

OCCASIONAL PUBLICATION 109

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**THE GREAT PERTINENCE OF GANDHI TO INDIA  
IN THE 75<sup>TH</sup> YEAR OF ITS INDEPENDENCE**

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IN THE 75<sup>TH</sup> YEAR OF ITS INDEPENDENCE**

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M. Hamid Ansari  
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The views expressed in this publication are solely those of the author and not of the India International Centre.

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## Alan Nazareth\*

In this paper, I present the gist of two of my books: *Gandhi's Outstanding Leadership* and *Gandhi: The Soul Force Warrior*.

In the first book, I focused on Gandhi's transformation from a timid youthful barrister in India into the fearless leader he became in South Africa after his racial humiliation at Pietermaritzberg. I presented the spiritual and other inputs (especially the Bhagwat Gita) that brought about this transformation, the nature, components and stature of his leadership, its diverse achievements, its impact on India and the world, and assessments of him, his leadership and achievements made by his contemporaries.

British Prime Minister Winston Churchill described him as a 'half naked, seditious fakir' and 'an old humbug'. To legal luminary B. R. Ambedkar, he was 'the most dishonest politician in Indian history with pernicious, saintly idiosyncracies'. For reputed Dalit author Kancha Ilaiah, Gandhi was 'the one who projected nationalism as Hindu and constructed the ideological basis for Hindu nationalism'.

Antony Copley, author of *Gandhi Against the Tide*, critiqued his support of the 1920–22 Khilafat movement and the Quit India movement when World War II was in its most critical phase. He averred that the former resulted in the 'most costly rupture with Jinnah' and the latter 'cruelly exposed his political naivette'. For Patrick French, author of *Liberty or Death*, Gandhi was 'the most baffling figure in the Indian freedom movement, who intertwined religion and politics with personal health and sexual relations and whose cure for almost any ailment was a saline enema.'

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\* Talk delivered by Amb. Pascal Alan Nazareth at the IIC on 31 January 2022.

Arthur Herman, author of *Gandhi and Churchill*, wrote:

Gandhi lived a dream of India as spiritual home of an ancient civilisation that could overcome mankind's conflicts and create a world of ahimsa and soul force, but when this goal was in sight, his vision lost its value to others and he was left with his dream's broken fragments.

However, assessments of his admirers are quite contrary.

Nobel laureate Rabindranath Tagore wrote, 'At his call India has blossomed to new greatness, as when Buddha proclaimed the truth of compassion among all living creatures'. Will Durant, in his monumental *The Story of Civilization*, has written:

China followed Sun Yat Sen, took up the sword and fell into the arms of Japan. India accepted as her leader one of the strangest figures in history, and gave the world the unprecedented phenomenon of a revolution led by a saint, and waged without a gun.

Renowned scientist Albert Einstein has written, 'A leader of his people, unsupported by any outward authority; a man of wisdom and humility who devoted his whole life to uplift his people, he confronted the brutality of Europe with the dignity of a simple human being and has always risen superior.'

Reputed psycho-analyst Eric Ericson wrote:

In a period when proud statesmen spoke of a 'war to end war', and make 'the world safe for democracy' and Russian Revolutionaries

proclaimed an eventual ‘withering away of the state’, one man in India gave the world a new political instrument which may provide man with a choice.

Mikhail Gorbachev, former Soviet Union President, in his Foreword to *Gandhi’s Outstanding Leadership* has written:

We live in a world where many old threats to humanity’s existence still exist and more formidable ones have been added to them. Mahatma Gandhi, one of the most remarkable thinkers of the 20th century has shown a promising way of safeguarding ourselves from these threats: humanity should forsake violence.

During the eight years that Barack Obama was US President, photos of Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr. adorned the Oval office. In London’s famed Parliament Square, a 10-foot high bronze statue of Gandhi faces that of the Prime Minister who had derided him as a ‘seditious, half naked fakir’! There are more statues of Gandhi in more cities and more books written about him than any other 20th century leader.

The gist of my second book indicates why I titled it *Gandhi: The Soul Force Warrior*, with the subtitle *Revolutionized Revolution and Spiritualized it*.

In *Hind Swaraj*, which he wrote in 1909, Gandhi revealed that he wrote it ‘in answer to the Indian school of violence’ and to present in it ‘the gospel of love in place of that of hate’; and that ‘it was an attempt to offer the revolutionary something infinitely superior, retaining the whole of the spirit of self-sacrifice and bravery that was to be found in the revolutionary’. This clearly indicates that his incredibly ambitious objective was to convert the

hate-filled, armed revolutionary into a ‘soul force’ warrior motivated by truth and love.

Though most often lauded as an ‘Apostle of Non-violence’, Gandhi was primarily a seeker of truth. He was willing to give up non-violence under certain circumstances but never to abandon truth, which for him was the Almighty. His seminal contribution was to combine truth and love and create a revolutionary ideology and praxis with it.

Gandhi’s revolutionary theory and praxis were first presented at the historic meeting of the Indian community at the Empire Theatre in Johannesburg, on 11 September 2006. One of his nephews, Maganlal Gandhi, proposed ‘Sadagraha’ (firmness in a good cause) as the name for it but Gandhi changed it to ‘Satyagraha’ (firmness in Truth) and it came to be widely known by this name. However, some years later, Gandhi redefined Satyagraha as ‘Soul Force’ in the following words:

There is an indefinable mysterious power that pervades everything, a living power that is changeless, that holds all together, that creates, dissolves and recreates. That Power is God. Satyagraha is Soul Force pure and simple. It connotes the living Law of Life. This law will work, just as the law of gravitation will work, whether we accept it or not....In politics, its use is based on the immutable maxim that government of the people is possible only so long as they consent either consciously or unconsciously to be governed.

His praxis for Soul Force was to ‘put one’s whole soul against the will of the tyrant’ and be assured that ‘Working under this law of our being, it is

possible for a single individual to defy the whole might of an unjust empire and lay the foundation for that empire's fall or regeneration.' Gandhi is the best example of this.

I gave my second book its title and subtitle because Gandhi's ideology and its praxis were deeply anchored in the 'indefinable mysterious power that pervades everything' and in 'putting one's whole soul against the will of the tyrant'; and, unlike all other 20th century revolutions which were tethered to hate and violence, his were totally rooted in love and non-violence.

With his Satyagraha-cum-Soul Force ideology and praxis, he succeeded in ameliorating the political and social status of Indian indentured labourers and merchants in South Africa during 1906–1914. Subsequently, from 1917 onwards, he succeeded in transforming India's freedom struggle into a mass 'people's uprising' which peacefully secured not only India's independence in 1947, but also sounded the death knell of feudalism, untouchability, women's subjugation, the indenture and zamindari systems in India and European imperialisms, and fascist, communist and military dictatorships in various parts of the world.

In Chapter 6 of my book, titled 'The Dynamics and Potency of Soul Force', I have given detailed descriptions of successful Soul Force revolutions in the USA, Philippines, Poland, Bolivia and Chile. The six-part 'Force More Powerful' film series produced by York Zimmerman and WETA Washington in the mid-1990s presents impactful actual footage of most of them. All the six films begin with a two-minute focus on Gandhi in a South African jail in 1907, who affirms, 'Out of these jail gates we shall pass from our present bondage to freedom'. The narrative, by Ben Kingsley, then goes

on to state that this young lawyer from India inspired his fellow Indians to fight for their rights, to burn their registration papers and expect to be arrested, taught them that non-violent refusal to cooperate with injustice was the way to end it. The narrative concludes by declaring that ‘The Power that Gandhi discovered changed the 20th century’. All six films are available on YouTube and each is only 30 minutes. I urge people to view them, particularly the South African film titled ‘Freedom in Our Life Time’, which is the most impactful.

The 20th century was the most bloodstained in human history, particularly the first half during which almost 100 million people, mostly civilians, were killed in two world wars, Hitler’s gas chambers, atom bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Korean, Vietnam, Arab–Israel, India–Pakistan and national liberation struggles in Asia and Africa. It was also its most revolutionary one. In the first half, Fascist revolutions occurred in Italy, Germany and Spain, and Marxist revolutions in Russia and China. All of them were replete with violence in keeping with the Marxist maxim ‘Violence is the midwife of all old societies pregnant with new life’. Remarkably, its second half witnessed not violent but many non-violent revolutions in countries as far apart as Philippines, Poland and Chile. Each of them have their own local names, but have now generally been referred to as Velvet Revolutions! Roger Markwick has written a book about them, titled *From Violence to Velvet: A Century of Revolutions 1917–2017*.

In Chapter 7, which is titled ‘Revolutionary Nature of Gandhi’s Achievements’, I deal with 10 of his prime achievements, their revolutionary nature and impact on India and the world. It is pertinent to recall here some of these revolutionary changes.

India was transformed from a society that was highly feudal and caste-based, plagued by poverty, hunger and disease, and a society that suppressed women's agency, into a constitutional democracy based on universal adult franchise and a highly industrialised, technologically advanced country. In its 75 years of Independence, it has had two Dalit, two Muslim and a woman president, a Dalit chief justice, a woman and a Sikh prime minister, and many women and minority community chief ministers.

Sri Lanka, the Philippines and Chile have had women presidents, Bolivia its first Aymara president, South Africa and the US their first Black presidents.

Over 100 former colonies, comprising two-thirds of the global population and three-fourths of its land area, have gained independence; all East European Communist dictatorships have ended, the Warsaw Pact scrapped, the Berlin Wall brought down, Germany reunified, the Soviet Union dissolved, and democratic regimes established in most of its former component states, many of which have joined the European Union.

All these developments are revolutionary in view of the radical changes they brought about in existing scenarios and in being non-violently achieved. These changes represent the most sweeping democratisation of national politics and international political geography in history.

Gandhi's great pertinence to India at present and hereafter is because he embodied in himself and his revolutionary Soul Force theory and praxis, the deep spirituality and nobility of India's millennial maxims—*Tat Twam Asi*, *Ekam Sat vipraha bahuda vadanti* and *Udara Charita nam tu Vasudhaiva Kutumabakam* and *Satyameva Jayate*. Among the many valuable maxims

he gave us was, ‘What is obtained by love is retained for all time. What is obtained by hate proves a burden because it increases hate.’

I will end with a quote from Martin Luther King Jr.: ‘If humanity is to progress, Gandhi is inescapable. He lived, thought, and acted, inspired by the vision of humanity evolving toward a world of peace and harmony. We may ignore him at our own risk.’

## Gita Dharampal\*

Paying our obeisance to Gandhiji—in the midst of the Azaadi ka Amrit Mahotsav—is certainly incumbent upon us, and yet it is not without an undercurrent of tragic irony, for our celebration of India’s 75 years of Independence paradoxically coincided yesterday with the 74th anniversary of Gandhiji’s assassination. As Father of the Nation, the Mahatma lived for just over five months in Independent India, and was shot at point blank range by an ardent nationalist.

This harsh reality is difficult for us to fathom even seven and a half decades later. Notwithstanding this abysmal truth, if we probe deeper we are confounded even more by Bapu’s own prophetic words in response to a correspondent’s naïve enquiry.

I quote the brief passage so that you can also savour the terseness of Gandhiji’s diction:

You are gravely mistaken in assuming that as soon swaraj comes, prosperity will flood the country. If, before assuming that, you had used your imagination a bit to see that after 150 years of slavery, we would need at least half that much time to cleanse our body-politic of the virus that has infiltrated every cell and pore of our being—during our subjection, you would not have found it necessary to ask me. I am sure you will understand what I mean, namely, that far greater sacrifices will be needed after the attainment of self-government to establish good government and raise the people—than were required for the attainment of freedom by means of Satyagraha (extract from a letter to a correspondent, on 6. 6.1947, in CWMG LXXXVIII, 86f).

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\* Talk delivered by Dr. Gita Dharampal, Professor Emeritus, Heidelberg University, Germany at the IIC on 31 January 2022.

This is certainly a powerful statement, and with it, Gandhi provides us today with a lot of food for thought!

Now, in 2022, having reached the halfway mark, India at 75 needs to engage in critical self-evaluation (but not necessarily self-flagellation!), to seriously revisit the Mahatma's legacy, and to endeavour to understand what he envisaged for Independent India to make her viable for all her citizens, especially for 'the lowest of the low'.

Today, even if we do not necessarily agree with everything that Gandhiji said or did, it is, nonetheless, self-evident that his contributions have impacted every aspect of human endeavour.

Speaking as a representative of academia, and in like manner to my father, Shri Dharampal (a Gandhian intellectual whose birth centenary we are celebrating this year), I present the following emphatic statement: The concepts of science, of politics and economics, of philosophy and psychology, the theories of the organisation of society and the state all have to comprehend (or if need be counter) Gandhiji's thought, words and deeds, each in its own sphere and in as thorough and rigorous a manner as has been done with the thoughts of the great Gautama Buddha, and more recently, in the world of modern academia, for instance, with the works of Jean Jacques Rousseau and Karl Marx.

Indeed, just to cite one instance, Gandhiji's revolutionary manifesto *Hind Swaraj* (published in 1909), with its aim to bring about a 'Swaraj in Ideas' (an intellectual Swaraj), represents a work of greater significance than Rousseau's *Social Contract* and Karl Marx's *Das Kapital*. For, unlike these

two books, *Hind Swaraj* did not mark the end of an age, but instead, ‘the beginning of a new order’, for India and the world!

Today, more than ever, *Hind Swaraj* and Gandhiji’s indomitable example sound a wake-up call for all of us, summoning us to engage in independence of thought and action, reinforced by integrity and commitment, virtues which are more urgently required today than ever before.

Gandhiji—a master in thinking out-of-the box—can certainly appeal to today’s youth, inspiring them to chart out new vistas. Gandhiji, who a century ago rose as a vibrant symbol of the reawakening of India from colonial servitude, today, at the beginning of the second decade of the 21st century, once again embodies for us the *yugpurush* of a new India at 75!

It may be of special interest to gain a brief insight into how the great pertinence of Gandhi is being realised—i.e., being put into action—in the centre of India. So let me use my prerogative to cite this one concrete example which is very close to my heart.

Infused with this spirit, namely to make Gandhi come alive, the Gandhi Research Foundation (GRF) on the outskirts of Jalgaon (not far from the UNESCO world heritage sites of Ajanta and Ellora) was founded by Padma Shree Bhavarlal Jain, a truly enlightened entrepreneur in 2009. As its Dean, let me present this very special institution to you which exemplifies Gandhiji’s great pertinence for India at 75.

The cherished dream of Bade Bhau (as our incredible founder is affectionately known) was to make Gandhi’s legacy come alive for today’s youth and to

enable his spirit to flourish and enrich future generations, not only in India, but all over the world.

To realise this vision, Bade Bhau established ‘Gandhi Teerth’ (meaning a Gandhi Pilgrimage Site, a resplendent oasis in the wilds of Khandesh in northwestern Maharashtra) that was inaugurated in March 2012 by the then President of India, Smt. Pratibha Patil.

This impressive monument, built in translucent Jodhpur stone, represents a magnificent modern temple in celebration of Gandhi’s heritage. Yet, the grandeur of the Gandhi Teerth is true to Gandhi’s magnanimous spirit, for although Gandhiji was a follower of simplicity, he was by no means a proponent of poverty or smallness. Indeed he was championing grandeur in simplicity and above all in the use of indigenous resources. When we associate poverty or smallness with Gandhiji, we deny his innate spirit of grandeur!

Inspired by a truly Gandhian spirit, Bade Bhau, through his unstinting efforts, strove all his life to regenerate the existing indigenous resources in our rural economy, to revitalise the welfare of our industrious farmers, and to reinvigorate our community solidarity, especially by overcoming the urban and rural divide. In line with his life’s message—‘to leave the world better than you found it’—Bade Bhau’s brainchild, the Gandhi Research Foundation, through a whole spectrum of Gandhian initiatives, aims to inspire minds, influence and empower the lives of individuals and communities (rural and urban) by exemplifying the relevance—the great pertinence—of Gandhi’s vision today for India and the world (for more details, please consult our website at [www.gandhifoundation.net](http://www.gandhifoundation.net)).

Indeed, in following Gandhiji's dictum, 'Be the change you want to see in the world', through 'simple living and high thinking', each and every one of us can make our contribution towards revitalising India, and in the process help to redeem humanity and Planet Earth and thereby pay homage to the Mahatma as India celebrates her 75th anniversary of Independence.



## Hamid Ansari\*

A thesaurus would dwell on the difference between ‘relevance’ and ‘pertinence’ with the former implying a general and the latter suggesting a more specific impact. Thus, while the progress of our freedom movement was part of a wider process, the impact of Gandhi’s personality was critical in imparting it shape and direction. The manner of its impact on the Indian mind is worthy of careful study.

So, who was Gandhi? Why was he relevant to his contemporaries? How do we evaluate his bequest to our times?

I recall here a famous passage:

This little man of poor physique had something of steel in him, something rock-like which did not yield to physical powers, however great they might be. And in spite of his unimpressive features, his loin cloth and bare body, there was a royalty and kingliness in him which compelled a willing obedience from others. Consciously and deliberately meek and humble, yet he was full of power and authority, and he knew it, and at times he was imperious enough, issuing commands which had to be obeyed....Whether his audience consisted of one person or a thousand, the charm and magnetism of the man passed on to it, and each one had a feeling of communion with the speaker...one of the most remarkable things about Gandhi ji was, and is, his capacity to win over, or at least, to disarm his opponents.... Having found an inner peace, he radiated it to others and marched through life’s tortuous ways with firm and undaunted steps.<sup>1</sup>

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\* Talk delivered by Shri M. Hamid Ansari, former Vice President of India at the IIC on 31 January 2022.

So described by Jawaharlal Nehru was the man who held India and Indians spell bound in his life time, and does so to this day.

A biography cannot be compressed in an essay and so my effort today would be to focus on the formative period of the Gandhian ideology and methodology and the final outcome, because these left an imprint on the Indian mind and shaped the approach of ordinary Indians.

## II

After his studies in the UK and his sojourn in South Africa in the course of which some of his techniques of passive resistance were initiated, Gandhi returned to India, ‘a mature idealist and political mobiliser’. The political establishment in South Africa heaved a sigh of relief: ‘The saint has left our shore’, wrote Smuts, ‘I sincerely hope for ever.’ He was, in some matters, influenced by both Gokhale and Tilak. These early years were critical to the shaping of his mind and of the principles and practice of *Brahmachariya*, *Satyagraha*, *Ahimsa*. He studied other religions, found virtues in all of them, and scrupulously adhered to his self-definition of a Sanatani Hindu (given later in *Young India* on 12 October 1921).<sup>2</sup> Elsewhere, he described his language as ‘aphoristic; it lacks precision. It is therefore open to several interpretations’.<sup>3</sup> He wrote in *Young India* that ‘I am not anti-British...but I am anti-untruth, anti-humbug and anti-injustice....No Indian has cooperated with the British Government more than I have...’.<sup>4</sup>

His political thoughts were first expressed in *Hind Swaraj* published in 1908. It asserted self-rule; also a rejection of modernity. The book is fascinating to read, more difficult to implement as a guide to political action since, as

Gandhi himself admitted, ‘politics encircles us today on the coil of a snake’.

Gandhi’s earliest involvement in India was in the Champaran Satyagraha of 1917 where he adopted the approach of the civil disobedience movement resulting in a committee set up by the government and to proposals that were acceptable to the agitating cultivators. A second movement was the Kheda Satyagraha in 1917–18 in Kheda in Gujarat seeking remission of taxes due to crop failure. Here too a response was forthcoming from the government.

Champaran and Kaira, and the industrial dispute in Ahmadabad, were the first instances of Satyagraha in practice in India. Both hammered home the lesson that Satyagraha,

could be used in virtually any situation of conflict, by literate and illiterate. It was a weapon for all seasons and, in Gandhi’s hands, directed by his personal ideology, it gave him the edge over conventional politicians with their techniques of petitions, public speeches and debates, which were more suitable for the educated.<sup>5</sup>

Equally critical was the Rowlatt Satyagraha that ‘radically altered Gandhi’s standing with the government...and showed Gandhi as an all-India leader of immense potential’.<sup>6</sup>

His tactics were having an impact, and so was his general appearance. An intelligence report in May 1920 assessed that ‘the association of Gandhi with any movement is a great asset because his name is one to conjure with among the ignorant masses.’<sup>7</sup> A report by the Governor of Madras to the Viceroy in April 1921 said ‘it is amazing what an influence this man is

gathering. . . . There is no doubt that Gandhi has got a tremendous hold on the public imagination.’

Gandhi’s support for the Khilafat Movement was for multiple reasons: a demand for fulfillment of British pledges given to the Muslims, his own sense of moral responsibility, and to secure Hindu–Muslim friendship. He explained it in his own words in May 1920:

If I had not joined the Khilafat movement, I think, I would have lost everything. In joining it I have followed what I especially regard as my dharma. I am trying to show through this movement the real nature of non-violence. I am uniting Hindus and Muslims. The Khilafat movement is a great churning of the sea of India. Why should we be concerned with what it will produce? All that we should consider is whether the movement itself is pure and worthy.<sup>8</sup>

Gandhi considered his participation in the Amritsar session of the Indian National Congress (1919) as his ‘real entrance into Congress politics’. After the Jallianwala Bagh massacre, he took an active part in the collection of funds for the Memorial to that massacre and also for the redrafting of the Congress Rules that resulted in a unanimous report. It sought to make the Congress pyramidal in structure, more representative and more functional between annual sessions. This was a key innovation that allowed regional committees greater freedom to participate in proceedings.

Gradualism was the essence of his approach. ‘My life, through insistence on truth, has taught me the beauty of compromise’. When, in the 1921 session of the Indian National Congress, Maulana Hasrat Mohani (who coined the slogan *Inqilab Zindabad*) proposed a resolution seeking ‘Swaraj or complete

independence free from all foreign control’ to be the objective of Congress, Gandhi demurred: ‘let us not go into waters whose depth we do not know’ and suggested other priorities.<sup>9</sup>

And yet, there was clarity of vision in perceptions. In a letter to Dr. B.C. Roy in May 1928 he said,

I am biding my time and you will find me leading the country in the field of politics when the country is ready. I have no false modesty about me. I am undoubtedly a politician in my own way, and I have a scheme for the country’s freedom. But my time is not yet and may never come to me in this life.<sup>10</sup>

### III

Any study of the intrinsic principles of Gandhi’s thinking, and of his major political interventions, would show the extent to which the two were intertwined. His *Autobiography* records his reading of Ruskin’s *Unto This Last* and his own remark that it ‘captured me and made me transform my life’.<sup>11</sup>

Gandhi’s elaboration of some of his practices was unique. He defined passive resistance as ‘a method of securing rights by personal suffering and the reverse of resistance by arms’. It requires fearlessness. He chose themes for agitations that appealed to the poorest and the simplest. An Urdu poet summed up his style:

*Lashkar-e-Gandhi ko hathyaron ki hajat kuch nahin  
Han magar be-intiha sabr-o-qanaat chahiye*

The army of Gandhi does not need any weapons  
Yes, but it does need limitless contentment and patience.

His personality, life style and simplicity, and the idiom of his communication, caught the imagination of the public. His ashram in Ahmadabad added to the transmission of being regarded a Mahatma. ‘It is the fakir’s dress that has broken down all barriers’, wrote Abbas Tyabji, a former chief justice of Baroda. Jawaharlal Nehru wrote that the ‘movement absorbed him so wholly that he gave up all other associations and contacts’. Through 1921 the tension between the Congress and the government mounted; first the Ali Brothers and then many Congress leaders were arrested on charge of sedition.

The Turkish novelist and feminist Halide Edib spent the early months of 1935 in India, some of it with Gandhi, and recorded her impressions in *Inside India*, first published in 1937. One chapter of the book recorded his ‘Eleven Vows’ and his manifold activities aimed ‘to build the Indian society from the bottom to the top and focuses on the abolition of Untouchability, the regeneration of the village as a unit of Indian society, and achievement of communal unity.’<sup>12</sup>

Gandhi’s major campaigns against British rule were the non-cooperation movement of the 1920s, the civil disobedience movements of 1930s—of which the Salt Satyagraha was the highlight—and the Quit India Movement of the 1940s.

‘How did one coax an aggrieved yet disarmed, heterogeneous and divided populace to wage an assault on a powerful empire?’ Tagore posed the

question to Gandhi on 18 January 1930 who said, ‘I am furiously thinking night and day’. In the middle of February, ‘the intuition came to him like a flash: the assault should be over salt’.<sup>13</sup> Gandhi pictured a march to the sea by his ashramite army, with himself at the head. It had another virtue: all could jointly oppose it, Hindus and Muslims, peasants and the landless. Also known as the Dandi March, it attracted a great many people including Jawaharlal Nehru and Sarojini Naidu, and resulted in violence by the police and the arrest of 60,000 people.

The non-cooperation movement in 1920–1922 was organised to induce the British government in India to grant self-rule or *swaraj* to India. His speech in Madras on 12 August 1920 spelt out the essence of the doctrine of non-cooperation. It was Gandhi who first organised the act of large-scale civil disobedience. It gathered strength by joining forces with the Khilafat Movement launched by the Muslims of India against the British breach of promises made with regard to Ottoman Turkey. For a variety of reasons it had a limited life span and the violence in the village of Chauri Chaura made Gandhi call it off, much to the ‘disappointment and anger’ of Nehru.<sup>14</sup> Nevertheless, it marked the transition from a middle class to a mass base.

A spell of imprisonment followed by the Gandhi–Irwin Pact created space for political negotiations. Gandhi attended the Second Roundtable Conference in London but was imprisoned on return. The Gandhi–Ambedkar talks resolved the question of a separate electorate for the Dalits. On the proposed negotiations leading to the Government of India Act 1935, Gandhi’s view was that it was an act of the sword not of goodwill. He had, earlier, resigned from the primary membership of the Congress and left the decision-making

to the Congress leadership that accepted the clarifications given by the Viceroy. In the elections that followed, the Congress won overwhelmingly.

The Quit India Movement of August 1942 demanding an end to British rule in India was launched by Gandhi with a speech whose focus was on Ahimsa: ‘the draft Resolution of the Working Committee is based on Ahimsa.... Ours is not a drive for power, but purely a non-violent fight for India’s independence....The Congress is unconcerned as to who will rule when freedom is attained. The power when it comes will belong to the people of India...’.

He called for an ‘orderly British withdrawal’ from India and described the promised withdrawal after the war as ‘a post-dated cheque on a crashing bank’. This was unacceptable to the British who imprisoned the entire Congress leadership. It is of course another matter that the Quit India Movement was opposed by segments of Indian opinion, including the Muslim League, the Hindu Mahasabha, the Communist Party of India and Indian states which felt that a fight against the Axis powers should take precedence.

The modest dwelling in Wardha to which Gandhi often withdrew had an aberration: a telephone. It was explained to me that this was at the insistence of the British authorities!

When political negotiations were resumed after the war and the Partition Plan was presented, Gandhi told Dr. Rajendra Prasad that ‘I can see only evil in the plan’. This was expressed candidly in the latter’s ‘Introduction’ to Pyare Lal Nayar’s book, *Gandhi: Going to Wipe their Tears*.

Gandhiji was uncompromisingly opposed to the Partition of India, which he called her vivisection....Based on a wrong theory and brought about by such questionable means, it would do irretrievable harm to both Hindus and Muslims—in India and in Pakistan. But he left it to the Congress Ministers in the Central Government, who were in charge of running the administration, to act according to their judgment. Once they decided in favour of Partition, he did not oppose them, although he never concealed opinion.<sup>15</sup>

His virtual resignation from the decision-making process was also conveyed to Mountbatten in his letter of 11 April 1947.<sup>16</sup>

Gandhi was not in Delhi on Independence Day. On the eve of that day his mood was bleak. He marked the day with a 24-hour fast, refused to record a message for the *Hindustan Times* and said ‘he had run dry’. He also declined an interview to the BBC and told an emissary, ‘I forgot English’.<sup>17</sup>

A life spent in promoting fraternity was confronted once again by the conflagration of violence that preceded and followed the vivisection of India. It was to be the last challenge of his life.

#### IV

Gandhi died as he lived: dedicated to his principles, to his own version of modernity premised on Ahimsa. <sup>18</sup> On his last birthday on 2 October 1947, his request to visitors was ‘to pray either for present conflagration should end or he be taken away. I do not wish another birthday to overtake me in an India still in flames.’

To us, citizens of India, he was above all Father of the Nation. We should therefore turn to him for guidance. What would that be? There is a tablet at the Rajghat listing seven social sins. These are simple yet candid and well worth recalling:

1. Wealth without work
2. Pleasure without conscience
3. Knowledge without character
4. Commerce without morality
5. Science without humanity
6. Religion without sacrifice
7. Politics without principle

Would this be a pertinent ingredient in our resolve of the day? It would please the spirit of Bapu.

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End Notes

<sup>1</sup>Jawaharlal Nehru. 1936. *An Autobiography*. London, pp. 129–30.

<sup>2</sup>R. Palme Dutt. 1940. *India Today*, pp. 416–17.

<sup>3</sup>Cited by Partha Chatterjee. 1999. *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World*, in Partha Chatterjee Omnibus, p. 85.

<sup>4</sup>R. K. Prabhu and U.R. Rao. 1967. *The Mind of Mahatma Gandhi*, p. 322.

<sup>5</sup>Judith M. Brown. 1972. *Gandhi's Rise to Power: Indian Politics 1915–22*, p. 106.

<sup>6</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 180–88.

<sup>7</sup>*Ibid.*, op. cit., p. 212. Also, *Gandhi: Prisoner of Hope*. 1969, p. 168.

<sup>8</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 249. Also, Rajmohan Gandhi. 2006. *Mohandas: A True Story of Man, his People and the Empire*, p. 245.

<sup>9</sup>Nafees Ahmad Siddiqi. 2004. *Hasrat Mohani aur Inqilab-e Azadi*, pp. 220–28. Karachi. Also, *First Complete Independence Resolution & Trail of India and Hasrat Mohani*. 2014, pp. 83, 89–90. New Delhi.

<sup>10</sup>Judith Brown. *Gandhi: Prisoner of Hope*. P. 213.

<sup>11</sup>M. K. Gandhi. *An Autobiography*, pp. 249–50. 'I [am]determined to change my life in accordance with the ideals of the book'.

<sup>12</sup>Halide Edib. 1937. *Inside India*, p. 43.

<sup>13</sup>Rajmohan Gandhi, op. cit., pp. 324–25.

<sup>14</sup>Nehru, op. cit., p. 81.

<sup>15</sup>Rajendra Prasad. 2002. *Introduction to Pyarelal Nayar: Gandhi: Going to Wipe their Tears*, p. 6.

<sup>16</sup>Judith Brown. 1969. *Gandhi: Prisoner of Hope*, p. 370.

<sup>17</sup>Ramchandra Guha. 2007. *India After Gandhi*, p. 8.

<sup>18</sup>He amplified the import of Ahimsa late in life in a private letter in January 1948: 'What I had mistaken for ahimsa was not ahimsa, but passive resistance of the weak, which can never be called ahimsa even in the remotest sense.' Judith Brown, op. cit., p. 375

## Shyam Saran\*

In this paper, I present a lesser known aspect of Mahatma Gandhi's thinking and vision for India's future—his concern about ecological sustainability, not just for India but for humanity as a whole. He may not have talked about climate change which we now acknowledge as a looming crisis, but climate change after all is an aspect of a much deeper and existential challenge that threatens survival itself, which is the ecological degradation of our planet. Maintaining ecological sustainability was at the very heart of Mahatma Gandhi's vision for India of the future. Seventy-five years after his death, when India and the rest of the world are standing at the edge of a precipice, his message on sustainability bears reflection. What is more, this message of ecological sustainability is integrally embedded in some of the key philosophical concepts associated with him.

Gandhi's two central concepts are non-violence or ahimsa, and truth or satya. These are over-arching concepts derived from ancient Indian philosophy. Violence is endemic in the cosmos. Stars are born, they burn bright for a time and are then extinguished. Life on earth is full of violence; Nature appears to relish it; indeed wields it as an instrument of sustaining life, or what Darwin demonstrated as the survival of the fittest. Each life form in its own demise nourishes another. Thus ecological sustainability does not preclude violence; indeed, it seems integral to it. So how does the concept of ahimsa square with ecological sustainability?

Gandhi recognised that violence is inherent in life itself, but it is the human species that uses violence not out of need but for its greed. He said, no animal suffers from the disease of greed, except human beings. No other species is known to indulge in mass slaughter of its own kind. So ahimsa responds to this attribute of humanity and seeks to remind human beings

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\* Talk delivered by Shri Shyam Saran, currently President, IIC at the IIC on 31 January 2022.

that they are not masters of the universe, but ‘having evolved into intelligent beings, they should recognise their responsibility to be custodians of all living beings.’

Gandhi added, ‘It is an arrogant assumption to say that human beings are lords and masters of lower creatures. On the contrary, being endowed with greater things in life, they are trustees of the lower animal kingdom.’

This notion of custodianship extends to refraining from polluting our land, water and air. This, too, is violence because it affects not only the lives of other human beings, but also all other creation.

In this sense, Gandhi’s concept of ahimsa is more than relevant today, when we see the mindless violence towards Nature, whether it is in the cutting down of pristine forests, the pollution of our land, water and air, or the relentless encroachment on the last remaining habitat of our rare and wild species.

I would like to digress here to speak about Gandhi’s reverence for mother cow or Gaumata. To him, in the context of India, the cow, like Nature herself, was a source of nurture; giving life-sustaining milk just as a mother does to her infant. The cow also contributes to nurture and therefore life, by pulling the plough through the fields and by serving as a bearer of burden. It is a symbol of life, of motherhood, and therefore worthy of our reverence and protection. It is a symbol of ahimsa, too, because it is the most gentle of all animals, again like a mother. Isn’t it ironical that to protect the cow, which is ahimsa-incarnate, there are those who would indulge in the most

vile forms of violence? How could lynch mobs, driven by unalloyed hate and cruelty, claim to protect the very symbol of ahimsa?

The other concept advocated by Gandhi is truth, and this, too, is critical to meeting the challenge of ecological degradation. Humanity today suffers from a form of collective blindness, refusing to acknowledge that an ecological disaster is lurking round the corner; that it is the inevitable consequence of the value system that underlies modern industrial development, including mass consumption. In this value system, Nature is seen as a dark force to be conquered rather than to be revered as a source of nurture. In India's millennial culture, Nature is a mother, from whom you should take only what she can regenerate. There is no overdraft possible.

The satya Gandhi spoke about saw the world as inhabited by a universal family of all living creatures with equal rights; there is unity in diversity in Nature; no animal suffers from the disease of greed except human beings. As we have seen, Gandhi decried the arrogance of humanity which sees itself at the pinnacle of creation and entitled to rule over the rest. This arrogance, he argued, lies behind the inequality among nations, behind imperialism and colonialism. He pointed out that 'It took Britain half the resources of the planet to achieve this prosperity. How many planets will a country like India require?'

'God forbid that India should ever take to industrialisation after the manner of the West. The economic imperialism of a single kingdom is today keeping the world in chains. If an entire nation of 300 million took to similar exploitation it would strip the world like locusts.'

And yet our current development trajectory is based precisely on aspiring to Western standards of affluence. Which is like chasing an illusion. But are we ready to confront this satya?

Elaborating on this further, Gandhi put forward the compelling ecological truth: ‘We may utilise the gifts of Nature as we choose, but in her books, the debits are always equal to the credits.’ In all that we see around us—the extreme climatic events, the melting of the glaciers, the destructive floods and droughts, and yes, the COVID-19 pandemic itself—are these not signs that Nature has come to collect her debts? Wasn’t Gandhiji prophetic in his warning?

The notion of ecological integrity is linked to the political imperative. Inequality is embedded in the current pattern of economic development. Britain’s prosperity could only be sustained by the spoliation and loot of the resources of its colonies. Within our country the same imperative applies—persisting with the current pattern of growth is not compatible with an egalitarian society; it is not compatible with democracy.

There are two concepts of Mahatma Gandhi which are relevant—antyo-daya, or welfare of the weakest, and sarvodaya, which is the welfare of all. Antyo-daya is fundamental to democracy—the touchstone of whether a policy is good or bad is whether it would benefit the most vulnerable and weak among our citizens. Only if this were followed would sarvodaya follow, which is what democracy is truly about. These concepts are in turn integrally linked to how we treat ecology—going back to his sharp and compelling observation—that ‘The earth provides enough to satisfy every man’s need but not for every man’s greed’.

Are our policies geared to safeguarding every man's need or are they predicated on human greed as the driving force for development? Is not the answer obvious?

Let me repeat an example I often use to illustrate this point:

The density of car ownership in the US is over 900/1,000. No wonder it is a gas guzzling nation. In Europe, the density is over 800/1,000. In India it is currently 22/1,000. If India were to aspire to even a fraction of the West's density of car ownership, not all the fuel in the world would suffice to run our cars. Would there be enough land available in our densely populated country to park those cars, and how many miles of expensive highways and expressways must be built to run them on? So only a small percentage of the population will have the wherewithal to enjoy owning and driving cars while the rest must walk, cycle or use public transport. Would it not make better sense to tax private vehicles heavily and finance efficient, affordable public transportation? Give the people the right to mobility, not the right to own a car.

Gandhi was not against modernisation of the economy, nor against industrialisation. However, he understood that inherent in the pattern of development followed by the West, ecological limits would very soon be reached. We would reach a dead-end. His message on sustainability is indeed pertinent to India at 75.

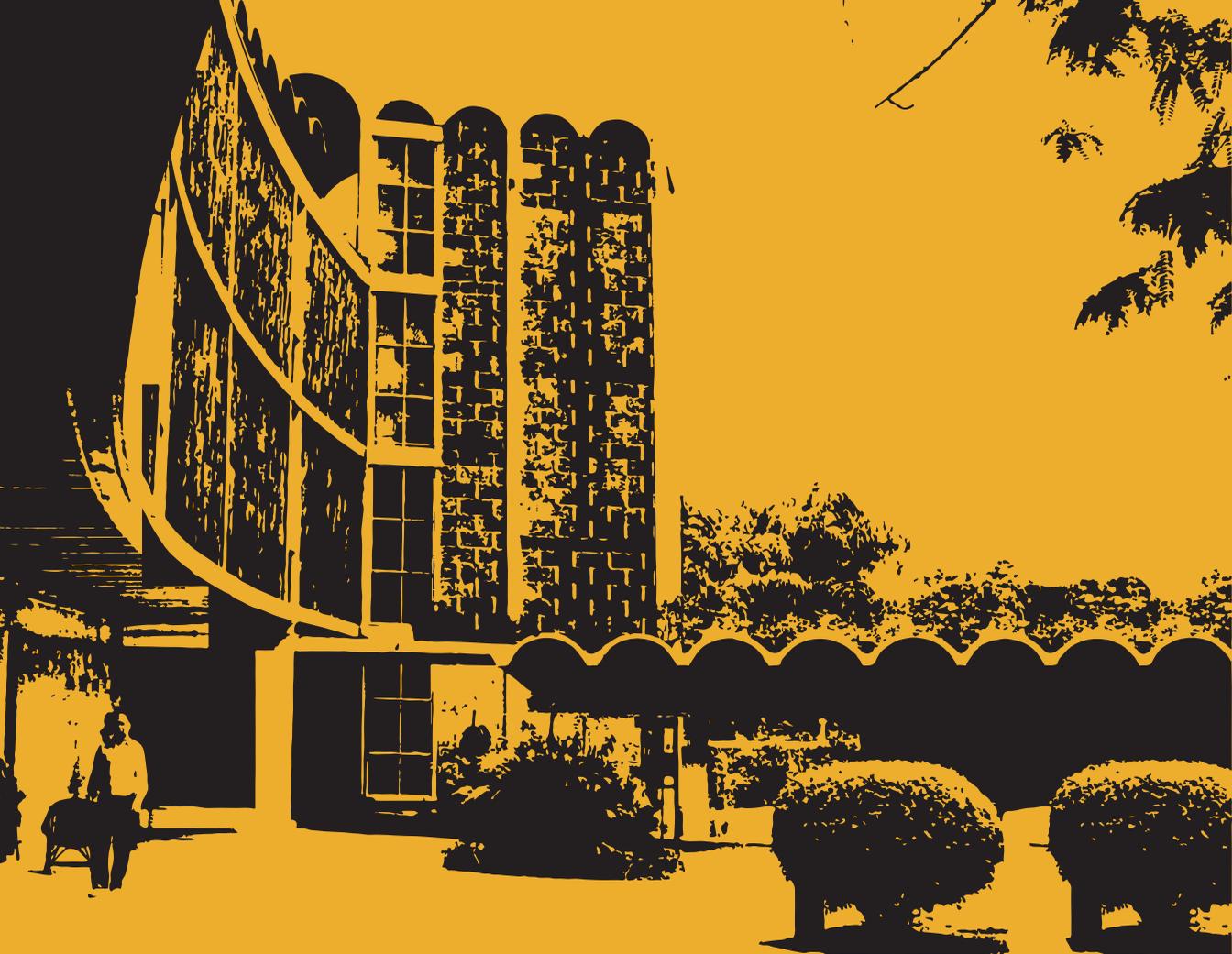
## About the Authors

Pascal Alan Nazareth holds a Masters Degree in Economics from Madras University. In his 35 year IFS career, (1959–1994) he has served in India’s diplomatic missions in Tokyo, Rangoon, Lima, London, New York; as DG(ICCR) and India’s High Commissioner to Ghana and Ambassador to Egypt and Mexico. Since his retirement in May 1994, he has lectured at numerous prestigious universities and Institutes in India and abroad such as National Institute of Advanced Studies Bangalore, Benares Hindu University and Stanford, Yale, Columbia, Heidelberg, Uppsala and Peking Universities. His *Gandhi’s Outstanding Leadership* has come out in 12 Indian and 23 languages including Arabic, French, Mandarin, Russian and Spanish. Former Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev has written the Foreword for nine of its European language editions. On October 9, 2007 he was presented the U Thant Peace Award for his ‘Life Time of World Service.’ On October 2, 2012 and 2017, he delivered the keynote addresses at the International Day of Non Violence event at the United Nations in New York and the United Nations Library in Geneva.

Gita Dharampal, retired Professor and Head, Department of History, South Asia Institute, Heidelberg University, acquired an interdisciplinary academic training in literature and philosophy (Manchester, England and Leipzig, East Germany, 1970-74); social anthropology (Cambridge, England, 1975-76); and Indian cultural history (1976-1980, SOAS, London and Sorbonne, Paris, Ph.D.); and completed her Habilitation (German professorial dissertation) in early modern history (Freiburg, Germany, 1992). Her publications and research focus on topics ranging from pre-modern transcultural interactions between Europe and India, the maritime cultural history of the Indian Ocean region (1400-1800), medical history, religious-ritual transformations (1500-2000), the socio-cultural and political history of the colonial period, in general, with a special emphasis on Mahatma Gandhi’s movement of political and cultural resurgence. Besides participating actively in international conferences and giving invited keynote talks, she has held visiting fellowships and professorships at various international institutions as well as in Delhi, Kolkata, and Hyderabad universities. She is presently Dean of Research at the Gandhi Research Foundation at Jalgaon in Maharashtra.

M. Hamid Ansari joined the Indian Foreign Service (IFS) in 1961 and served in Indian missions in Baghdad, Rabat, Jeddah and Brussels. He has served as Ambassador of India to UAE, Afghanistan, Iran, and Saudi Arabia. He was Chief of Protocol; High Commissioner to Australia; Permanent Representative to the UN, New York; Visiting Professor, Centre for West Asian and African Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi; Vice-Chancellor, Aligarh Muslim University, and Member, National Security Advisory Board. He was elected as Vice President of India, and ex-officio Chairman, Rajya Sabha. Among his many publications are *Iran Today: Twenty Five Years After the Islamic Revolution*; *Traveling Through Conflict: Essays on the Politics of West Asia*; *Teasing Questions: Exploring Disconnects in Contemporary India*, and *Citizen and Society: Selected Writings*. Among the honours he has received are the Padma Shri; Honorary Doctorate for International Relations, Mevlana University Konya, Turkey; and Honorary Doctorate, Mohammed V. University, Rabat, Morocco.

Shri Shyam Saran joined the Indian Foreign Service in 1970. He has served in several capitals of the world, and was India's Ambassador to Myanmar, Indonesia and Nepal, and High Commissioner to Mauritius. In the Ministry of External Affairs, New Delhi, Shri Shyam Saran held many important posts, and as a Joint Secretary in the Prime Minister's Office in 1991–92, he advised the Prime Minister on foreign policy, nuclear and defence-related issues. Shri Saran was appointed India's Foreign Secretary in 2004 and held that position till his retirement from service in September 2006. Subsequent to his retirement, he was appointed Prime Minister's Special Envoy for Indo–US civil nuclear issues and later as Special Envoy and Chief Negotiator on Climate Change. Shri Shyam Saran was Chairman of the National Security Advisory Board; Chairman, Research and Information System for Developing Countries; and is Senior Fellow with the Centre for Policy Research. On 26 January 2011, Shri Shyam Saran was awarded the Padma Bhushan by the President of India for his contribution to Civil Service. His publications include *How India Sees the World* and *How China Sees India and the World*. He is currently President, India International Centre.



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