Beyond Independence: Understanding Gandhi's Relevance in Contemporary India

Ersad Ali
Assistant Professor, Department of History, Raja Birendra Chandra College
Kandi, Murshidabad

Abstract:

This paper examines the contemporary relevance of Mahatma Gandhi's political philosophy, ethical principles, and vision of national development. It explores how Gandhi transformed India's freedom struggle through Satyagraha, non-violence, and mass participation, while offering a broader understanding of freedom through the concept of Swaraj. For Gandhi, genuine independence extended beyond political sovereignty to encompass moral autonomy, economic self-reliance, social equality, and human dignity. The paper also analyses his critique of modern industrial civilization, excessive mechanization, urbanization, and profit-centred economic development, as articulated in Hind Swaraj. His emphasis on village reconstruction, agriculture, cottage industries, education, and constructive social work reflects an alternative model of development grounded in justice and sustainability. Furthermore, the paper investigates the growing distance between contemporary society and Gandhian ideals amid increasing social inequality, communal tensions, and declining ethical responsibility. While acknowledging the limitations and contradictions within Gandhi's thought, it argues that his principles remain valuable for addressing present-day challenges. The paper concludes that Gandhi's legacy should be understood not merely through commemoration but through critical engagement with his ideas to promote inclusive development, social harmony, and a morally responsible society.

Keywords: Mahatma Gandhi; Satyagraha; Non-violence; Swaraj; Sustainable Development; Social Justice

"When great men appear, we often fail to recognize them properly. This is because our minds are timid and unclear, our nature is weak, and our habits are frail. We lack the strength of mind required to understand and accept greatness in its entirety. Those who are greater than all others are the very people whom we have kept at a distance from ourselves." - Rabindranath Tagore's words about Mahatma Gandhi seem particularly relevant today. Why is this so? One reason is that today marks Gandhi's 157th birth anniversary. Even after so many years, no definitive biography of Gandhi has been published, whereas Jawaharlal Nehru had the good fortune of having such a biography published many years ago. Secondly, the very person whom we once revered as a hero is now being insulted, and his statues are being vandalized. Thirdly, we seem

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to have moved considerably away from all his ideals, including non-violence, Satyagraha, Swaraj, his concept of freedom, and education. However, Rabindranath Tagore honoured him with the title Mahatma, while Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose did not hesitate to call him the Father of the Nation.

Describing Gandhi as a person, Jawaharlal Nehru wrote in his book *The Discovery of India*

"He was like a powerful current of fresh air. He awakened us, and we took a deep breath. He was like a beam of light, a flash that pierced the darkness and lifted the veils from before our eyes. He gave a new breadth and character to India's struggle for independence. He spread among the masses the noble ideal of self-sacrifice for the sake of patriotism. He instilled new hope in the hearts of discouraged people. He awakened consciousness and inspired colourful dreams of the future among the backward sections of society." Although many people could not agree with his views and methods, no one could ignore him. Yet, in his physical appearance, dress, and manner of conduct, there was nothing particularly striking about him. Among Indian leaders, he was the only one who could truly identify himself with ordinary people. After all, we may call someone a leader only when that person can bring people of all religions and castes under one common umbrella. We believe that Mahatma Gandhi succeeded in doing precisely that.

Gandhi was nearly fifty years old when he entered Indian politics in 1919. When he returned to India at this age, hardly anyone knew or recognized him. He had no deep-rooted connection with either of the two dominant factions in Indian politics at the time—the Extremists and the Moderates. Moreover, when he entered Indian politics, he did not completely accept the ideology of either group. Although his objectives often brought him closer to the Moderates, he never followed them blindly. On the other hand, he did not entirely endorse the Extremists' methods of non-cooperation and boycott. As mentioned earlier, his ideas and methods were entirely different. Consequently, he disagreed with many people. Nevertheless, from 1919 to 1947, he remained the central figure of India's freedom movement. Never before had a national movement been conducted on such a scale with a single individual at its centre.

Gandhi adopted the principles of Satyagraha and non-violence as the methods of India's struggle for independence. He had previously used these principles to stand up against the white rulers in South Africa without resorting to weapons. Upon returning to India, he applied these methods in the freedom struggle in a way that no Indian political leader had done before. Satyagraha has two essential aspects: truthfulness and non-violence. The essence of Gandhi's entire life was the struggle for truth. He described the pure moral strength inherent in every human being as Satyagraha. He believed that everything could be conquered through this strength.

He sought to use this strength in two ways: first, for constructive work, and second, as a means of resisting injustice. He identified two important aspects of constructive work—education and village service. He found the path to India's liberation in the service of its villages. His ideal was a self-reliant village.

The fundamental principle of Satyagraha is therefore non-cooperation with injustice. One must hate injustice, but not the person who commits it. Gandhi chose the path of non-violence to

achieve this ideal of Satyagraha. Through non-violent struggle, he sought to remedy injustice. The objective was not merely to exert pressure on the wrongdoer. Rather, its purpose was broader. Gandhi believed that the ultimate objective was to withdraw all forms of cooperation from the wrongdoer and bring about a transformation that would lead to the acceptance of truth and the abandonment of injustice.

Gandhi's understanding of freedom was also very different from that of others. For him, freedom had an entirely different meaning. Political independence was undoubtedly his immediate objective, but the attainment of political freedom was merely a means of achieving a much greater and nobler goal: the freedom of the soul. To Gandhi, freedom and self-reliance were synonymous. Freedom did not simply mean driving the British out of India. He believed that if an Indian government, like a foreign government, obstructed spiritual progress, or if the benefits of independence were enjoyed by only a handful of people while the condition of ordinary citizens remained unchanged, such a situation could not truly be called freedom.

He understood that Indians could not compete with the British government through physical force alone. Therefore, he believed that Indians had to stand tall through moral strength and self-reliance. Gandhi also adopted the concept of Swaraj in the sense in which the term is used in the Upanishads. For him, Swaraj meant governing oneself. In other words, it signified the liberation of the soul. Social, political, economic, and moral freedom are all interconnected and interdependent. Gandhi believed that the liberation of the soul could be achieved only when all these forms of freedom were attained together, in a comprehensive and integrated manner.

In this context, Amalesh Tripathi observed - "As an individual, Gandhi was a personality of extraordinary complexity, rarely encountered in history. Within him existed diverse and even apparently contradictory layers of consciousness. At times, he was a refined liberal in the Victorian tradition; at other times, an uncompromising anarchist. Sometimes, he resembled the equanimous sage of the Bhagavad Gita; at others, a shrewd statesman like Kautilya. At times, he was a conservative Hindu who upheld the varna system; at others, an advocate of inter-caste marriage. Sometimes, he represented wealthy merchants; at other times, he stood alongside peasants and workers in their struggles. He was simultaneously a symbol of nationalism and internationalist thought. The British repeatedly found themselves outmanoeuvred by his practical intelligence, yet they also took advantage of his simple faith on numerous occasions. No one had ever been such a friend to Muslims who sought communal harmony."

Gandhi's personality was marked by a remarkable combination of cooperation and non-cooperation, resistance and compromise, willpower and detachment. He attracted people from different social classes and with different interests through the sheer force of his honesty and love. He was a man who could see himself in everyone and everyone in himself.

The clearest expression of Gandhi's ideology can be found in his book Hind Swaraj. In this work, he expressed several original views about Indian society and civilization. He argued that traditional Indian village life, based on agriculture, cottage industries, production, and exchange, had been relatively free from exploitation and, consequently, less prone to violence. In his view, large-scale machinery and uncontrolled urbanization had increased the potential for violence. The fundamental principle of large-scale industrialization, he argued, was the

production of consumer goods for maximum profit and the expansion of markets. This eventually led to colonialism, driven by the desire to capture markets, and subsequently to imperialism.

Gandhi was a severe critic of modern machine-based civilization. He believed that modern machinery had diminished the importance of human labour and productive capacity. He also argued that transport systems enabled agricultural produce to be carried to distant markets, while diseases could spread from one place to another. Railways made it possible to transport raw materials from remote rural areas to industrial centres. He further maintained that the British had used the railway network to extend and consolidate their control over the entire country.

Gandhi was equally critical of modern medicine and the system of pharmaceutical treatment. He argued that illnesses often resulted from neglect and a lack of self-restraint. To illustrate his point, he wrote: "I eat too much and suffer from indigestion. I then visit a doctor, who gives me medicine, and I recover. Later, I overeat again and take the same pills. Had I not been given those pills the first time, I would have had to endure the suffering. As a result, I would never overeat again. Modern medicine, therefore, has weakened our ability to exercise self-control."

Gandhi also criticized the legal profession, despite having trained and practised as a barrister himself. He argued that lawyers had increased disputes within society. According to him, if lawyers did not exist, people might be able to settle their disagreements among themselves. Instead, lawyers often helped prolong conflicts.

However, it would be incorrect to conclude that Mahatma Gandhi was entirely opposed to modern machinery, science, and technology. Rather, he wanted certain definite limitations to be placed on scientific research and the application of scientific knowledge. The criteria for these limitations, in his view, were non-violence, humanity, and morality.

It is important to remember that Gandhi formulated his vision of development for a country whose economy had been shaped by prolonged colonial rule and whose society had become relatively underindustrialized. Agriculture remained the principal source of livelihood for the majority of its population. Consequently, agricultural development occupied a central place in Gandhi's vision of national progress.

In essence, the fundamental basis of Gandhi's ideology was the establishment of a just society. Moreover, he tried to practise in his own life what he preached and believed. In this connection, he wrote in his autobiography, The Story of My Experiments with Truth: "My life is my message."

Yet, standing in the twenty-first century, we have moved far away from Gandhi's ideas, ideals, and methods. What, then, have we gained by moving away from them? We have gained large-scale industries, state intervention in the name of public welfare, and an economy increasingly influenced by globalization. Yet all these developments seem to be failing us in many respects, primarily because of the absence of a strong moral foundation and our unwillingness to put ethical principles into practice.

And this is precisely where Gandhi's relevance lies. The eminent writer Arundhati Roy wrote in her essay The Greater Common Good: "Perhaps this century is going to be the century of small things." In other words, perhaps the world is moving towards a model of development that emphasizes small-scale science and technology rather than large-scale scientific and industrial projects. The author may have been pointing towards the need for village-centred development—the very idea that Gandhi had advocated long ago.

Furthermore, I believe that Gandhi sought, during his lifetime, to accomplish everything necessary for the comprehensive development of a nation and its people. Yet such an extraordinary personality became the first martyr of independent India. Why did this happen? When Gandhi's assassin was asked why he had killed him, he reportedly replied: "This fellow was so wicked that he made Brahmins and untouchables sit together." This statement reveals the depth of the social prejudice that Gandhi sought to challenge through his commitment to equality and the dignity of every human being.

Now, as we stand in the twenty-first century, what will become of our country if we allow ourselves to be governed by such ideas and prejudices? Therefore, I believe that for the comprehensive development of a country and its people, we must begin once again from the very points at which Gandhi's efforts were interrupted.

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