence” (Barker 2007: 50–51).

[I]f we describe Gandhi in either/or terms we miss the essence that is something very intrinsic to the kind of person that he was.

To describe Gandhi either as a moral genius or as a shrewd political strategist, however, would not be altogether absurd, but what I want to stress is that if we describe Gandhi in either/or terms we miss the essence that is something very intrinsic to the kind of person that he was. Therefore, if we want to understand Gandhi's life and philosophy with its all complexity, we need to overcome this superimposed, false dichotomy of Mahatma vs shrewd political strategist, because being both a moral genius and shrewd political strategist was integral to Gandhi's self. We cannot understand Gandhi's life and philosophy with all its complexity by accepting one and negating the other.

However, we cannot though just gloss over the dichotomy of the Mahatma vs the politician without explaining how these two contradictory aspects coexisted within a single ideological unity. It means we cannot fully understand his life and philosophy without knowing the inner dynamism that brought the diverse elements into a fruitful relationship with one another.

### 3 Gandhi Lived a Life of Double Standards

For many scholars Gandhi was a man of personal integrity. He epitomised a perfect harmony between thought, word and action. They emphasised that Gandhi's life must be understood in such a way that his words and deeds should reflect each other. As K Ramakrishna Rao writes:

*Gandhi's life is an example of [the] Upanishadic saying: 'To know Brahman is to be Brahman.' In other words, in the Mahatma's life, knowing and being blended and marched in perfect harmony. There was no divorce between thought and action, his beliefs and behaviour. He acted in consonance with what he believed to be true...Gandhi became a Mahatma because there was always unity and complete coherence between what he professed and what he practised.(Ramakrishna Rao: 2017; p176)*

But what I am arguing is that this is a very problematic proposition and if we follow this dictum we may run the risk of understanding him inaccurately. Because Gandhi had lived a very well-defined and unambiguous life of double standards. Let me first explain what I mean by double standards. Generally speaking, hypocrisy and double standards are used interchangeably and they are seen as an example of a problem of integrity in a person. It means a person is leading a life of double standards, preaching moral values without practicing them. If double standards are understood in this way it has a negative connotation; it implies that a person of double standards acts contrary to his conviction because of his moral weakness. But I am not using double standards in that sense. On the contrary, I am arguing that Gandhi lived a life of double standards because he believed that the masses in general would not be able to live the high standards of the moral life which he prescribed for himself. Though he himself tried to live a life of very high standards, he did not expect his social economic and political campaign to be conducted on moral or religious principles alone. He was satisfied if his moral principles were taken as the best policy for conducting such a campaign. The best example is the principle of non-violence.

For Gandhi, non-violence was a creed but he was satisfied if people accepted it as the best policy or strategy. In his speech at the All India Congress Committee (AICC) meeting at Wardha on 15 January 1942, Gandhi said that ahimsa, to him, was a creed, the breath of life. But he placed it before the Congress as a political weapon to be employed for solving political problems (M K Gandhi Vol 75: pp 219-220). Later, in response to a question, he confessed that he remained convinced that he did well to present non-violence to the Congress as an expedient. He added that he could not have done otherwise if he was going to introduce it into politics for if he had started with men who accepted non-violence as a creed, his campaigns might have ended with himself (M K Gandhi Vol 76: 220).

[T]hough Gandhi theorised his socio-political campaign based on a strict adherence to principles of morality, in practice he did not give equal importance to avoiding dilution of his principles of morality.

I must not be misunderstood that I am proposing that Gandhi favoured a complete disjuncture between morality and politics, between private conscience and public responsibility. I accept that Gandhi remained a man of morals not only in his personal practice and teaching, but that he strictly adhered to his principles of morality while theorising on his social-political campaigns. What I am trying to argue is that though Gandhi theorised on his campaigns based on a strict adherence to the principles of morality, in practice he did not give equal importance to avoiding dilution of his principles of morality. He allowed some level of dilution in his principles of morality owing to the fact that the masses might not have been able to practice these principles to the fullest extent. Gandhi wrote:

*For the simple reason that I even compromise my own ideals even in individual conduct not because I wish to but because the compromise was inevitable. And so in social and political matters I have never exacted complete fulfilment of the ideal in which I have believed...Generally speaking where the sum total of a movement has been evil, I have held non-co-operation to be the only remedy and where the sum total has been for the good of humanity, I have held co-operation of the basis of compromise to be the most desirable thing (M K Gandhi Vol 41: 276).*

This arrangement allowed Gandhi to have a moral practice which has an epistemic foundation that was both certain and flexible, determinate and yet adaptable, categorical as well as experiential. And such an epistemic foundation, which is both certain and flexible makes possible the coexistence of two contradictory aspects, i.e., the Mahatma the moral genius and Gandhi the politician and shrewd strategist, within a single ideological unity.

#### **4 Constructive Programme (Poorna Swaraj) the Core of Gandhi's Life**

A basic understanding of what Gandhi stood for or what he wanted to achieve is a prerequisite for making sense of Gandhi's writings and his actions. In the absence of such an understanding, it would appear that his life, writings and actions were just a conglomeration of inconsistencies. Therefore to make sense of Gandhi's life, it is important to have a clear idea of what he stood for or what he wanted to achieve in his life. Most scholars who accept that Gandhi was basically a politician consider India's political freedom to be the goal of his life. On the other hand, those scholars who believe that Gandhi was a Mahatma, a moral genius, hold that he was trying to achieve self-realisation, i.e., moksha in his life.

Gandhi himself described what he wanted to achieve was "self-realisation, to see God face to face, to attain moksha. I live and move and have my being in pursuit of this goal." But even those scholars who accept that attainment of moksha was the aim of Gandhi's life accept the centrality of achieving India's political freedom in his life. They believe that his political campaigns were part of his training for freeing his soul from the bondage of flesh for the attainment of moksha. Therefore, the majority of scholarly works on Gandhi have also been written primarily to explain what shape and character he gave to the national movement. Such a reading suggests that Gandhi's constructive programme was largely secondary to the struggle for political independence of India.

In such studies, Gandhi's constructive programme is explained as constituting a supplementary strategy for consolidation of people's power between the two phases of the mass struggle for political independence of India. But even the many studies in which Gandhi is seen primarily as a leader of India's political struggle for independence do not mean that he gave more importance to his political movement than his constructive programme. It can be attributed to the hegemony of the nationalist movement in the imagination of Indians. The nationalist movement proved to be a pivotal factor in catching the imagination of the scholarship of modern India for a long time. Many scholarly works on Gandhi have also been written to highlight the role played by Gandhi in guiding the national political movement. And it is due to the hegemony of the nationalist movement in this scholarship that we rarely see scholarly studies in which Gandhi is more involved in his constructive programme rather than his political work.

At one point, Gandhi said:

*My work of social reform was in no way less or subordinate to political work. The fact is that when I saw that to a certain extent my social work would be impossible without the help of political work, I took to the latter and only to the extent that it helped the former (M.K. Gandhi, Vol. 47: p.246).*

I know that just one quote from Gandhi would not be sufficient to argue that it was the constructive programme rather than the political freedom of India that was the true life vocation of his life. We need some more evidence to substantiate the argument. It is very well known that Gandhi vigorously rejected the idea which equated Swaraj for the nation with merely the overthrowing of the British. He conveyed this on many occasions and in many ways. In fact, at one point Gandhi even affirmed that by patriotism he meant the welfare of all the people, and if he could secure it at the hands of the English, he should bow down his head to them. Indeed Gandhi's analysis and understanding of Swaraj for the nation is much deeper than is usually understood.

From the very beginning of his active political career, Gandhi understood that Swaraj cannot be attained just by throwing the British out of India. He knew very well that the tyranny of any Indian ruler could be just as bad as that of the British. He wrote that his patriotism did not teach him to allow people to be crushed under the heel of Indian princes (M K Gandhi 1938: 76–77).

Gandhi defined his idea of Swaraj or independence for the nation as a collective capacity of individuals to live together in peace and harmony. He wrote in *Hind Swaraj* that it is Swaraj when we learn to rule ourselves and it is, therefore, in the palm of our hands.

For instance, on one occasion, he affirmed that we cannot have Swaraj until we have made ourselves fit for it, and, on another, he observed that the key to Swaraj lay in self-help. He emphasised the role and importance of the individual in achieving Swaraj as political independence, and that this independence had to be “experienced by each one for himself.” Therefore, for Gandhi, Swaraj could not be imposed on the people from above either by alien or native rule.

|| [A] focus on Gandhi's constructive programme rather than on his political movement can give us a much better understanding of Gandhi's life and philosophy.

Gandhi believed that independence or Swaraj must begin at the bottom. Fred Dallmayr argues that for Gandhi, Swaraj must first be nurtured through education at the local or village level, and then spread to larger communities and to the world through a series of oceanic circles (Dallmayr 2012: 112). To sum up, for Gandhi, Swaraj for the nation was not just “a collective freedom from alien rule,” but a collective capacity of individuals to live together in harmony. The attainment of independence for the nation also meant the nurturing and strengthening of this capacity in the individual to live with others in peace and harmony. And it was his constructive programme which was designed to achieve such Swaraj. Therefore, a focus on Gandhi's constructive programme rather than on his political movement can give us a much better understanding of Gandhi's life and philosophy. Even for Gandhi, spiritual freedom of the individual or moksha was not something different. As a *karmayogi*, Gandhi believed that moksha or self-rule did not lie in an other-worldly metaphysical realm, but rather in the nurturing capacity of the individual and the nation (*praja*) to organize their own lives.

|| [A]chieving political independence for India in terms of “parliamentary Swaraj” was only one of Gandhi's concerns, and perhaps not even his most important.

However, this is not to reject Gandhi's valuable contribution to India's nationalist struggle against British power; it simply means that achieving political independence for India in terms of “parliamentary Swaraj” was only one of his concerns, and perhaps not even his most important.

## 5 Gandhi's Practice Should be Considered First

Ronald J Terchek (2000: p 112) writes, “If we read Gandhi literally, we run the danger of sometimes reading him incompletely”. Gandhi also confessed that “my language is aphoristic, it lacks precision. It is therefore open to several interpretations” (M K Gandhi Vol 53: 485).

[W]e cannot make proper sense of Gandhi's life and philosophy without having a proper framework of how to read Gandhi's writings.

Therefore, reading Gandhi calls for much speculation and much ingenious interpretation. And we cannot make proper sense of Gandhi's life and philosophy without having a proper framework of how to read his writings. The writings are marked with inconsistency and in the available literature some scholars have suggested that inconsistency in Gandhi's writings should be seen as gradual changes in his opinion on different issues. Bipan Chandra, an authority on Gandhi, has made some passing remarks on Gandhi's writings:

*Many quote his [Gandhi's] statements on the caste system, inter-caste and interreligious dining and marriages...and so on, from his early writings. But the fact is that, while his basic commitment to human values, truth and non-violence remained constant, his opinions on all these and other issues underwent changes—sometimes drastic—and, invariably, in more radical directions (Chandra 2004: 3-4)*

To justify his point, Chandra quotes from two of Gandhi's writings, one from 1933 and the other from 1938. In the first, Gandhi says:

*In my search after Truth I have discarded many ideas and learnt many new things ... and, therefore, when anybody finds any inconsistency between any two writings of mine, if he has still faith in my sanity, he would do well to choose the later of the two on the same subject" (ibid: 4)*

It is a fact that on more than one occasion, Gandhi said that he was not at all concerned with appearing to be consistent and suggested that his last opinion should be taken as the final one. On the basis of this suggestion from Gandhi himself, many scholars like Chandra have argued that there was a gradual evolution and/or radical changes in Gandhi's opinion on caste and other related issues.

Navajivan Publishing House, Ahmedabad, which has the copyright for Gandhi's writings, had been following the practice of printing this quote in many collections of Gandhi's different writings and speeches on varied subjects, in order to make the reader aware that there were considerable changes in Gandhi's views on different subjects over time. But, surprisingly enough, Gandhi never accepted that there were inconsistencies or changes in his opinions, not to speak of changes in more radical directions. Before he made the aforementioned comment, in the same piece of writing Gandhi also said: "[A]s I read them [his writings] with a detached mind, I find no contradiction between the two statements, especially if they are read in their full context" (M K Gandhi Vol 55: 60).

Indeed, whenever Gandhi spoke about what others said were inconsistencies in his writings he made it very clear that he personally did not find any inconsistency. He also suggested that before making their choice, these friends who referred to the inconsistencies should also try to perceive an underlying and abiding consistency between his two seemingly inconsistent statements of different times. He wrote at one point:

*Whenever I have been obliged to compare my writing even of fifty years ago with the latest, I have discovered no inconsistency between the two. But friends who observe inconsistency will do well to take the meaning that my latest writing may yield unless, of course, they prefer the old. But before making the choice they should try to see if there is not an underlying and abiding consistency between the two seeming inconsistencies. (M K Gandhi Vol 70: 203)*

If there were no gradual changes in Gandhi's opinion on different issues, how to make sense of the inconsistency in Gandhi's writings? In this context, Raghavan N Iyer's suggestion becomes vital for resolving the issue. Iyer suggests that political thinkers are properly studied without reference to their personalities and practice, but when we turn to Gandhi we find it peculiarly difficult to ignore his personality and his activities (Iyer 2000: 4).

Gandhi also very categorically said "[W]hat you do not get from my conduct, you will never get from my words" (M K Gandhi Vol 73: 145). He went a step further and suggested that "as a matter of fact my writings should be cremated with my body." Another quote from him: "[W]hat I have done will endure, not what I have said or written" (M K Gandhi 1961 ed: 286)

This does not imply, however, that Gandhi's writings are not to be carefully examined. Rather it means that Gandhi expected to be judged and understood by his conduct and not by his writings alone. It also implies that should some contradictions and inconsistencies appear in his writings, they are to be resolved in the light of his practices. Gandhi himself said: "To understand what I say one needs to understand my conduct." (M K Gandhi, Vol 51, p 353)

## 6 Gandhi had His Own Perspective

A number of approaches to the study of Gandhi's thought are in fashion today. There is a strong body of scholarly opinion that holds that the West especially, Leo Tolstoy, Henry David Thoreau and John Ruskin exercised something close to a seminal influence on Gandhi.

On the other hand, there are also a good number of scholars who strongly hold that Gandhi was non-Western or Eastern; spiritually grounded and a uniquely Indian political thinker. Moreover, in spite of the difficulty of pinning down Gandhi's religious affiliation to one particular religion, there have been many studies in the field of religion which have described him as basically a Hindu or a Buddhist or a Jain or a Christian. Even as a Hindu, Gandhi has been described as a Vedantian who believed in transcendental monism as well as a Vaishnava who had faith in the grace of God as a person. Similarly, all sorts of political labels have been applied to him: individualist, anarchist, socialist, communist, liberal, reactionary, revolutionary, nationalist, cosmopolitan, and so on.

I question whether any system or religion can hold Gandhi completely. For example, his views are too closely allied to Christianity to be entirely Hindu, and too deeply saturated with Hinduism to be called Christian. My last suggestion is that Gandhi must be understood on his own terms. He surely borrowed from different traditions of thought, both Eastern and Western. However, he could integrate them fully because he had a perspective of his own. He had his own perspective with which he operated and had his own analytical categories which he manoeuvred to weave them into a rational, organically linked structure of thought. Indeed this original perspective enabled him to select ideas to articulate or support his own central thesis. It should be clear that no amount of comparisons or the drawing of parallels can illuminate the essential characteristics of Gandhi's life and philosophy. Indeed, he has reached a position where such comparisons become meaningless. Because Gandhi's philosophy is open-ended and heuristic in nature and that makes it difficult to treat him as a representative of any known form of philosophical stream.

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