

MAHATMA GANDHI

HIS POLITICAL RELEVANCE AND GLOBAL IMPACT

We have entered a new era of revolt against the oppressive global neoliberal regime and mankind faces unprecedented environmental and social challenges in this troubled context. The message, example and methods of Mahatma Gandhi are being remembered in many counties today as he had indentified the ills of capitalism and pointed out solutions to problems which have since grown much bigger. These include destructive industrialisation, ecological issues, runaway technological militarism in the service of unaccountable financial elites and unsustainable consumerism, among others.

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The twenty-first century finds our world confronting new challenges, no less apocalyptic than in the twentieth century, despite the industrial, scientific–technological and information revolutions no longer being confined to the traditional heartlands of Europe and North America. We are witnessing the financial and economic collapse of regions, which owe the most to capitalist development, even as transformations radically change the day-to-day lives of many in the world for the better, but also for the worse in some respects. Simultaneously, we have witnessed some of the most barbaric wars in human history to once again restructure, re-colonise and control regions around the world, to seize by military or non-military means the resources and budgets, the savings of citizens and the entire economic space and markets of vulnerable countries,

directly targeting for mass elimination or displacement civilian populations considered as rivals for the consumption, use or seizure of resources. Even as the world is threatened with runaway militarisation, the clandestine use of advanced weapon systems and pre-emptive strikes with atomic weapons has become the accepted military doctrines of some governments. Simultaneously there are imminent threats to the Earth's ecosystem in several regions, adversely impacted by the relentless and unending search for ever-increasing profits. Human lives as a consequence have become the collateral of the pattern of capital accumulation known today as the "market economy", with the killing of millions recorded as mere statistics and with national and international legal systems rendered powerless.

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Although more than half a century has passed since the assassination of Mahatma Gandhi, individuals and social movements struggle for answers to surmount moral and political decay, to overturn entrenched exploitative systems or racial institutions that sometimes appear difficult to defeat in political frontlines and arenas the world over. Wherever citizens have gathered *en masse* to defy tyrannical systems, whether in Cairo's Tahrir Square or on Wall Street the moral political principles and strategies of Mahatma Gandhi continue to guide humanity, along with his critique of the human ravages of capitalism and colonialism as economic systems.

This is also true of his political strategy of mass political education, of *satyagraha* (struggles for truth) and of nonviolent civil disobedience and noncooperation as methods to overturn unjust political systems to alter the status quo of injustice, methods which Gandhi adopted to successfully defeat the most insidious and successful among tyrants—the entrenched British Empire. In recent years Bolivia has witnessed its native citizens resorting to civil disobedience, blockading the seat of government, with successive administrations having to resign until the election of the government of Evo Morales. This was

not a “coloured” revolution—Bolivians changed their government through a mass movement for economic and political justice for their indigenous people.

Mahatma Gandhi was neither politically passive nor a narrow nationalist bigoted leader attempting to convince the world of the superiority of his own political path, faith or religion. Gandhi was above all a seeker of truth, who believed in the essential oneness of mankind and humanity. At the same time, he was a practical political leader committed to learning from his own experiments in the field, testing many strategies for political action and political passivity was alien to him. It was in South Africa that Gandhi, arriving as a barrister to assist in a legal dispute went on to first become a cautious rebel when personally faced with racial discrimination. He then gradually assumed the leadership of the entire Indian community, when the South African racist government initiated steps to disenfranchise all Indians through the legislative assembly of Natal to prevent them from voting. This was followed by other discriminatory acts, such as the *Asiatic Law Amendment Ordinance* issued in the province of Transvaal, which provided for racist and discriminatory finger printing and registration cards for all Indians, making it mandatory for them to carry such cards among other degrading and discriminatory provisions. Seizing the initiative Gandhi urged the Indian community to resort to nonviolent civil disobedience as unjust laws had to be opposed, even as he tested the strength of his own political principles and organisational capacity. He established the Natal Indian Congress to oppose the oppressive measures and organised resistance. Few leaders could rival Gandhi’s organisational abilities.

The Mahatma’s influence on all sections and classes of the Indian community in South Africa was predominant.

“In South Africa he found a people not only disarmed and enslaved, but used to it and accepting insults, a people apparently subdued and degraded. His first act was to make them aware of their dignity, their duties and their legitimate rights ... the Durban affair and later developments in the Transvaal, revealed to the astonished Europeans and the Indians themselves, that they had a moral backbone capable of resistance”.

The struggle exposed all participants including Gandhi, to physical attacks, jail and even the possibility of death. However the civil disobedience and resistance went on until a satisfactory agreement was reached, though the sacrifice included several jail terms and the loss of lives of volunteers. Gandhi, who had come to South Africa for a few months, spent 21 years of his life in this struggle. The impact on his formidable political opponents in South Africa, including

General Jan Christiaan Smuts is found in a letter written by the general to a friend after Gandhi left for India in 1914. Smuts, who as Colonial Secretary and thereafter as Secretary of the Interior was responsible for the implementation of some of the discriminatory laws passed against Indians, wrote with reference to Gandhi, “The saint has left our shores, I hope forever”. Several years later, when an exasperated Winston Churchill demanded to know from Smuts, who was twice Prime Minister of South Africa, as to why he had not assassinated Gandhi in South Africa itself, before the “half naked *fakir*” could threaten the British Empire in India, Smuts replied, “How could I do this to a man who made sandals for me with his own hands when I imprisoned him”. In later years remembering the Mahatma, Smuts wrote, “I have worn these sandals for so many summers since then, even though I may feel that I am not worthy to stand in the shoes of so great a man”.

The impact of Gandhi’s work in South Africa has been abiding. Even though he never returned, his political inspiration later led directly to the civil resistance movement of the Indian community against the racist *Ghetto Act* of 1946, which institutionalised racial segregation in South Africa, until the country was liberated. Even after Gandhi’s assassination, the African National Congress and the South African Indian Congress were united in their 1952 “campaign of defiance against unjust laws” when thousands courted arrest. However in the years that followed, due to the political intransigence and brutality of the apartheid government and its imposition of “white” racist minority rule, the political struggle became increasingly bitter, leading to an armed resistance movement. India, continuing the Mahatma’s legacy, supported the international movement for the liberation of South Africa and played a leading role in the United Nations (UN). The international organisation repeatedly censured South Africa’s apartheid and racist laws and imposed sanctions, which gradually led to the isolation of the government in all international fora. Gandhi’s inspiration in South Africa even continued beyond the liberation struggle, influencing the establishment of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission by the African National Congress to assist racial

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reconciliation and avoid violence of a racial war to settle past scores for brutalities committed on African and Asian people. The success of this commission is reflected in the low level of racial strife in South Africa today, despite a lack of complete agreement on present day policies.

There was always a moral angle to Gandhi's political struggle that was irresistible, making it difficult to defeat. He kept attention focussed on the injustices of society and the political system enslaving humanity, rather than obsessing with individuals or political opponents. By de-personalising issues, all the energy and direction of his political battles were directed at the defeat of a system which sought to enslave. Though Gandhi's cultural and spiritual roots were steeped in Indian philosophical and religious traditions, as articulated in the great epics, in particular the philosophy of the *Bhagwad Gita* and the influences of the spiritual poet and personal friend Shrimad Rajchandra, Gandhi was far from an Indian revivalist. His sources of inspiration were not confined to India, they were global and universal and included political essays such as Henry David Thoreau's "Resistance to Civil Government", economic essays such as John Ruskin's "Unto this Last" and philosophical works such as Leo Tolstoy's, "The Kingdom of God is within You" and Jesus Christ's "Sermon on the Mount". While accepting these influences, he tested and applied them in the context of conditions on the ground in South Africa and India, to communicate the political and social message of emancipation.

Throughout his life, Gandhi did not perceive a conflict between his individual religious beliefs and other religious world philosophies, which he equally respected. Consequently, his political and spiritual impact was widespread among diverse nations and races—his moral and political ideals and sources of inspiration had a universal appeal. People of varied faith and nationality became his closest companions, some sharing his commitment to political causes in South Africa and others to his political struggles for freedom from colonial rule in India. The Scotsman Charles F Andrews, an invaluable participant in India's freedom struggle, also assisted Gandhi with negotiations relating to the struggle in South Africa. Law clerk Sonja Schlesin of Russian origin ran Gandhi's law office in South Africa, while the Englishman Henry Polak, editor of a newspaper at Johannesburg, assisted him. Another close friend Hermann Kallenbach, an architect of German origin in South Africa, worked at Tolstoy Farm in Transvaal and at Phoenix in Natal, while the eminent French writer and peace activist Romain Rolland was the bridge between the Mahatma and Europe. A British admiral's daughter Madeleine Slade was a sincere disciple,

whom Gandhi referred to by the Indian name he had given her, Mirabehn. These were among the many who shared Gandhi's life's journey at different stages—men and women of different nationalities, who worked with him along with his committed colleagues and disciples in India. Their cultures, nationalities and religions made no difference to him; they were an integral part of his movement and life's work and as close as family members.

It was to Gandhi, his sincere disciple that the Russian author Leo Tolstoy addressed his last letter, in which he summed up his life's philosophy.

"The longer I live and especially now, when I feel the nearness of death, I want to tell others what I feel so particularly clearly and what to my mind is of great importance, namely that which is called 'passive resistance' but which is in reality nothing else than the teaching of love uncorrupted by false interpretations ... This law was proclaimed by all—by the Indians as by the Chinese, Hebrew, Greek and Roman sages of the world. I think that this law was clearly expressed by Christ ... the people of the Christian world have accepted this law whilst at the same time they have permitted violence ... Therefore, your activity in the Transvaal, as it seems to us at this end of the world, is the most essential work, the most important of all the work now being done in the world, wherein not only the nations of the Christian, but of all the world, will unavoidably take part".

Tolstoy thus chose his apostle and bequeathed to him a legacy. Gandhi spread this philosophy through his struggles and example to every corner of the world.

All prophets are human, yet distinguished by their spiritual ability to be farseeing, when others barely look a few steps ahead. It was not surprising that Gandhi possessed this quality.

When most intellectuals of the day worldwide and in India were carried away by the munificent magnificence of the industrial and technological revolution which had ushered in the age of capital, as best represented by Western technological progress and its "civilising mission" which it had usurped, the Mahatma with his uncanny insight and understanding of the cultural, economic, political and social impact of the imperialism of the British Empire, looked far ahead. Beyond the glitter he pointed out the worldwide pillage of resources, the degradation and incipient fascism at the heart of the system for millions in the world, its capacity for waste amidst plenty, its vast income differentials that made people of the same society inhabit different worlds. He aptly asked, when the inhabitants of a small island had caused so much misery to the world by pursuing such a system, what would happen if millions in India and other parts of the world emulated and replicated the same system? Gandhi was convinced that it was necessary to transcend capitalism.

The Mahatma's moral force and example, his incisive political understanding and mass mobilisation, his innovative strategies to defeat a system which had enslaved millions, made Rolland (one of the most passionate voices of the anti-war movement in Europe in the pre-Second World War period) declare in the agonising years of the 1930s when Europe was plunged into despair and drifting towards an economic abyss and another world war, that in the twentieth century there were only two paths to liberation, one was the Socialist Revolution of 1917 and the other Gandhi. According to him, these two paths were not antagonistic, merely different roads. Several years earlier, as the International Communist Movement debated the strategies adopted by the Indian struggle for independence against British colonial rule (the first Socialist Revolution supported all anti-colonial and national liberation struggles), the other great revolutionary of the twentieth century Vladimir I Lenin opined that the tactical and wider unity forged by the leadership of the Indian National Congress (the mainstream anti-colonial struggle in India), among several other smaller streams would have a better chance of victory than the sectarian path proposed by the Indian revolutionary MN Roy. This was recognition of the correct political path forged by Gandhi for independence, despite the social complexity of feudalism in India and its fragmentation of society into castes and classes with widely different interests, which Gandhi painstakingly and strategically united into the political struggle for independence.

Although Gandhi did sympathise with the objectives of the first Socialist Revolution, he had reservations on some of the methods adopted. His sympathy with socialist objectives was not surprising, as Gandhi's paramount concern was not just freedom from colonial rule. This for him was only the first step in the objective to abolish hunger, unemployment and the social practice of untouchability, which was a scourge in India. Gandhi stood for egalitarian ideals, overall economic emancipation and the social reform of Indian society. What distinguished the Indian freedom movement from other political movements was the Mahatma's emphasis on social reform of the feudal Indian society and its backwardness, as an integral part of the movement that embraced all weaker sections and encouraged the mass participation of women at every level.

Gandhi's moral and political influence in the world reached such heights that leaders and heads of state of even fascist movements in Europe desired to meet him (to increase their own statures) when he visited Europe in 1931 on his return journey to India from the political negotiations at the Round Table Conference convened in London. Politically curious about fascist political movements

spreading across Europe, Gandhi met Benito Mussolini but declined to give the dictator the political respectability he sought—the Mahatma had already chosen his path. In attempting to build the widest coalition to overthrow foreign rule, Gandhi's genuine and evolving spirituality made him consciously seek out the weakest and the most exploited members of society, to communicate to them his political message for economic, political and social emancipation, as it was to them that he was closest. The political leader of the scheduled castes and one of the main architects of the Constitution of India, BR Ambedkar, a renowned legal scholar stated this in the Constituent Assembly, while paying homage to Gandhi after his assassination. Not surprising, Gandhi was even cheered by Lancashire textile factory workers, with whom he stayed in a working class district, while attending the negotiations at the Round Table Conference. They were wholly sympathetic to his movement and understood when the Mahatma explained that the political movement for the boycott of foreign cloth in India, which included cloth manufactured by them, was absolutely necessary to emancipate the poorest of the poor working people and peasantry of India, who were far worse off than the textile workers of Britain. Gandhi also had admirers among anti-colonial movements in Africa and the Arab world. Even in the recent uprisings when millions gathered at Tahrir Square in Cairo in 2011, Egypt many declared that they were inspired by Mahatma Gandhi.

In a world engulfed by “unending war” which has destroyed peoples and societies, our understanding of the political truth that Gandhi represented, would not be complete without recalling the public stand he took at Lausanne, Switzerland in 1931, even as war clouds hung over Europe and fascist political forces were on the ascendancy, with their shrill war cries. To the media interacting with him, the moral and spiritual leader of India's political struggle, he said:

“I observe throughout the West a sickness of heart. You seem to be tired of the military burden under which Europe is groaning and also tired of the prospect of shedding the blood of your fellowmen. The last war, falsely called great, has taught you and humanity many a rich lesson. It taught you some surprising things about human nature. You also found that no fraud, no lies, no deceit was considered too bad to use in order to win the war; no cruelty was considered too

In the US Martin Luther King emerged to follow in the footsteps of Mahatma Gandhi, convinced that “noncooperation with evil is as much a moral obligation as is cooperation with good”. He referred to the Mahatma as “the guiding light of our inspiration”.

great; there were no unfair ways and means for encompassing the destruction of your so-called enemy. Suddenly, as in a flash, the friends of your youth became enemies, no home was safe, nothing spared. This civilisation of the West was weighed in the balance and found wanting”.

In this context, Private Bradley Manning, the American soldier convicted by court-martial under the *Espionage Act* among other laws, for exposing videos of war crimes, despite the *War Crimes Act* and its constitutional provisions, when there were no other avenues for disclosing them may be regarded as a Gandhian prisoner of conscience, among others, who must not be forgotten. We also ought to remember that according to the Nuremberg principles it is mandatory to disclose such crimes.

Before the people of Europe, Gandhi placed the alternatives of civil disobedience and noncooperation, to acquiescing with states that militarised and waged aggressive wars. He emphasised:

“the refusal of military service was only a secondary episode in the real fight which needs to be fought, which involves a total refusal to cooperate with the exploiting and militarist state ... refusal to pay taxes, refusal to hold posts, refusal of even the apparent or superficial benefits which the state confers or claims to confer. ... There must be total void round that state making it impossible to function”.

Mere non-cooperation with the army of such a state “was too little”. It was absolutely necessary in such circumstances not to cooperate with any activity of the state, when it resorted to aggressive warfare. During the course of the same visit in the context of the political issues confronting Europe, when Gandhi was asked questions on capitalism, he replied:

“Labour does not know its own power ... Did it know, that it would only have to rise to have capitalism crumble away. For labour is the only power in the world”.

The anti-war activist Rolland urged Gandhi to influence and attempt to reverse, with his acknowledged worldwide moral authority, the disastrous events in Europe and the drift towards another world war. As a biographer of Gandhi's, he has left behind some vignettes of the Mahatma in his writings and correspondence.

“In any judgment passed on him, this one essential must be borne in mind— he is in constant evolution. There is nothing fixed about him, nothing settled once and for all... This has always been his method of self-instruction and action—direct social experimentation, repeated and verified, step by step and broadening his circle at each step. There is no doubt that his thoughts have been modified in the course of these experiments. By way of a symbolic example, let

me quote you a thing he admits to himself, his transformation four or five years ago of an ideological formula dear to him, 'God is Truth' into 'Truth is God' which is his present motto ... India was in the lowest degree of serfdom and discouragement and it was Gandhi who by his heroic example (he has often been imprisoned, beaten and threatened with death), gave her a sense of pride and dignity and revived in her the powerful breadth of independence. This was no mean task—imagine three hundred million human beings reawakened by the tireless propaganda ... his deepest sympathies lie with the labouring people and the millions of disinherited and oppressed”.

A revolutionary is known by his disciples and in the United States of America (US) Reverend Martin Luther King emerged to follow in the footsteps of Mahatma Gandhi, convinced that “noncooperation with evil is as much a moral obligation as is cooperation with good”. He referred to the Mahatma as “the guiding light of our inspiration”. The American Civil Rights Movement commenced another struggle for the emancipation of African-American people, which the American Civil War had failed to accomplish, despite the abolition of slavery and that some still regard as an unfinished task. King too was silenced by assassination in a manner similar to Gandhi—the *guru* and his disciple sharing the same fate. The Civil Rights Movement began with a single act of nonviolent civil disobedience when Rosa Parks refused to vacate a “whites only” seat in a bus, a humiliation routinely inflicted on African-Americans. This led to the organisation of the Montgomery Bus Boycott by all African-Americans under the leadership of King and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, which then spread throughout Alabama. Despite hardships, the boycott continued for 383 days, inflicting heavy financial losses on the transport company, until the US Supreme Court declared the racial segregation laws unconstitutional. On the struggle and the impact of Gandhi on the movement King wrote:

“In the summer of 1956 the name of Mahatma Gandhi was well known in Montgomery. People who had never known of the little brown saint of India were now saying that name with an air of familiarity. Nonviolent resistance had emerged as the technique of the movement, while love stood as the regulatory ideal. In other words, Christ furnished the spirit and the motivation, while Gandhi furnished the method”.

Mahatma Gandhi believed that in any society where millions were hungry, food was the “divinity” to be installed in every home and that every religious philosophy in fact mandated respect for all of humanity, cutting across cultures.

The movement was unstoppable and spread rapidly throughout the US, criticising a system which imposed segregation and simultaneously exposed tendencies within the country which made for a violent society. This included militarism, which King maintained was a continuation and extension of anti-human policies of economic exploitation and racism against all working people of the US. A year before his assassination, at the New York Riverside Church in a speech titled “Beyond Vietnam: A Time to Break the Silence” King made a historic public indictment of the American political system on 4 April 1967. In the context of the Vietnam War and the addiction of the system to war, he referred to the US as “the greatest purveyor of violence in the world”. Mahatma Gandhi believed that in any society where millions were hungry, food was the “divinity” to be installed in every home and that every religious philosophy in fact mandated respect for all of humanity, cutting across cultures. King likewise stressed:

“True compassion is more than flinging a coin to a beggar, it comes from seeing that an edifice which produces beggars needs restructuring ... (and that) any religion that professes to be concerned with the souls of men and is not concerned with slums that damn them, the economic conditions which cripple them, is a spiritually moribund religion in need of new blood”.

One of the most important political movements in the world today, the Palestinian struggle for national self-determination has been inspired among other liberation struggles by Mahatma Gandhi's. Many Palestinians have adopted and adapted Gandhian strategies of resisting inhuman policies. This pursuance of the Gandhian path has sustained the people of Palestine in spirit, through the saga of trials and tribulations of over half a century against occupation by the Government of Israel and the Zionist Movement in defiance of UN resolutions. Israel has claimed “exceptional” and “chosen people” status, while imposing near genocide on the Palestinian people, whose entire territory has been converted into one of the largest concentration camps in the world, in collaboration with the world's foremost military powers. Gandhi's was one of the first voices to be raised internationally against the colonisation of Palestine—he was no stranger to the rights and wrongs of the world. His was a simple and unequivocal stand, “Palestine belongs to the Palestinian people” and foreign settlers could not legitimately usurp these lands, as wrongly permitted by the *Balfour Declaration*. This early stand influenced the position of the Government of India in the UN in 1948, when it opposed the creation of the State of Israel and supported the

State of Palestine in all Palestinian territories, even as other world powers and the General Assembly supported the creation of two states. The Arab State of Palestine was never created and despite delimitations by UN resolutions had its territories swallowed up through aggressive wars and colonial settlements, which continue to date. The diverse strategies of resistance adopted by the Palestinian people and reinforced by other struggles and developments have defeated the Government of Israel morally and politically at the bar of international public opinion and in international fora, including in pronouncements of the International Court of Justice, which in its Advisory Opinion has declared the wall constructed by Israel as illegal and in violation of Geneva Conventions and International Humanitarian Law.

Apart from the defeat of Israel in 2006 by the Lebanese National Resistance, the mainstream Palestinian movement has been reinforced by worldwide Gandhian strategies adopted by the International Solidarity Movement in support of Palestine, the “Free Gaza Movement” of the Gaza Flotillas and the international movement for “boycott and disinvestment”, directed against the government and companies of the occupying power, aimed at “lifting the veil” of the oppressor’s inhumanity and denying respectability to the State of Israel. The “Flotillas to Free Gaza”, one of the most imaginative and formidable nonviolent armadas ever launched by citizens of different countries with the support of a few sympathetic governments, was equally important in winning the battle for international public opinion, even as some peaceful volunteers on the vessel *Mavi Marmara* were murdered by Israeli commandos and other vessels hijacked on the high seas in acts of piracy with all on board courting arrest. With these diverse strategies, the battle for world opinion and the moral and political victory has already been won by the people of Palestine and has led to the State of Palestine being granted observer status at the UN and member status at several UN agencies. What remains is the demolition of the wall, the dismantling of all discriminatory institutions, the right to return for Palestinian refugees and

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the physical vacation of all occupied territories by the State of Israel. Events have proved Gandhi right on the Palestinian question while most major powers perpetrated grave injustices. Not only have the people of Palestine paid for these but so have the Arab people as a whole, through conflicts, wars and the seizure of the region's resources. World peace today is threatened by a nuclear war on related issues.

The Mahatma was not ignorant of the real causes of political violence. Though he consciously sought to avoid violence, he was wholly aware that in the absence of an orderly political mass movement, violence would become a reality in societies, with millions brutalised or exploited. In 1945, in a revised edition of his *1941 Reconstruction Programme*, Gandhi warned:

“A nonviolent system of government is clearly an impossibility so long as the wide divide between the rich and the hungry millions persists”.

In every fora the world over, wherever the ecological, economic, political and social future of humanity and preservation of the planet Earth (our common home) is debated and discussed, Gandhi with his simple precepts provides a guidance for all generations. King, the Mahatma's great disciple summed up his contribution as:

“Posterity could not escape him even if it tried. By all standards of measurement, he is one of the ... greatest men in world history”. ❏

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