

Editorial

Remembering Mahatma as Gandhi: Gandhi as Political Philosopher and Social Theorist

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I

The special issue dedicated to Gandhi titled 'Remembering Mahatma as Gandhi: Gandhi as Political Philosopher and Social Theorist' intends to address Gandhi's concept of democracy, its delicate relation with his millennial ideal of non-violence/*Ahimsa* and the intent and impact of Gandhian thought in the contemporary discourses on socio-cultural-political life and coexistence.

Many influential studies and social theorists have pointed out the legacy of Gandhian thought on contemporary philosophy and social theory as - rigorously reprimanding and controversially concealing - simultaneously. Nonetheless, Gandhi and his philosophy prominently figures in all discussions about democracy, ethics of plurality and political morality. Therefore, we have solemn re-readings and reinterpretations of Gandhi which consummate radical negotiability with the concepts of democracy, nation state, critique of modernity, human rights, civil society, religion and social freedom. We have worthy models of rereading of Gandhi in the theoretic efforts of Partha Chatterjee, Ashish Nandy, Bikhu Parekh, Akeel Bilgrami, Shiv Viswanathan, Ramchandra Guha,

Sumit Sarkar, Rudolf C Heredia and Thomas Pantham – to mention a few prominent names from the scores of such efforts from India and abroad.

Ramachandra Guha in one of his timely and interesting write up on Gandhi published in Malayalam¹ discusses how three authors, Ivan Meysky, S A Danke and S D Saklathwala wrote comparatively about Gandhi and tall secular leaders of Gandhi's time – mainly in order to praise leaders such as Lenin, Ata Turk and Sukarno. For the authors, while these secular, progressive and popular leaders spearheaded liberative movements against power and exploitation of the masses, Gandhi in the pretext of his principle of *Ahimsa*, religious ideas of *Dharma* and Truth acted like a reactionary who wanted to recreate the past. Guha, nonetheless, completes his write up by underlining a relevant and a timely perspective that inspires us all, that:

[As we celebrate the One Fiftieth Birth Anniversary of Mahatma Gandhi]...I think that the posthumous fame and reputation of Gandhi among the ordinary masses and intellectuals alike is far above than Lenin. Clearly, above the Russian prophet of arms revolution and class antagonism stands now the Indian Prophet of Ahimsa and brotherhood and fellowship of all religions and even after thousands of years he [Gandhi] would stand as the guide of humanity.²

Hence, Gandhi's thought constantly resurges many major issues such as nature; environment and lifeworld; democracy and development; casteism and caste inequality; the concept of language and democracy; the critique of western modernity and capitalism; women and *swaraj* and their role in democracy; social freedom; nationalism and patriotism; democracy and non-violence; the critique of modern science and technology and human rights.

Meanwhile, we should also see the major debates which took place across the length and breadth of the theoretical gamut of social theory and philosophy which challenged many aspects of Gandhi's concept of

¹ Ramchandrra Guha, ' Gandhiyum Leninum nammudeyum Avarudeyum Kalath' (Gandhi and Lenin in their and our times), *Mathrubhoomi Weekly*, October, 27, 2019, 52-55.

² Ibid, 55; My translation, from Malyalam to English.

democracy and *Ahimsa*. Gandhian concept of democracy which presumes non-violence as its contour/guiding principle have been intensely criticized by many thinkers like Ambedkar as well as by the recent critics of institutionalized democracy. In recent times Gail Omvedt and Arundhati Roy make this discussion alive. Arundhati Roy shows us that Gandhi's ideals of self purification fail to make poverty visible as Gandhi's ideals of simplicity is always mired with political power. She consistently argues that poverty cannot be simulated as Gandhi wanted to do, as it is sheer powerlessness and not having money or possessions. Whereas those who are at the receiving end of untouchability and caste system are in inimitable poverty.³ It is interesting to note a new dimension that D.R Nagaraj shares with us in this regard. He writes:

Untouchability was of the central concerns of Gandhiji. In all historical fairness it must be admitted that it was Bapu who made untouchability one of the crucial questions of Indian Politics, although there were many yogis and movements before him in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries whose contribution require a deeper grasp and analysis...Gandhiji's take off point was that the problem of untouchability was a problem of the self, in this case the collective Hindu self. He had transformed the notion of the Individual self and the necessity of clearing the cobwebs of caste ego was shifted to the level of the larger notion of the collective self.⁴

However, such criticisms and observations on Gandhi's concept of democracy and non-violence surrounding the social violence (*Himsa*), surrounding the issues of casteism and violence on the Dalits, the nascent grey areas of the idealized uncertainty of minorities', the violently patronized and promoted issues related with language-identity, religious issues related with religions' place in the public sphere, and the responsible dispositions of the civil society along with the moments of Gandhi's self-transcendence opens up a larger understanding of Indian reality – as D R Nagaraj has shown – make rereading of Gandhi politically more demanding.

³ Arundhati Roy, "The Doctor and the Saint", In *Annihilation of Caste: An Annotated Critical Edition*, (New Delhi: Navayana, 2014), 78.

⁴ D. R. Nagaraj, "Self Purification Versus Self-respect: On the Roots of the Dalit Movement", In Reghuramararaju (ed.) *Debating Gandhi*, (New Delhi: OUP, 2006), 361-368.

Therefore, an interesting aspect that runs through all the serious introspections on the ideas and concepts of Gandhi is a reckoning the sage, who largely made the fortunes of political and social India on the one side and on the other side is being remembered as the failed prophet of Indian democracy – but who still commands the most original discussions on democracy and self rule. That is the reason why it is to be admirably remembered that Gandhi has encountered almost all the conundrums related with democratic and post traditional socio-political coexistence. As Ramchandra Guha said in an interview recently, Gandhi's nationalism was democratically affirmative to the core as it was essentially pluralist and keeping the highest model of social freedom in its core. It is this sense and ideal of democratic diversity that made him address the social and political concepts of his time from deep critical perspectives and strive for the principle of reconciliation of the political with the ethical-spiritual. As Tridip Suhrud points out:

This divide between the religious, spiritual Gandhi and the political one or, more aptly, the divide between Gandhi the *ashramite* and Gandhi the *satyagrahi* has come to shape not only our academic engagement with the life and thought of Gandhi, but also our memory of the man whom we revere, revile or remain indifferent to. The dichotomy is a superficial one. Gandhi saw himself as a *satyagrahi* and an *ashramite*. His politics was imbued with spiritual strivings and his relationship with religion was a deeply political one.⁵

Akeel Bilgrami, in a study on Gandhi highlights the above mentioned divide in a slightly different fashion, “[t]he quality of his thought has sometimes been lost because of the other images Gandhi evolves – a shrewd politician and a deeply spiritual figure.”⁶ Though Akeel Bilgrami takes his interpretation of Gandhi into a track which more politically deals with the spiritual image of Gandhi, it seems that the questions related with the uniqueness of Gandhian democratic instruments cannot be answered unless a determining link is established between Gandhi the

⁵ Tridip Suhrud, “Rediscovering Gandhi: New insights from recent books on Gandhi”, 1 February 2013. www.caravanmagazine.in/profile/468.

⁶ Akeel Bilgrami, “Gandhi, the Philosopher”, *Economic and Political Weekly* 38, 39: (2003).

ashramite and Gandhi the *satyagrahi*. The major question in this context, let us assume that though it is debatably resilient, can it be beneficial to think that the strong conceptual connective that links Gandhi the *ashramite* and Gandhi the *satyagrahi* is his philosophy of nonviolence or *Ahimsa* and the latter as the primary socio-political category that defines the ontology of democracy according to Gandhi. Gandhi's Principle of *Ahimsa* as that which Determines the Political Gandhi.

Though it may be commented that the observation that Gandhi's legacy will continue to determine the core and ambience of modern democracy is an overemphasized truism, it can sufficiently inform the contemporary thoughts on both the theoretical and practical concepts of democracy. The contemporary critiques of democracy world over will be incomplete without Gandhian critique of liberal democracy.

Firstly, Gandhi challenges the majoritarianism of numbers in democracy. Gandhi achieves the ideal of democracy which can claim its uniqueness when he rejects democracy as majoritarianism of any form. Gandhi agreed to the popular ideal of democracy where the opinion of the majority is counted. But, he captures the core of democracy and the democratic process when he held the view that, "when a respectable minority objects to any rule of conduct it would be dignified for the majority to yield to the minority." The ethic that Gandhi was trying to introduce and inscribe into Indian political life, as pointed out was that, "real *swaraj* will not be the acquisition of authority by a few but the acquisition of the capacity of all to resist authority when it is abused."

Secondly, Gandhi rejects the logic of power that is derived by the liberal model of democracy from the culturally insensitive technological civilization. As Ramin Jahanbegloo tells us:

In response to the totalizing project of modernity exemplified by colonial domination and a discursive dominance of positivist and reductionist science, Gandhi laid down two conditions for the enshrinement of moral civilization in Hind Swaraj. First, his notion of Swaraj, which referred to three philosophical, ethical and political ideas of self examination, self rule

and self determination. Second, his concept of Sarvodaya or welfare of all, which rejected the Utilitarian view of liberal democracy as representing greatest good of the greatest number.⁷

Consequently, Gandhi shows us that the violence involved in the deadly combination of techno-scientific capitalism –its ideal of domination of nature and its brute force and economic greed – which the liberal form of democracy in its failure to recognize becomes the helpless carrier and perpetrator of all the above.

Gandhi's concept of non-violence becomes actively and politically visible here. According to Gandhi, though non-violence never evades violence fully, it carries on a constant struggle against arrogance and violence. It is a very powerful and active force. The followers of non-violence would never retreat at the sight of violence. As A K Saran writes, according to Gandhi, “[v]iolence is negative in nature, for every violent act or thought violates reality. All violence is violence against reality. Non-violence is acceptance of reality as it is.”⁸ As quoted by Saran, Gandhi explains this as follows:

...When parties to a situation do not see the relevant reality in a mutually acceptable way, the believer in non-violence, that is, the one who wants to accept reality as it is, will voluntarily undertake to suffer for his vision of reality....This will bring about a change of heart and mind of the other party, or in the sufferer, or in both and thus a common vision of reality will emerge, eliminating any imposition of a supervening reality by the use of superior physical force.⁹

Perhaps in the writings of thinkers like Bilgrami we can find out how Gandhi's concept of non-violence devises the struggle for *swaraj*, which is a term closest to democracy for Gandhi or a concept that which makes Gandhi's concept of democracy distinct. As Bilgrami writes:

⁷ Ramin Jehanbegloo, *The Decline of Civilization*, (New Delhi: Aleph Book Company, 2017), 44.

⁸ A. K Saran, “Gandhi's Theory of Society and Our Times”, In Dallmayr & G.N Devy (ed.) *Between Tradition and Modernity*, (London: Sage, 1998), 212.

⁹ *Ibid*, 212.

It [*Ahimsa*]...became a self conscious instrument in politics in this century... It was studied under different names, first usually as part of religious or contemplative ways of life remote from the public affairs of men and state, and later with the coming of romantic thought in Europe, under the rubric of critiques of industrial civilization. For Gandhi, both these contexts were absolutely essential to his conception of non-violence. Non-violence was central in his nationalist mobilization against British rule in India. But the concept is also situated in an essentially religious temperament as well as in a thoroughgoing critique of ideas and ideologies of the Enlightenment and of an intellectual paradigm of perhaps a century earlier than the Enlightenment.¹⁰

Gandhi views the perverted combination of - colonialism and the uncritical modernity along with the one dimensional technological domination - act together as violence against human dignity and therefore becomes essentially antidemocratic. *Ahimsa* is in recognizing the cognitive enslavement of colonial modernity and its sibling liberal democracy and critiquing them. The proximity to the above formulated and accomplished conceptual and praxeological Gandhi and Gandhian thought, perhaps makes us to think that it determines the authenticity and seriousness of any theoretical engagement in India after Gandhi.

II

The present volume as the result of a debate on the relevance of remembering Gandhi comes out with some major and intimate engagements with Gandhian thought and its significance. Siby K George's paper titled, 'Gandhi and the Development Discourse', brings to the fore one of the major engagements that has been endorsed to Gandhi's philosophy and its overall impact on our socio cultural and political life. The paper scrutinizes and also problematizes Gandhi's cognitive disengagement with the colonizer's moral discourse. The discussion highlights Gandhi's 'counter-narrative and its 'rejection of the modern developmental state and his alternative of an ethical form of development'

¹⁰ Akeel Bilgrami, "Gandhi, the Philosopher", *Economic and Political Weekly* 38, 39(2003): 4159.

as the ecological and human crisis of the twentieth century was the direct consequence of the inner morbidity of modernity. However, along with many contemporary thinkers the paper draws our attention to the fact that the problem of modernity that Gandhi has challenged doesn't make him a retrogressive anti-modernist. The paper quite insistently attempts further to show and argue that the alternative development picture that Gandhi has put forward is significant in the face of the dehumanizing impacts of modernity.

George Thadathil in his paper titled 'A Conciliatory Gaze: SNG on MK Gandhi and BR Ambedkar' involves in highlighting the Gandhi-Ambedkar debates in the past decade and attempt to bring in Narayana Guru into the debate and expand to focus more on reinventing the debate and discourse. Narayana Guru as a Keralite/Malayalee Vedantin social reformer and revolutionary campaigner against untouchability and caste system has been a prophetic forerunner to the Gandhian project besides being part of the Gandhain dialogue network later. The paper in its search for potential reconciliation of the irreconcilable positions of Gandhi and Ambedkar brings in the notion of Narayana Guru's *atma sukham* (self-happiness or self-joy or soul-bliss) as a concept that can act as a 'purification process of all religious views and in itself being an alternative conceptualization of spiritual wellbeing'. The attempt to ground such a search draws attention to the somewhat unknown and hidden views and philosophical position of SNG into dialogue with the more elaborately written and argued positions of Ambedkar and Gandhi. The paper tries to show that the failure of 'Gandhi's project for modern India among the Dalits, Adivasis and Women on the one hand, and the circumspection as regards to Ambedkar's version of modern India among the upper castes and strata on the other, pose the need for a new path and advocates.' These could be drawn out from SNG and SNG movement with its vision of selfhood for a people who can 're-script their identity'.

The paper by Pius V Thomas and Violina Patowary, which discusses 'Gandhi's Legacy: Vandana Shiva as Gandhi's Heir' emphasizes the contemporariness and legacy of the political Gandhi who influences the

contemporary concepts of democracy, ethics of plurality and political morality. The paper takes its course of discussion to a radical critique of globalized world, global institutions, the environment and nature in order to locate the democracy proper. In such an effort the paper aligns the notion of political Gandhi with a 'radical and intimate interlocutor like Vandana Shiva who builds up her ecofeminist theoretical environmentalism and the principles of global coexistence and democracy through a Gandhian paradigm. The discussion in the paper convincingly hint at the idea that the concept of earth democracy, which Vandana Shiva puts forward to mediate a major environmental ethical and socio-political ideal in addressing the environmental crisis rests quite credibly on the Gandhian ideal of Swaraj.

'Gandhi in the Tropics: Climate, Disease and Medicine' by BikashSarma discusses a historiography of medicine in India and Gandhi's engagement with it through a process of qualitative denunciation and qualitative appreciation. The paper argues that the western medicine in the context of India cannot be cognized without an elaborate historiography that highlights the knowledge production that the colonizer made according to the changing 'perception about the landscape, climate, disease and the natives at the contact zone.' The paper makes an effort to track down the emergence of the colonial discourse on medicine and make Gandhi stand in dialoge with the emerging discourse.

'The Violence of Non-violence: Reading Nirad C Chaudhuri Rereading Gandhi' by Jaydeep Chakrabarty explores and challenges the logic of Gandhi's concept of non-violence with the aim of showing its nexus with its binary opposite, violence. The paper does it through a 'reading of Nirad C Chaudhuri's critique of Gandhi and Gandhism,' supported by 'Jacques Derrida, John Milton and Rabindranath Tagore's conceptuality of binary opposites.' The discussion, however, aims to address and work out the 'common areas' and of meaning of nonviolence in Gandhi and its binary opposite violence.

Subhra Nag's paper titled, 'Freedom, Authority and Care as Moral Postulates: Reexamining Gandhi's Proposal for Ethical Reconstruction' makes a feminist ethical interrogation of Gandhi and the Gandhain thought. It challenges and interrogates Gandhi's moral thought and ideas in what paper calls in a single frame of analysis in order to attain an alternative moral stance, which could be more in dialogue with the ethics of care.

The paper titled, 'Decoding *Gandhigiri*: A genealogy of a 'popular' Gandhi' by Abhijit Ray makes a critical study of *Lage Raho Munna Bhai* in its effort to explore the popular cultural and filmic representation of Gandhism in Bollywood movies. The paper in this connection takes up Gandhi's critique of modernity and how it ignites debatable post-modernist ideas. The paper observes that the movie *Lage Raho Munna Bhai* 're-engineered' certain ideas of Gandhi without going to the deeper meaning of Gandhian philosophy and created a populist Gandhi. The paper argues that though *Gandhigiri* exhibits certain post-modernist traits of kitch and populism, it also rightly upholds Gandhi and his persona.

Though the volume is slender in terms of the number of the papers, the engagements which take place in the papers presented in situating and encountering Gandhi and Gandhian thought seem to be creatively border crossing the conventional delimitations in discussing Gandhi and conceptually diverse. The volume, I hope, will find its own niche in the efforts to know and remember Gandhi.