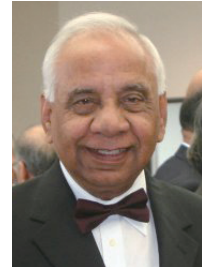


The Message of Mahatma Gandhi

By Rabinder Malik



Author Rabinder Malik

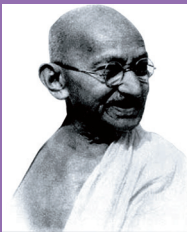


Photo: Author

Gandhi

Mahatma Gandhi is perhaps the most well-known Indian in the world today. His life was one of dedication and simplicity and he valued non-violence and truth as the guiding principles of his life. Gandhi followed the inner voice that guided him throughout his life and he could justifiably say to the world: “My life is my message.”

Introduction

Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, commonly known as Mahatma Gandhi, was the preeminent leader of Indian nationalism in British-ruled India. He is referred to as the “Father of the Nation” or “Bapu” in India. Employing non-violent civil disobedience, Gandhi led India to independence and inspired movements for non-violence, civil rights and freedom across the world.

The son of a senior government official, Gandhi was born and raised in a Hindu community in coastal Gujarat, and trained in law in London. Gandhi became famous by fighting for the civil rights of Muslim and Hindu Indians in South Africa, using new techniques of non-violent civil disobedience that he developed. Returning to India in 1915, he set about organizing peasants to protest excessive land-taxes. A lifelong opponent of “communalism” (i.e. basing politics on religion), he reached out widely to all religious groups. Assuming leadership of the Indian National Congress in 1921, Gandhi led nationwide campaigns for easing poverty, expanding women’s rights, building religious and ethnic amity, ending *untouchability*, increasing economic self-reliance, and above all for achieving *Swaraj*— the independence of India from British domination.

There has probably not been a person who has made such a difference to the lives of such a large number of people in one single lifetime. There is also no doubt that Mahatma Gandhi was much ahead of his time, as is borne out by his life and work. I still remember the words of Albert Einstein, which I had quoted in writing an essay on Gandhi when I was in high school nearly six decades ago. He had said of Gandhi: “Generations to come will scarce believe that such a man as this one, in flesh and blood, ever walked on earth.”

Ideally, one would have liked to write this article after going through many volumes of Gandhi’s writings but that is not possible in the short time available. Much of what is covered in this article is based, firstly, on what I remember about Mahatma Gandhi from the time I was growing up as a young boy in New Delhi after India gained its independence from Britain in 1947 and had to cope with the tragic consequences of the partition of the country, which also affected my own family. I was living in

New Delhi when Gandhi was assassinated on Jan. 30, 1948, at Birla House where he held a mass congregation every evening.

In order to learn more about Gandhi’s life and struggles, I recently spent a few days in Ahmedabad, India, and visited the Mahatma Gandhi Ashram at Sabarmati and the adjoining museum. There are two other sources that I would also like to acknowledge which helped me in understanding more deeply the significant contributions of Mahatma Gandhi that span such disciplines as economics, spirituality, conflict resolution, international peace, education, politics and more.

The first one was the series of lectures on the message of Mahatma Gandhi delivered by Shobhana Radhakrishna during her visit to Japan last year. As she has had the experience of spending a part of her life in Gandhi’s Sewagram Ashram in India, and has dedicated her life to serving the poor and the underprivileged for over three decades, her lectures gave me a deep insight into the life and thoughts of Mahatma Gandhi including his values of truth, peace, non-violence, tolerance, universal brotherhood, ethical leadership, communal harmony, and humanitarian service. In a separate lecture Radhakrishna delivered early this year in India, I learnt also about the program of collective sanitation as practiced by Gandhi in his Ashrams.

The other important source was the book entitled *Mahatma Gandhi and the Environment* published in 2009 by The Energy and Resources Institute (TERI) of New Delhi. This book highlights many futuristic statements Gandhi made on the environment and development, especially at a time when environmental problems were either not too obvious or at best were only in their incipient stages.

Gandhi & Non-Violence

Mahatma Gandhi’s name has become synonymous with peace, non-violence, social justice and civil disobedience. He bequeathed to the world a novel method of fighting injustice through non-violence, thus becoming an inspiration to millions in India and abroad. Most notably, Gandhi and his method became an inspiration for stalwarts like Nelson Mandela, Martin Luther King Jr., the Dalai Lama, Aung San Suu Kyi, and Bishop

Desmond Tutu in their respective freedom movements.

The International Day of Non-Violence is marked on Oct. 2, Gandhi's birthday. As this pioneer of the philosophy and strategy of non-violence put it, "Non-violence is the greatest force at the disposal of mankind. It is mightier than the mightiest weapon of destruction devised by the ingenuity of man."

Gandhi has been an inspiration for non-violent movements for civil rights and social change across the world. Throughout his life, he remained committed to his belief in non-violence even under oppressive conditions and in the face of seemingly insurmountable challenges. The theory behind his actions, which included encouraging mass civil disobedience to British law as with the historic Salt March of 1930, was that "just means lead to just ends"; that is, it is irrational to try to use violence to achieve a peaceful society. He believed that Indians must not use violence or hatred in their fight for freedom from colonialism.

Mahatma Gandhi's greatest contribution to humanity is his message of non-violence as the way to peace and justice. He taught that non-violence is not just a refusal to kill; it is the action of love and truth as a force of positive social change. Indeed, he insisted that non-violence was the most active and powerful force at work for good among the human race. He concluded that non-violence always works because it uses the method of suffering to melt the human heart. Gandhi extended the experiment in non-violence to non-violent resistance, non-cooperation and civil disobedience. He demonstrated through his life that non-violence was not a passive weak force, but an active force full of possibilities.

Gandhi's Settlements (Ashrams)

Mahatma Gandhi established four settlements in his lifetime, two in South Africa and two in India. These settlements were his model for community life and simple living. The essence of community life lies in living together, in sharing and caring, sharing joys and sorrows, work and responsibilities, vices and virtues, sins and saintliness. The mingling of spiritual with political aims in the settlements gave them an unprecedented character.

These settlements played a significant role in the history of the Indian community in South Africa as well as in the history of the non-violent freedom movement in India. They were the training grounds for *Satyagrahis* to dedicate their lives to the non-violent freedom struggle and get involved in community service through constructive work for restoring the dignity of the poorest of the poor. The legacy of Mahatma Gandhi to South Africa was that he gave the Indian community living there a method of fighting injustice through *Satyagraha*. He sowed the seeds of dignity and self-confidence and with that even the apparently weaker sections could fight the mighty government.

The life and thoughts of Mahatma Gandhi are intertwined and inseparable. His politics was imbued with his spiritual experiments and his spirituality was tempered by his vision of a non-violent society, and his constructive work was integral to his politics. His unique practices of fasting, spinning, silence and prayer were as much a part of his politics as of his spiritual life. These practices and experiments were sustained and nurtured by the settlements that he founded.

Gandhi implored people to be ethical and honest, lead a simple life and serve people. He advised them to avoid these seven sins:

- Politics without principle

Photo: Author



Mahatma Gandhi spreading his message of non-violence

- Wealth without work
- Commerce without ethics
- Knowledge without character
- Pleasure without conscience
- Science without morality
- Worship without sacrifice

Collective Sanitation as Practiced by Gandhi

For centuries, sanitation has been considered to be a low-level activity in India. The job used to be done by the members of a particular caste of people who were treated differently. Although every mother does the cleaning of children and women sweep the houses, the cleaning of streets and latrines was left to the so-called *untouchables*.

Mahatma Gandhi could not accept the idea of *untouchability* and campaigned tirelessly against it. However, *untouchability* has not been eradicated from the country, and even today it is present despite Gandhi's campaign and laws banning this practice.

Gandhi began cleaning toilets in South Africa and he made cleaning of the Ashram a common activity for everyone. In his Ashram in India too, collective sanitation became a fine art and developed into a scientific activity. Experiments with different types of latrines were conducted in the Ashram to make the cleaning process free of offensive smells and to use the night soil as fertilizer for farms. It developed into a process that made it both hygienic and economically productive. But perhaps the most important dimension of the process was a social one in that a task abhorred by the higher caste Hindus was turned into a daily ritual by Mahatma Gandhi in his Ashram. One of the methods of introducing his Ashram life to newcomers was to allot the task of cleaning toilets. It was both a test of their willingness to change their lifestyle and an act of initiation into the Ashram's way of living.

Inspired by Gandhi's message on cleanliness, current Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi wielded a broom himself to launch in India the "Swachh Bharat Abhiyan" (Clean India Mission) on the anniversary of Gandhi's birth on Oct. 2, 2014. Modi said: "I bow to Mahatma Gandhi on his birth anniversary. Mahatma Gandhi's thoughts and beliefs remain a great inspiration for us. Let us dedicate ourselves to building the India of Mahatma Gandhi's dreams."

The mission, which aims to accomplish the vision of a "Clean India" by Oct 2, 2019, the 150th anniversary of Gandhi's birth, has been described as "beyond politics" and "inspired by patriotism". The specific objectives



Photo: Author

Mahatma Gandhi with Indian Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru

of the campaign are:

- Elimination of open defecation
- Conversion of insanitary toilets to flush toilets
- Eradication of manual scavenging
- 100% collection and scientific processing/disposal/reuse/recycling of municipal solid waste
- A behavioral change in people regarding healthy sanitation practices
- Generation of awareness among citizens about sanitation and its linkages with public health
- Supporting urban local bodies in designing, executing and operating waste disposal systems
- Facilitating private-sector participation in capital expenditure and operation and maintenance costs for sanitary facilities.

Gandhi & Sustainable Development

Although there were no wide-ranging debates on the environment and development *per se* during the lifetime of Mahatma Gandhi, he was nevertheless much ahead of his time on account of his being deeply conscious of the very environmental concerns we perceive today. It shows his foresight and vision. This is abundantly clear from his statements and writings, and above all from the very simple and sustainable personal lifestyle that this great socio-economic and political reformer followed all his life. He renounced all luxury, and willingly experienced the pangs of deprivation, even though he came from a wealthy family, and as a barrister-at-law could have led a very comfortable life. He identified himself with the poorest of the poor in India. Indeed, he had a holistic approach towards all such problems and his strongest point was that he preached only what he himself practiced.

What are the important elements of Gandhian environmentalism? Based on his utterances and writings, and above all on the very lifestyle he adopted, first and foremost Mahatma Gandhi would have wanted us to follow the path where the empowerment of women and weaker and poorer sections of society was guaranteed. Secondly, he would have liked us to link environmentalism with some basic social, economic and ethical tenets.

Gandhi would have also liked society at large to take on the full responsibility of carving out its own future, where:

- Humankind acts in a manner that it is a *part* of nature rather than *apart* from nature;
- Materials available on the earth are not used with an element of greed, and a conservationist and sustainable life-saving approach prevails

- over the unsustainable consumerist self-destructive approach;
- The human race thinks about how much is enough for a simple, need-based and comfortable lifestyle;
- Human beings practice non-violence not only towards fellow humans but also towards other living organisms and inanimate materials because overuse of such materials also amounts to violence;
- Women are respected and are made partners and given their rightful place in all spheres of human endeavor;
- Development generally leads to local self-reliance and equity with social justice; and
- Ethics and self-discipline in resource use are the overriding criteria in the process of development.

Gandhi's life and work are an environmental legacy for all humanity. This is not because he wrote a big treatise on the environment, but because he was a practitioner of sustainable development in the real sense of the word. In brief, his whole life was his message and a lesson on the environment and development for Indians and the world at large to follow.

India is rich in cultural heritage and substantially rich in resources but is populated essentially by the poor, where the benefits of development have not percolated to the lowest socio-economic level. Being predominantly an agricultural country, the pattern of development has to be eco-development. In Gandhi's opinion, such development should be based on ecological principles like environmental harmony, economic efficiency, resource (including energy) conservation, local self-reliance, and equity with social justice. Equity has an ethical content because once brought into the realm of reality, it would involve *sacrifice* on the part of the *haves* in favor of the *have-nots*.

Gandhi said: "A certain degree of physical harmony and comfort is necessary, but above a certain level it becomes a hindrance instead of help. Therefore, the ideal of creating an unlimited number of wants and satisfying them seems to be a delusion and a snare... Man falls from the pursuit of the ideal of plain living and high thinking the moment he wants to multiply his daily wants. Man's happiness really lies in contentment..."

There is now a need for a major rethink on social, economic, environmental and cultural fronts, so as to translate sustainable development into reality. Transformation of individuals is very necessary, as Gandhi had envisaged. The guiding principle has to be the meeting of needs, and not greed. To recall Gandhi's prophetic statement: "The earth provides enough to satisfy every man's needs, but not every man's greed."



Photo: Author

Mahatma Gandhi spinning the wheel

It is clear that in order to improve sustainability we need appropriate environmental policies, and a whole range of environment-friendly technologies. Another idea relevant to the situation put forward by Gandhi was that the real test regarding the environment and development is that it should help poor men and women. This is also an important piece of advice for rich countries towards sharing resources with less fortunate and poor countries and individuals.

Conclusion

In a brief paper like this it is not possible to cover all that Mahatma Gandhi tried to achieve during his lifetime. One way to get an idea of the depth and breadth of his thoughts is to read through some of the things he said. His basic philosophy is contained in this quote: "I do not want my house to be walled in on all sides and my windows to be stuffed. I want the cultures of all the lands blown about my home as freely as possible. But I refuse to be blown off my feet by any."

Some of his other pertinent quotes are reproduced below:

"Be the change that you wish to see in the world."

"Live as if you were to die tomorrow. Learn as if you were to live forever."

"An eye for an eye will only make the whole world blind."

"Happiness is when what you think, what you say, and what you do are in harmony."

"The weak can never forgive. Forgiveness is the attribute of the strong."

"First they ignore you, then they ridicule you, then they fight you, and then you win."

"Where there is love there is life."

"Freedom is not worth having if it does not include the freedom to make mistakes."

"Prayer is not asking. It is a longing of the soul. It is daily admission of one's weakness. It is better in prayer to have a heart without words than words without a heart."

"Nobody can hurt me without my permission."

"Hate the sin, love the sinner."

"Your beliefs become your thoughts,
- Your thoughts become your words,
- Your words become your actions,
- Your actions become your habits,
- Your habits become your values,
- Your values become your destiny."

Photo: Author



Gandhi Smriti Museum - a memorial to Mahatma Gandhi

"The best way to find yourself is to lose yourself in the service of others."

"A man is but the product of his thoughts. What he thinks, he becomes."

"To give pleasure to a single heart by a single act is better than a thousand heads bowing in prayer."

"You must not lose faith in humanity. Humanity is like an ocean; if a few drops of the ocean are dirty, the ocean does not become dirty."

"The future depends on what you do today."

"Let the first act of every morning be to make the following resolve for the day:

- I shall not fear anyone on Earth.
- I shall fear only God.
- I shall not bear ill will toward anyone.
- I shall not submit to injustice from anyone.
- I shall conquer untruth by truth. And in resisting untruth, I shall put up with all suffering."

"The greatness of a nation and its moral progress can be judged by the way its animals are treated."

"To believe in something, and not to live it, is dishonest."

In conclusion, it is heartening to note that the present government of India is putting in place programs that are inspired by the message of Mahatma Gandhi, such as the "Clean India" campaign and uplifting of the poor sections of Indian society, especially women. Based on my long experience of working for the United Nations in different countries, I believe that the life of Mahatma Gandhi also is a message for action by the world as a whole to improve the lives of people living everywhere on this planet. **JS**

Dr. Rabinder Malik had a long United Nations career, including 20 years with the UN University, and with UNDP and WHO in India and Indonesia. He is a visiting lecturer at Keio University, representative of TERI in Japan, president of the Discover India Club (DIC), and a member of several social and cultural organizations in Japan.