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Abstract

Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi (1869-1948), known as 'Mahatma', meaning 'great-souled' as people called him, was born on 2nd October 1869 at Porbandar in India. He was the first to warn the then-Indian leaders, policymakers, and his followers in the late 1940s about the dangers of high inequality in income and wealth distribution prevalent between the rich and the poor in India. This shows his power of visionary gleams and his awareness of the political economy. Gandhi's vision of non-violence, ahimsa, and right action was based on the idea of the total spiritual interconnectedness and divinity of life as a whole. He was also the first to create three principles of sustainable development: Sarvodaya, Swadeshi, and Satyagraha, aptly relevant to today's India. His idea of creating of economically self-sufficient local economy is now at the closest proximity to 'Atmanirbhar Bharat' which he tried to launch many years back. It is in this context we try to explore the relevance of Gandhian political economy for today's India.

Key Words: Political economy, Platform capitalism, Sarvodaya, Satyagraha, Sustainable development

JEL Code: B3

If you cannot change yourself, how can you change the World?

M.K.Gandhi (1869-1948),

“If there is one man who had had literally millions of words written about him, both when he was alive and even more importantly after he passed away, it is Gandhi. Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi. Gandhi, the Mahatma.... Historians of the future, I believe, will look upon this century not as the atomic age, but as the age of Gandhi.”

—Prof. Eknath Easwaran in a talk given on the campus of the University of California at Berkeley, way back in 1966.

1. INTRODUCTION

Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi (1869-1948), known as 'Mahatma', meaning 'great-souled' as people called him, was born in a *bania* family on 2 October 1869 at Porbandar, Western India and went to England in 1888 to study law. He returned to India in 1891, and after practicing law for some time he moved to South Africa in 1893, where he was a determined opponent of the 'pass laws' and other kinds of racial discrimination. There he organized 'Satyagraha' (non-violent action, or 'passive resistance') in 1906, 1908 and in 1913, perhaps inspired by John Ruskin's book *Unto This Last* which cast a magic spell on Gandhi and brought about an instantaneous and practical transformation in his life. He was later to translate the book into Gujarati with the title *Sarvodaya* (The welfare for all) (Kamath, 2007), drawing from

Ruskin a recognition of the overriding necessity of welfare for all and the value of manual labour. He realized that the oppressed were to be roused, the oppressors to be persuaded. This outlook made it possible for Gandhi to enter the dilapidated huts of the poor as no modern Indian leaders had done till then. He also realized that resistance to imperialism was possible as history points out to the facts of the Soviet Revolution in 1917 and the defence of Soviet Russia against Allied intervention (1919), together with the banner of independence of Turkey raised by Mustafa Kamal. It was the genius of Gandhi that enabled him to see in Khilafat the crucial factor in the situation. If the struggle for it was successful it could throw British imperialism off balance in world arena and thereby bringing Swaraj so much nearer; in India, it could arouse in the Muslim masses an enthusiasm for the National Movement that the Lucknow concession of December, 1916 on distribution of council seats had failed to elicit (Habib, 2018)

2. GANDHI'S PHILOSOPHY FOR NATION BUILDING

With a view to serving his country of birth, he returned to India from South Africa in 1914 and soon became a leading figure in the cause of Indian nationalism and development movements. In 1915 Gandhi established the Satyagraha Ashram at Ahmedabad, and in 1917 moved it to the Sabarmati River. On 30 January 1948 Gandhi was shot down on the way to his Prayer Meeting.

In the late 1940s, the term 'development' was not in vogue as it is today. Gandhi had, therefore, used the term 'progress' for development, more with respect to ethics and cosmic integrity. He said, 'by economic progress we mean material advancement without limit, and by real progress we mean moral progress, which again, is the same thing as progress of the permanent elements in us' (*The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi (WMG)*, Vol. 87: 249). He never made an academic contribution to 'development'. Instead, he pleaded for an organized effort to change the ruling paradigm and move towards a superhuman stage. The Gandhian idea of development is based on the foundational ethics of *ahimsa* (non-violence, which he interpreted as 'firmness in the truth'). Perhaps Gandhi's most important influence has been on the black civil rights movement in the USA led by Martin Luther King.

In the cosmic-moral organization, faith is the path of spirituality, and spirituality in its true sense is the motive and guiding force behind development. Gandhi suggested 'Seven Social Sins' to be avoided, if one strives to be a real man. Of course, these are ideals, but they are more relevant in the present era of desperation and age of confusion, and could easily be accepted.

According to Gandhi, the 'Seven Social Sins' are:

- (i) *Consumption without conscience*. The means and symbols of consumption are the 3Ps, namely property, power and prestige. Without conscience or moral responsibility, consumption always turns to evil; in other words, eating food is consumption, but without conscience it leads to sickness. Consumerism is one of the basic root causes of social conflict. Consumerism is the go of the day of the many emerging market economies, whose painful consequences are known to us.
- (ii) *Knowledge without character*. Knowledge is power, but without morality it is hypocrisy.

With a lack of morality, knowledge becomes a heavy burden on humanity.

- (iii) *Wealth without labour*. In the modern era, wealth is the highest symbol of projecting the level of personality and status. This promotes the tendency of the ‘rich becoming richer and the poor becoming poorer’. Such rich people never realize their social responsibility; this leads to social crisis and propels the society on the verge of ruin.
- (iv) *Business without morality*. According to the philosophy of welfare economics, the basis of economic success is morality. Gandhi said, ‘Economics that hurt the moral well-being of an individual or a nation are immoral and, therefore, sinful’ (*WMG*, vol. 13: 317, also *cf.* *WMG*, vol. 75: 158).
- (v) *Religious duty without sacrifice*. Compassion, service, sacrifice and altruism are the basic rules of *dharma* (righteous duty). Lacking the sense of sacrifice promotes individualism, egocentricity and selfishness. Serving the poor is service to God.
- (vi) *Science without human sense*. Science has the power of both creation and destruction; its nature depends on the way in which it is used by mankind. Misconception of science as a tool and technique for the use of resources has promoted the philosophy of consumerism, which finally resulted in environmental disorder, pollution and loss of peaceful life. Science is the means, but the end is human kindness!
- (vii) *Politics without principles*. Politics without principles is the cause of the global crisis and destruction of social harmony. Gandhi emphasized the need for spirituality as the first step of politics and governance.

Whenever the ethical code of a society is lost, civilization will grind to be an abrupt fall and end. In such a situation, a cultural tradition is unable to find a balance between the needs and expectations of society, and that is how it fails to illuminate a path of revolution. In this way, the road to progress and development comes to a dead-end. Gandhi proposed a philosophy of revival and peace which he called ‘*Sarvodaya*’ (‘well-being for all’). Enhancing personal welfare (sva-) to the level of community well-being (*sarvo*) is the cultural code of *Sarvodaya*. History has proved that the alternative to war and conflict is *ahimsa* (‘non-violence’), i.e. peaceful agitation, creating mass awareness of cultural unity (Singh, 2015).

There are two ideas inherent in the philosophy of *Sarvodaya*.

- (i) *Democracy is a life style*. Democracy is not only a way of governance; it is also a way of life. Gandhi warned that a process of dialogue and criticism must always be maintained between the public and ruling powers. The continuing trend towards loss of public awareness is a sign of the decline of democracy.
- (ii) *Machines have a cultural value*. The use of *machines* (a product of science) also has a cultural value. The application of science, or its tool, the machine, depends on human intention. Science is like a machine, the effects of whose use depend upon the attitude and motives of the person who has control over it. The path on which science is presently advancing will lead to a great dissolution. Cultural values are imposed upon machines by human beings (*cf.* *WMG*, vol. 25: 251-2).

Gandhi's view of non-violence, *ahimsa*, vegetarianism and *karma* (right action) is based on the idea of the total spiritual interconnectedness and divinity of life as a whole. All natural phenomena are, therefore, divine, sacred and of equal value. As human beings, we have to take the main responsibilities towards nature through a moral-ethical-religious approach. His theory of *ahimsa* was not strict like a sectarian rule; he said: 'whoever believes in *ahimsa* will engage himself in occupations that involve the least possible violence'. In one of his strongest articles he wrote that non-violence is not passive or inactive. It does not permit running away from leaving dear ones unprotected. It is the summit of bravery and is not meant for cowards or those who are afraid to die. He said, "Non-violence is the law of our species as violence is the law of the brute. The spirit lies dormant in the brute and he knows no law but that of physical might. The dignity of man requires obedience to a higher law— to the strength of the spirit."

Committed to non-violence (*ahimsa*) and self-realization (*svachetna*), Gandhi wanted to solve India's problems from the perspective of individual conversion and with the ideology that 'every man has an equal right for the necessities of life even as birds and beasts'. According to him, the 'right thing' is a moral order (*dharma*) operated by right action (*karma*). Gandhi's emphasis upon self-realization and rules of conduct and virtues is essential for spiritual life and also for the maintenance of the social order. Gandhi warned politicians about the social and political evils of which they become part!

Gandhi said, 'every human being has a right to live and, therefore, to find the wherewithal to feed himself and where necessary to clothe and house himself' (*WMG*, vol. 38:197). He said, 'there's enough in the world to meet the needs of everyone but there's not enough to meet the greed of everyone'. If ever, he did not advocate macroeconomic policy. All villages should become self-sufficient. It must work from the bottom upwards and not the top down.

As we work in different walks of life, we should continue to be inspired by his words that we must 'recall the free of the poorest and the weakest man (and woman) whom you have seen and ask yourself if the step you contemplate is going to be of any use to him (and her)' (*WMG*, vol. 89: 125).

Gandhi practiced what he preached (Cook and Stevenson, 2018)). If he was concerned about the 'poorest of the poor' he adopted a life style which reflected his constituency. And if he preached 'cleanliness' and the uplifting of Harijans ('untouchables'), he himself undertook the scavengers' work, and emphasized the importance of inner and outer cleanliness. To follow Gandhi is difficult and yet millions did. He emphasized throughout that we must change ourselves before we can change others and that our real enemies are within.

The essence of natural cures is that we learn the principles of hygiene and sanitation and abide by those laws as well as the laws relating to proper nutrition. If rural reconstruction does not include rural sanitation, our villages will remain the dung-heaps that they are today.

Gandhi's twenty-one years of experience in South Africa transformed his views on life and human existence, which he again experimented with in India (Swan, 1985). He started to look

at the world from a poverty-trapped peasant's perspective, rather than from a middle-class bourgeois perspective. This led him to the creation of three principles of sustainable development: *Sarvodaya*, *Swadeshi* (meaning rejection of western machinery, not 'reproducing Manchester in India') and *Satyagraha*. To Gandhi, ahimsa was the means, truth was the end. Ahimsa was the bedrock of Satyagraha, the "irreducible minimum" to which Satyagraha adhered, and the final measure of its value. The other very important feature of sustainable development which he propagated was the whole question of local economy where everybody in the area would be self-sufficient. They would be employed and could sustain themselves and their families with dignity and work.

For Gandhi the *swadeshi* spirit extended to all the elements composing the *desh* (community) and implied a love of not only the traditional way of life but also the natural environment and especially the people sharing it. Gandhi used the term *swaraj* to describe a society run in the *swadeshi* spirit. It meant self-rule or autonomy and implied not only formal independence but also cultural and moral autonomy.

The removal of untouchability, an end to Hindu-Muslim enmity, economic self-sufficiency, and making non-violence effective were fundamental elements of his vision. Gandhi offered a viable alternative for self-rule and self-government. He focused on the welfare of all - Sarvodaya and the method he followed was that of *satyagraha* (Pyarelal, 1986).

Sarvodaya ('the uplifting of all') was a philosophical position that Gandhi maintained. Society must strive for the economic, social, spiritual and physical well-being of all, not just the majority. He favoured a holistic approach to well-being, and a total approach to the community, for him, the well-being of every individual was an important concern.

He advocated that the locus of power must be situated in the village or neighbourhood unit. He believed that there should be an equitable distribution of resources and those communities must become self-sustaining through reliance on local products instead of large-scale imports from outside. Gandhi was opposed to large-scale industrialization, and favoured small local industries that promote local self-sufficiency, which he called *Swadeshi*. In current terms, it means buy local, be proud of local, support local, uphold and live local. Economic equality should never mean possession of an equal amount of worldly goods by everyone. It does mean, however, that everyone should have a proper house, an adequate and balanced diet, and sufficient cloth(ing). It also means that the cruel inequality that obtains today will be removed by purely non-violent means.

Finally, Gandhi's best-known theory of *satyagraha*, 'truth force' or non-violent direct action, is actually a way of life, not just an absence of violence. It also entailed respect for all beings regardless of religious belief, caste, race or creed, and a devotion to the values of truth, love and responsibility. Mass awakening exemplified by the *satyagraha* movement, is 'the

perfect example of how one could confront an unjust situation, through extremely superior power' (*WMG*, vol. 9: 118, and cf. Gandhi 1990: 21). The achievement of political and moral ends through *ahimsa* is what Gandhi called *satyagraha*. This notion of non-violent action is the crucial part of Gandhi's political theory. *Satyagraha*, in fact, is a theory of action. It calls for courage, strength of character and positive commitment to a righteous cause. In some circumstances, e.g., inhuman acts like molestation or killing, it might be better to choose violence than craven submission to injustice. Gandhi thought that 'total non-violence' might be feasible only when mankind has acquired superhuman qualities.

The spectres of global warming, lack of water through deforestation, and continued depletion of natural resources and diversity on Earth, are some of the results of 'unsustainable development' and economic growth. Should we not follow the path of Gandhi? He corrected himself over and over in his striving for moral-spiritual perfection while doing his best to reform existing institutions and social practices. He wrote in 1932, 'I do not accept defeat but hope, with God's grace, to melt the stoniest heart and, therefore, continually strive to perfect myself' (*WMG*, vol. 50: 451).

We are slowly realizing that reducing poverty or moving towards sustainable development is not just an economic or a technical problem or one of acquiring greater financial inputs. All these are important but achieving these goals also needs an inner awakening, an inner transformation of man — a path already paved by Gandhi. If we ignore Gandhi 'we ignore him at our own peril', Martin Luther King once said.

3. GANDHI AS A VISIONARY POLITICAL THINKER

At the time India got its independence from the British colonial power, Gandhi observed that there were two 'India's: one residing with the landlords who were rich but few in numbers and the others who were landless poor—kicked pooh-pooed and neglected— constituting a vast majority suffering from utter destitution and poverty and struggling hard to find both ends meet— bereft of shelter, food, clothing and drinking water. Therefore, he warned his followers who were at the helm of affairs in the country that the 1917 Russian type of Bolshevik revolution in the country are knocking at the door, if the new government fails to take up urgent economic measures to uplift the rural and urban poor and reduce the gulf of difference that was existing between the rich and the poor. He suggested various measures to achieve the goal.

The first measure is land reforms, that is, the distribution of surplus land to the landless poor. The abolition of the Zamindari system (which existed for some time even after independence during Nehru's regime), the abolition of privy purses, the land reforms that were introduced to reduce the size of the big land holdings, and the resultant surplus land distribution among the landless poor during the regime of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi— all these measures help to mitigate the grievances of the rural poor to some extent and indirectly helped

to avert the dangerous trend which Gandhiji feared was developing in the beginning days of independent India.

The second measure that was suggested by Mahatma Gandhi is preventing the concentration of the country's wealth in a few hands, leading to the rise of business tycoons, which are the characteristic features of the capitalist economy. He suggested heavy taxation on the corporate sector and other private entrepreneurs, and the resultant income may be spent to uplift the conditions of the poor by providing them basic amenities like food security, health, housing, clothing, child care and nutrition, and education for their children. Therefore, Indian Constitution makers have taken every care to implement these suggestions made by Gandhi and have chosen a via media (which is democratic socialism) between the two kinds of philosophies that were in practice in the rest of the world at the time India got its independence (*Bobbili, 2019*).

4. HOW DID GANDHI SHAKE THE WORLD TO WAKE IT UP?

Gandhiji once claimed that nonviolence was the greatest power with which humankind had been endowed. Recognition of the power of non-violence struggle has since gone well beyond the spiritual pacifists of the Gandhian tradition to encompass a wide range of social scientists who have recognized how Polish dockworkers, Filipina nuns, Serbian students and millions of other ordinary people have done what strategic alliances, armed guerrillas, and intergovernmental organizations could not, including bringing down some of the most entrenched dictatorships on the planet (*Zunes, Merriman, & Stephan, 2010*). The study of nonviolence struggle has become a part of the international studies curriculum only recently.

Gandhiji was significant in the transformation of the study of nonviolence from individual acts of civil disobedience as articulated by Henry David Thoreau, Leo Tolstoy and other 19th century writers— to strategic civil resistance in which large numbers could participate to force social, economic, and political changes.

Much has been written by and about Gandhi concerning his campaigns in South Africa and India as well as his ideas while Gandhi wrote only two books, the articles, talks, and speeches in his *Collected Works* total 90 volumes. Many collections of Gandhi's remarks and writing on different topics have been made; a comprehensive volume was edited by Prabhu and Rao (1967) and a useful anthology of large selections in historical sequence was edited by Fischer (1962).

From the point of view of political theory, perhaps the most important volume on Gandhian nonviolence since his death in 1948 was written by Bondurant (1958), who analyses case studies of three major campaigning: the 1918 textile workers' dispute in Ahmedabad; the 1919 resistance to the Rowlatt Act Bills; and the 1930-1931 Salt March.

Gene Sharp in his monumental 3-volume work *'The Politics of Nonviolent Action (1973)* defines nonviolent action as 'a general technique of protest, resistance, and intervention without physical violence.' It is so powerful that many oppressed citizens find their freedom, knowing it fully well that their armed war against an opponent's robust army would be futile.

Gandhiji's tangible appeal for the contemporary world should not be underestimated; although he espoused visionary ideals, we should by no means treat him as an ivory-tower idealistic. For, as a man of action, he was one of the most successful hands-on political leaders of the 20th century who, through his unconventional approach, epitomized what has come to be known as out-of-the-box decision making.

As a leader of the greatest anti-colonial struggle in history, he emphasized that he merely represented the voice of the people: 'I have merely given expression to the thoughts that were dormant within the hearts of the Indian people.' He was disheartened by the submissive stance of many of the Indian leaders (Dharampal, 2021).

5. GANDHIAN POLITICAL ECONOMY

Much of what we call Gandhian political economy begins with his book *Hind Swaraj* (Home Rule for India) written in Gujarati in 1910 and its visions and ideas. This text, in the form of a dialogue between Gandhi as 'Editor' and a radical Indian nationalist as 'Reader', is an important statement of the set of ideas with which Gandhi began his work in India in 1915. Much of it was articulated by Gandhi himself in his speeches and writings; these have been collected in three volumes called *Economic and Industrial Life and Relations* (1957). Particularly, the classic book *Hind Swaraj* has an overwhelming position among Gandhi's writings. Till the end, Gandhi maintained the book reflected his positions accurately. In *Hind Swaraj*, Gandhi attacked the endless pursuit of material wants, so characteristic of modern civilization as Gandhi saw it. In *Hind Swaraj*, Gandhi interrogated the very idea of 'progress' in the context of the aftermath of the Industrial Revolution. This, and his focus on human 'needs' as distinct from human 'wants', would suggest that Gandhi had a built-in bias against modern capitalism. Rao (2021:128) comments that *Hind Swaraj* needs to be read as a high-level statement of concern about modern civilization, especially its epiphenomenon of imperialism and the consequent pauperism of many, including Gandhi's fellow-Indian citizens. Parel (2006) has argued that there is sufficient evidence to show that Gandhi was not simplistic, rigid or close minded in his approach to machines. Gandhi was a newspaper editor, also a printer who worked and operated with his own printing press, a wondrous machine in its own right. . In *Hind swaraj* he has argued against machines simply, among other reasons because they displaced human labour.

A disciple of Gandhi, Narayan (1970) wrote about the relevance of Gandhian economics. Somewhat of recent years, Gandhian political economics has been further refined by several scholars like Sethi (1979), Das (1979), Diwan and Lutz (1985).

In terms of larger ideas, Gandhian economics belongs to spiritualism (Tendulkar,1951-54). The fundamental distinction between Gandhian and Classical political economy of both the left and the right varieties lies in the underlying assumptions about human beings and human conducts and therefore its underpinnings. Huxley (1944), Illich and Lang (1973) and Schumacher (1973) Hick, Hemple et al. (1989) articulate its reasoning in philosophical terms.

Gandhian political economy is based on a construct of an idealized community, The ruling ideology in this idealized society is Satya (the truth);Ahmimsa (non-violence) and Satyagrah(truth and action (Adams and Dyson,2003).

6. FIVE BASIC CONCEPTS OF GANDHIAN ECONOMICS

Diwan (1982) has formulated five basic concepts of Gandhian economics, all of which are related, are of equal importance, and have spiritual underpinnings.

- *Swadeshi*: a necessary condition for ecological sustainability. Swadeshi means self-reliance.
- Bread labour: This means personal action in the *swadeshi context*, and generates the distinction (among other things) “values-in use” and “values-in- exchange,” as well as between “stranger- defined” and “self-defined-work.
- *Aprigraha* : This means willing surrender It implies a demand function with an increase in the level of minimum consumption with a general lowering of price level.
- *Trusteeship*: This is best described as *sauci*, meaning purity of character. It is laced with spirituality and requires personal integrity, honesty and sensitivity. Gandhi’s life is a glaring example of such a personal character.
- *Non-exploitation and equality*: Equality and non-exploitation shift the price vector by lowering the prices of necessities and raising those of luxuries.

These concepts define two different types of affluence; one where a person is surrounded by material goods only, and the second where one is surrounded by people who care about other people. These distinctions between two affluences explain the divergence between economic growth and quality of life in industrialized countries. Gandhian principles implies “small is beautiful” instead of “ economies of scale.”

Though the emphasis here is on the local level, it relates to the global economy. The role of government in Gandhian economics is to maintain and develop effective institutions. Since the object is to strengthen communities, the government needs to be highly decentralized. The test of every policy is not profit, employment and growth, but instead how it strengthens family and community and, through them character and sensitivity.

7. CONCLUSION

Full many a change the world has witnessed today after Gandhi’s departure. Different countries have been endowed with different forms of capitalism such as state-guided capitalism, big firm capitalism and entrepreneurial capitalism, platform capitalism. Many of these changes have

been profound in their impacts. On the positive side, the world as a whole has become a 'flat earth' due to technological developments. On the negative side, development as an ambition that goes beyond simply increasing the monetary income, has not realized in many cases. Although the past 75 odd years after Gandhi's death has seen enormous progress, huge and urgent challenges remain in tackling injustice, inequality, and enormous suffering: hundreds of millions of men and women still remains desperately poor in Africa and in pockets of Asia, Latin America and Caribbeans. Gender-based inequalities still persist. The rapid economic growth goes hand in hand with increasing resource use and pressure on the environment and creates uncertainty for social stability and growth sustainability. The biggest challenges that the world faces today are: climate change, conflict, be it Russia-Ukraine conflict (2014) or Israel-Hamas war (2023), fundamentalism, civil war here and elsewhere, the rise of terrorism and pandemics. Inequalities in income and wealth in all most all societies are receiving growing attention since inequality between countries and within countries are growing. Almost more than 90 crore people live on less than \$1.90 a day. The world's richest 20 per cent of the people account for three-quarters of global income and consume about 89 per cent of global resources, while the world's poorest 20 per cent consume well under the 2 per cent of global resources. The picture is altogether same in India. Had Gandhi been alive today, he would be afraid of this Satanic earth and feel deeply that his preaching of peace, tryst of egalitarian society and political ideology based on firm pillar has evaporated meanwhile from India as well as the earth as a whole. India in particular would be saved if the future agenda would be formulated with the policies based on Gandhian economy with the modern envelops in order to regenerate communities and ensure sustainability in this respect.

To conclude, it would seem appropriate to cite Albert Einstein's famous appreciation on Gandhi on his 70th birthday:

A man of wisdom and humility, armed with resolve and inflexible consistency, who has devoted all his strength to the uplifting of his people and the betterment of their lot; a man who has confronted the brutality of Europe with the dignity of the simple human being and thus at all times risen superior. Generations to come, it may be, will scarce believe that such a one as this ever in flesh and blood walked upon earth (Calaprice 2011:124). This exemplary figure provides a kind of moral compass to help us navigate our way through life in order to realize a more humane and sustainable future for our planet earth.

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