

REVISITING GANDHI  
IN OUR TIMES



EDITORS

SANDIPAN SEN AND INDRASHIS BANERJEE

RAMAKRISHNA MISSION VIDYAMANDIRA

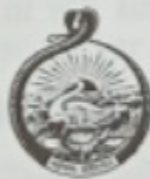
BELUR MATH, HOWRAH, WEST BENGAL

# REVISITING GANDHI IN OUR TIMES

A VOLUME COMMEMORATING  
THE 150<sup>TH</sup> BIRTH ANNIVERSARY OF GANDHI

## Editors

Sandipan Sen and Indrashis Banerjee



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30 January, 2021 - a century ago on this day in 1921, Gandhi visited Belur Math, and on this day in 1948, Gandhi was martyred

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### Publisher's Note

In an informal conversation with one of his boyhood friends, Swami Vivekananda opines that there are three categories of people in the world. One of these categories of people, he maintains, try to realize the ideal set by themselves. Definitely this section forms a microscopic minority. We - Indians are fortunate that we had in our midst a bunch of luminaries in the 19<sup>th</sup> century representing this minority class. Mahatma - Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi - is certainly one among them. Of course, in his quest for the ideal in the realm of chaos and turbulence, he had to encounter innumerable hurdles. The doctrines of Truth and Non-Violence never received acceptance unopposed. Their efficacy in the warzone of real politics has been and is being questioned time and again. But surpassing the domain of narrow 'practicality', we can clearly visualize that the ideal pursued by him

continues to inspire thousands striving to reach their destination in the moral and spiritual planes. The interplay of 'theory' and 'practice' in the life of the Mahatma has been an eternal enigma and has naturally drawn considerable attention from the researchers and academicians.

The Department of Political Science, Ramakrishna Mission Vidyamandira, has made a humble attempt to discuss these issues in a seminar entitled 'Revisiting Gandhi in Our Times' held on 4 March, 2020. Let me express my heartfelt gratitude to each and every faculty of the Department for bringing out this commemorative volume containing the papers presented in the seminar along with some other articles and a compilation of key texts of Mahatma Gandhi. We are particularly thankful to all the participants in the seminar for their valuable contributions. Finally, our sincere thanks to Soumen Traders Syndicate for bringing out the best in a short span of time.

9 October, 2020

Publisher

## Editors' Note

A hundred years ago, on the occasion of Swami Vivekananda's birth anniversary celebrations Mahatma Gandhi visited Belur Math, the headquarters of Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission on 30 January, 1921. Speaking in Hindi, he addressed a small gathering from the balcony of Vivekananda's room. In this impromptu speech Gandhi said: "I have come here not to preach non-cooperation or *charkha*. I have come here to pay my homage and respect to the revered memory of Swami Vivekananda, whose birthday is being celebrated here today. I have gone through his works very thoroughly, and after having gone through them, the love that I had for my country became a thousand-fold. I ask you, young men, not to go away empty-handed without imbibing something of the spirit of the place where Swami Vivekananda lived and died."

The next morning, Swami Shivananda, the second President of the Ramakrishna Math and Mission, speaking before the monks at the Belur Math said: "Gandhiji is a

great soul. Swamiji's love for the country is manifesting through him. He has completely dedicated himself to the struggle for freedom. How great is his renunciation! His life is exemplary. There is hope for world peace only if people like him are born in every country."

Eight years on, on 14 March, 1929, in his Presidential address at a meeting commemorating the birth anniversary of Sri Ramakrishna at the Ramakrishna Mission Sevashrama, Rangoon, Gandhi said: "Wherever I go, the followers of Ramakrishna invite me to meet with them; I feel that their blessings go with me. Their relief works are spread over India. There is no point where they are not established on a large or a small scale. I pray God that they will grow, and that to them will be united all who are pure and who love India."

Again, on 1 July, 1932, Gandhi, in a letter to Swami Anandanand, Manager of the Navajivan Press, wrote: "I have no doubt that Vivekananda rendered great service. We have clearly seen that he gave his life for what he considered to be the truth. When I went to see the Belur Math in 1901, I desired to see Vivekananda also. But the Swami of the Math informed me that he was ill and resided in the city and no one could see him."

Romain Rolland in his book *The Life of Vivekananda and the Universal Gospel* thus observed: "The two movements, although independent of each other and each going its own way, have none the less the same

object. They may be found side by side in service that is devoted to public wellbeing; and both of them – though with different tactics – follow the great design, the national unity of the whole of India." The shared vision of the Ramakrishna Mission and the Gandhian movement lay in uniting the nation and serve to ensure wellbeing that is universal and holistic. Indeed, Swamiji and Mahatma Gandhi were the pioneers of nation building in India.

In keeping with this rich tradition of mutual respect and shared aims among the members of the Ramakrishna Mission and Gandhi and his followers, the Department of Political Science of Ramakrishna Mission Vidyamandira, Belur Math ventured into organising a seminar titled 'Revisiting Gandhi in Our Times' on 4 March, 2020, to commemorate Gandhi's 150<sup>th</sup> Birth Anniversary. It was attended by around three hundred students, researchers and faculties of various colleges and universities across West Bengal. During the course of this seminar together with a panel of expert speakers, a host of young faculties and researchers associated with different institutes of higher learning exchanged their views on the contemporary relevance of Gandhi's ideas. Students took part in a poster presentation competition to express their ideas on the importance of Gandhi in our times.

The present volume, which is perhaps the maiden publication on Gandhi by any Ramakrishna Mission institution, contains the papers presented in the seminar,



along with some other articles, and also the posters presented in the competition.

The volume has four sections. Section one contains in-depth analyses by experts on some key Gandhian concepts, such as *Satyagraha*, *Swaraj*, *Sarvodaya* and *Sarvadharmā Samabhava*. Section two presents a bunch of articles, mostly by young faculties and scholars, depicting the contemporary relevance of Gandhi's ideas in the many spheres of *our* life and times, encompassing the practicability of true *Swaraj*, addressing environmental concerns, focussing upon the village and the villager in India, and delving into the making of Indian foreign policy. The third section offers a glimpse into the perspectives of today's youth on the significance of Gandhi's ideas, expressed through a handful of lively posters and short write-ups accompanying some of them. Finally, section four provides us an opportunity to have a brief overview of some of the key texts of Gandhi himself.

We convey our heartfelt gratitude to all the contributors to the volume, the press, and the college authorities and office staff for their unstinted support in making this publication a reality, especially, in this challenging time of the Covid-19 pandemic. It would be great to see if this humble effort could ignite some interest in Gandhi's ideas among the readers of this volume.

21 December, 2020

Editors

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## Approaching Gandhi from Our Times

Madhusudan Das

It is hard to deny that we live in troubled times. As a young of India, and also as members of humanity, we are being torn apart by the forces that today are pushing forward a course of drastic change and global warming. The widening gap between the rich and the poor, the widening divide of wealth, the widening divide of power and influence, and the widening divide of knowledge, are all factors that are pushing us towards a point of no return. The widening divide of the world is a challenge that we must face.

## INTRODUCTION

These challenges are all part of the process of globalization. Globalization is a process of increasing interconnectedness between people, places, and things. It is a process that has been going on for a long time, but it has become much more rapid and intense in recent years. Globalization has brought us many benefits, but it has also brought us many challenges. One of the challenges of globalization is the widening divide of the world. The rich are getting richer, and the poor are getting poorer. This is a trend that we must address if we are to have a better world. One of the ways to address this challenge is by looking to the wisdom of Mahatma Gandhi. Gandhi was a man who lived a life of simplicity and service to others. He was a man who believed in the power of non-violence and truth. His teachings are still relevant today, and they are especially relevant in these times of global change and global warming. We must look to Gandhi for inspiration and guidance if we are to have a better world.

## Approaching Gandhi from Our Times

Sandipan Sen

It is hard to deny that we live in troubled times. As citizens of India, and also as members of humanity, we are facing some overwhelming crises today. The impending threats of climate change and global warming, the widening gap between the rich and the poor, the swelling numbers of internally displaced people and those migrating into West Europe from war-torn regions, the interminable plights of the victims of discrimination based on gender, ethnicity, race, religion and sexual orientation, and the rising hostilities among communities and nations - all these challenges have crippled the prospects of a just and sustainable human society, despite the spectacular achievements in science and technology over the last few decades. The ongoing Covid-19 pandemic has further aggravated these fissures which were already emerging since the dawn of the new millennium. Interestingly, most of these crises have one thing in common: they are the outcomes of human decisions and actions - their

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misjudgements and misplaced priorities. Hence are closely associated with politics.

And in politics, we have noticed a global trend in the rise of conservative and populist forces into positions of power over the last two decades. As a consequence, there are growing instances of majoritarian excesses, marginalization of the minorities, intolerance towards diversities and stifling of dissents. Quite a few state authorities in different parts of the world have started implementing stringent immigration laws and trade rules in a drive to defy the existing arrangements of a globalized world order. These may be seen as reactions to the alarming rise in terrorist activities and radicalization of religious ideas and identities in the late 1990s. They may also be interpreted as impulsive responses to a deep sense of insecurity stemming out of the global economic meltdown in 2008-2009. In any case, their impact on our lives is enormous. Anxiety in individual minds and tensions in the social fabric are running high everywhere. Most importantly, there seems to be a shocking erosion of trust in some of the basic human values upon which nations and communities were built in the last few decades.

In an attempt to theorise these political trends in one of his recent works, Partha Chatterjee identifies them as crises of the hegemony of liberal democracy evolving out of complex structural processes of '*tactical* contraction of the integral state' during the phase of neoliberal



governmentality in the West, and the emergence of 'competitive populism' in postcolonial democracies like India. As he observes: "the possibility afforded to subaltern populations to anoint a sovereign of their choice who would fight the enemy and give them justice, without being bound by the opaque procedures of law and bureaucracy, is a powerful motivation that is likely to sway those people in Europe or the United States who feel disempowered by their invisible oligarchic rulers."<sup>1</sup> The fallouts of these processes, in his estimation, are, "features such as the centralization of power in the hands of an authoritarian leader, the repression of the opposition, the showering of benefits to a core base of supporters, and the undermining of institutional norms."<sup>2</sup> He further argues that soon many of these features of Indian populism "are likely to appear in the liberal democracies of the West."<sup>3</sup> However, in his consideration, in India these symptoms have emerged out of 'tactical extension of the state', whereas in the West these are likely to appear because of its 'tactical contraction'.

These challenges have, in many ways, impacted our times quite depressingly and made our lives vulnerable to a great extent.

Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi (1869-1948) too, lived in troubled times. In his times, India was under a repressive colonial rule, where people were denied the

basic freedoms by their foreign rulers and their native collaborators. Discriminations based on caste, colour, class, creed, gender and race were rampant in India and across the world. Two of the most violent and destructive wars that humanity had ever seen were fought during his lifetime, and brutal genocides were carried out by totalitarian regimes in many states. There was a palpable crisis of trust in fundamental human values. There was darkness everywhere. Gandhi was quite aware of the forces active behind these crises. He identified the modern coercive state as the main culprit and said: "The state represents violence in a concentrated and organized form. The Individual has a soul, but as the state is a soulless machine, it can never be weaned from violence to which it owes its very existence."<sup>4</sup> He went further to locate the roots of this 'soulless' state in the materialistic and consumeristic characters of Western civilization.<sup>5</sup> As he observed: "The tendency of the Indian civilization is to elevate the moral being, that of the Western civilization is to propagate immorality. The latter is godless, the former is based on a belief in God."<sup>6</sup>

But Gandhi was still optimistic. He never lost faith in the intrinsic goodness of human beings, and in the spiritual unity of humankind. So, he confessed: "I want to identify myself with everything that lives. In the language

of the Gita I want to live at peace with both friend and foe.”<sup>7</sup> Gandhi’s message of *Ahimsa*, *Satyagraha*, *Swaraj*, *Sarvodaya* and *Sarvadharmā Samabhava* emanated out of this unshakable faith.

Gandhi sought to offer, as it were, a ‘counter-hegemony’, against the inhumane and unjust imperialist ideologies, based on ideas rooted in the cultural and spiritual traditions of India.<sup>8</sup> Even though he was preceded by many in this endeavour, like Swami Vivekananda, Rabindranath Tagore, Bal Gangadhar Tilak, Aurobindo Ghosh and others, yet Gandhi was the most prominent among them, so far as the ability of politically articulating his idea was concerned.<sup>9</sup>

In an attempt to identify the distinctive characters of Indian civilization, Gandhi wrote:

Civilization is that mode of conduct which points out to man the path of duty. Performance of duty and observance of morality are convertible terms. To observe morality is to attain mastery over our mind and our passions. So doing, we know ourselves.... We notice that the mind is a restless bird; the more it gets the more it wants, and still remains unsatisfied. The more we indulge our passions the more unbridled they become. Our ancestors, therefore, set a limit to our indulgences. ... They saw that kings and their swords were inferior to the sword of ethics, and they, therefore, held the sovereigns of the earth to be inferior to the Rishis and the Fakirs. A nation with a constitution like this is fitter to teach others than to learn from others.<sup>10</sup>

From this perspective, Gandhi believed that real *Swaraj* or self-rule can only be achieved by freeing oneself from the inner bondages of desires and passion. To realize this Gandhi prescribed the following practices:

You and I have nothing to do with the others. Let each do his duty. If I do my duty, that is, serve myself, I shall be able to serve others.... 1. Real home-rule is self-rule or self-control. 2. The way to it is passive resistance: that is soul-force or love-force. 3. In order to exert this force, *Swadeshi* in every sense is necessary. 4. What we want to do should be done, not because we object to the English or because we want to retaliate but because it is our duty to do so.<sup>11</sup>

Gandhi further stated that spiritual emancipation was the prime motivation of all his endeavours, including the political ones. He wrote:

I am impatient to realize myself, to attain *Moksha* in this very existence. My national service is part of my training for freeing my soul from the bondage of flesh. Thus considered, my service may be regarded as purely selfish. I have no desire for the perishable kingdom of earth. I am striving for the Kingdom of Heaven which is *Moksha*. To attain my end it is not necessary for me to seek shelter of a cave. I carry one about me, if I would but know it. ... For me the road to salvation lies through incessant toil in the service of my country and there through of humanity. ... So my patriotism is for me a stage in my journey to the land of eternal freedom and peace. Thus it will be seen that for me there are no politics devoid of religion. They subserve religion. Politics bereft of religion are a death-trap because they kill the soul.<sup>12</sup>

This religiously, or rather spiritually motivated notion of politics, was however, in no way parochial or communal in content. Gandhi presented a very unique and universal idea of God, by equating Him with Truth. He wrote:

The word *Satya* (Truth) is derived from *Sat*, which means 'being'. Nothing is or exists in reality except Truth. That is why *Sat* or Truth is perhaps the most important name of God. In fact it is more correct to say that Truth is God, than to say that God is Truth. ... Devotion to this Truth is the sole justification for our existence. All our activities should be centred in Truth. ... There should be Truth in thought, Truth in speech and Truth in action.<sup>13</sup>

At the same time Gandhi cautioned that as one's capacity to perceive the Truth may differ from another, so there would be different, sometimes even conflicting, notions of Truth, which should be accepted without any prejudice. He wrote:

... what may appear as truth to one person will often appear as untruth to another person. But that need not worry the seeker. Where there is honest effort, it will be realized that what appears to be different truths are like the countless and apparently different leaves of the same tree. ... Hence there is nothing wrong in every man following Truth according to his lights.<sup>14</sup>

That is why Gandhi always endorsed the idea of 'equality of religions' or *Sarvadharmā Samābhava*. Thus, when he identified his views of an ideal state with the 'Ramarajya', he summarily rejected the notion of any theocratic state.

He mentioned: "By *Ramarajya* I do not mean Hindu Raj. I mean by *Ramarajya* Divine Raj, the Kingdom of God. For me Rama and Rahim are one and the same deity. I acknowledge no other God but the one God of truth and righteousness...."<sup>15</sup>

This unique worldview ultimately led Gandhi to *redefine* the concept of power, which is considered as the essence of politics. For him, the state or political power was inferior to the soul power. As he reiterated: "To me political power is not an end but one of the means of enabling people to better their condition in every department of life."<sup>16</sup> The utility of political power, to him, was limited to the extent that it could create socio-economic and political conditions conducive to the attainment of true *Swaraj* or self-rule for every individual living in a society. Beyond that, political power had no value for a moral or spiritual life, in his views. Thus, Gandhi never accepted political power as an end in itself, but always a means to the attainment of true *Swaraj* or *Moksha* or the ultimate spiritual goal of life. Since Gandhi believed that in any moral or spiritual endeavour, means are as vital as the ends, politics must be based on moral foundations. Such a morally or spiritually oriented politics can never be grounded on violence and untruth, and its goal can never be the deprivation, discrimination or domination of any sort. Hence, Gandhi took up *Ahimsa* and

*Satyagraha* as the means and *Sarvodaya* as the goal of his idea of politics.<sup>17</sup> He derived immense courage, extraordinary strength and profound compassion from these ideas. And these inner qualities made the Mahatma an exceptional political personality of his times, and made his political ideas unique.

The underlying resemblances between the nature of the crises of our times and that of Gandhi's are difficult to deny. The most notable among them is the crisis of human values in private as well as public lives, which Gandhi sought to restore through all his ideas and deeds. Therefore, a careful study of the key ideas of Gandhi can be quite rewarding for us while facing the challenges of our times. And this volume makes a humble attempt in this direction by earnestly seeking to revisit Gandhi and his ideas from the perspective of our times.

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## Revisiting Gandhi in Our Times

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## Section I

# REVISITING GANDHI: KEY CONCEPTS

## Satyagraha and its Relevance in Post-Gandhi Era

Tapan Kumar Chattopadhyay

Satyagraha was employed by Gandhi for the first time in South Africa to fight against the racist policies of the South African government. However, the movement in South Africa was initially called 'passive resistance' and it was only when the struggle gathered some momentum, the phrase 'passive resistance' was replaced by the term 'satyagraha'. The phrase 'passive resistance' was also used by Gandhi in his *magnum opus*, the *Hind Swaraj*, which was originally written in Gujarati in 1908 and translated into English (in Johannesburg) in 1909.

Before Gandhi, the doctrine of passive resistance was expounded chiefly by Aurobindo Ghosh in a series of articles published in *Bandemataram* in 1907. Passive resistance as a political technique had been in use in England long before Aurobindo tried to popularize it in India. Gandhi wrote:

I have no idea when the phrase 'passive resistance' was first used in English and by whom. But among the English people, whenever a small minority did not approve of some obnoxious piece of legislation, instead

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