

Weaving Swaraj: Gandhi's Satyagraha, Social Integration, and the India's Struggle for Independence

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ABSTRACT

This article explores how Mahatma Gandhi transformed India's independence movement with his unique ideas and strategies. Before Gandhi's time, Indian politics primarily involved small, educated elite advocating Western-style reforms. Gandhi introduced principles like truth (Satya), non-violence (Ahimsa), self-discipline, and self-sacrifice, which appealed to a diverse range of people, expanding the movement's reach. Gandhi drew inspiration from both Western thinkers and Indian philosophies, such as Vaishnavism and Jainism. He criticized Western Civilization for its focus on materialism and championed moral and ethical principles in politics. Gandhi promoted the idea of Swadeshi (self-sufficiency) and Khadi (handspun cloth) as alternatives to Western industrialization, symbolized by the Charkha (spinning wheel) in nationalist movements. Through movements like Champaran and the Non-Cooperation Movement, Gandhi united Hindu and Muslim, farmers, artisans, and laborers, fostering a broader sense of national identity. Despite making tactical compromises at times, Gandhi remained steadfast non-violence and ethical leadership. His actions, such as returning honors to protest injustices like the Jallianwala Bagh massacre, underscored his deep connection with the masses. Gandhi's enduring legacy as the "Mahatma" (great soul) of India stems from his profound impact on the country's journey to independence.

Keywords -

Non-violence, Satyagraha, Non-cooperation,

Introduction-

The position of Mahatma Gandhi as the most influential and revered leader is well established. Before the arrival of Gandhi, the national movement was described as "politics of studied limitations" and "a movement

representing the classes”.¹ This political movement was only confined to western educated elites- “a microscopic minority”- who were concerned about their demands only. They had very limited goals and a rift can be seen between these politicians. Gandhi with his ideologies of Satya,² Ahimsa, self-discipline, and self-sacrifice opened this limited political sphere to the masses. His political ideology “appealed to few wholly, but to many partially”, as everyone could find something in it to identify with and this truly helped in broadening the base of the national movement.

Gandhi drew inspiration from the writings of western³ thinkers like John Ruskin, Henry David Thoreau, Leo Tolstoy, and Ralph Waldo Emerson. He was also influenced by Vaishnavism and Jainism which can be seen in his idea of Ahimsa, Satya, and self-sacrifice. In his book ‘Hind Swaraj’ (1909), he praised the Indian civilization and at the same time, critiqued the western civilization. In his critique of the west,⁴ he marked a significant difference from the earlier nationalists who have a fascination with western civilization. This helped Gandhi to directly threaten the ‘internal legitimacy of the ruling culture’ against whom he was going to fight. Gandhi's approach and beliefs on nationalism differed significantly from those of the nationalist philosophers of his time. He used religious idioms but in a different way than the earlier revivalists. He was appealing to religious morality which helped him in combining politics with morals and ethics and intricately formed joined politics with the personal life with the masses.

Following is the objective of present research in order to study Gandhi's philosophy and his method of struggle against colonialism

Research Objective -

1. To examine the sources of Gandhi's Philosophy
2. To critically examine Gandhi's critique of westernization.
3. To highlight Gandhi's strategy and method of struggle.

¹ Brown, Judith (1974) Gandhi's Rise to Power, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.pp. 28

² Kumar, Ravinder. (1969).“Class, Community or Nation? Gandhi's Quest for a Popular Consensus in India,” Modern Asian Studies 3 (4), pp. 360

³ Brown, Judith (1974) Gandhi's Rise to Power, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.pp. 46

⁴ Nandi, Ashes (1998). The Intimate Enemy, in Exiled at Home, Delhi: Oxford University Press. 100-102

4. To examine Gandhi's idea's potentiality to reach the masses and the subsequent formation of a mass movement.
5. To examine various historiographical nuances on Gandhi method of non-violence and Satyagraha

Research Methodology -

The present research used primary and secondary literature. The primary sources include the writing of Mahatma Gandhi, his letters and collection of speeches. The secondary sources include various books, magazines and newspaper. To give more objectivity to this research both quantitative and qualitative method was applied. Along with to provide the critical analysis of the theme historical method was also applied completely align with research objectives.

I

'He talked about how the moral degradation of Indian civilization and attraction towards materialistic western civilization helped the British in subjugating us, i.e., he provided "a fundamental critique of the entire edifice of bourgeois society". Gandhi attacked the basic features of western civilization⁵ and argued that all these technologies of the modern world lead to limitless self-indulgence, lust for more, leading to more consumption, competition and conquest, disturbing the innate harmony and cooperation of humankind. 'So, through his critique of industrialization, he appealed to completely do away with this fascination towards the west. He was so much clear in his views about industrialization that he did not agree with Nehru's idea of socialist industrialization because, according to him, "evils are inherent in industrialism and no amount of socialization can eradicate them" . Instead, he proposed that Khadi and other village industries should be promoted which will help in eradicating poverty and provide employment to the masses. We can trace the importance of Khadi by noticing Charkha everywhere in the national movement whether it is the swadeshi movement of 1905 or the non-cooperation movement. Charkha became a symbol and helped in attracting the masses.

II

Most of the time, Gandhi designed his appeal very vaguely which can be interpreted by different stakeholders in different ways. For example, he talked about swaraj as a goal but never defined it but Gandhi and therefore, could unite different communities. He also talked about Ram Rajya which will be based on the pillars of morality, equality, freedom and liberty, and free from any kind of exploitation. These ideas motivated the peasants, artisans,

⁵ Chatterjee, Chatterjee. "Gandhi and the Critique of Civil Society," in Ranajit Guha (ed.) Subaltern Studies 3, Delhi: Oxford University Press, pp.162

⁶ Harijan, 29-9-40, p. 299

labourers and other poorer classes which were exploited by the forces of modernity, to join the national movement.

The idea of Swaraj was not directly interpreted, but in his quotations and books, he gave a very clear definition of his approach, when he was using the word Swaraj.

"I will..... Recall the face of the poorest and the weakest man [woman] whom you may have seen, and ask yourself, if the step you contemplate is going to be of any use to him [her]. Will he [she] gain anything by it? Will it restore him [her] to control over his [her] own life and destiny? In other words, will it lead to swaraj [freedom] for the hungry and spiritually starving millions? (Source: Last Phase, Vol. II (1958), P. 65) Satyagraha, another contribution of Gandhi ji to the movements. Gandhi himself described the Satyagraha beautifully, in simple words; it is an appeal for the truth, regardless of how long we must fight for it, without resorting to violence "There can be no Satyagraha in an unjust cause. ⁷Satyagraha in a just cause is vain, if the men espousing it are not determined and capable of fighting and suffering to the end; and the slightest use of violence often defeats a just cause. Satyagraha excludes the use of violence in any shape or form, whether in thought, speech, or deed. Given a just cause, capacity for endless suffering and avoidance of violence, victory is a certainty." (Source: Young India 27.4.1921.)

Gandhi, s approach towards Satyagraha is elaborated in his various works. Gandhi, as a person saw this as a battle for truth that transcended failure, a relentless pursuit until it is achieved, as he precisely stated in his publication ' young India Defeat cannot dishearten me. It can only chasten me..... I know that God will guide me. Truth is superior to man's wisdom.

III

Partha Chatterjee talked about satyagraha and ahimsa as the two facades of the Gandhian realm of practical and attainable politics which, according to Gandhi, would have helped India to achieve independence in a way that is in no way "questionable". Non- violence is the core concept of his philosophy but he was more than just a saint. However, as a politician, he in practice sometimes settled for less than complete non-violence. For example, he campaigned for military recruitment in 1918 in the hope of winning post-war political concessions and also in 1942, he gave the slogan of 'do or die' and left it to the public the way they want to opt (however, he suggested

⁷ Sarkar, Sumit. 1983. Modern India, 1885-1947. New Delhi: Pearson. Pp. 155-156

a non-violent path to them also). He also repeatedly emphasized that even violence was preferable to cowardly surrender to injustice sometimes created delicate problems of interpretation.

But historically, the way the masses perceived his ideas and how different sections of the society have reacted and participated and how such masses were controlled by him during non-cooperation and other movements is much more significant than this personal philosophy itself. Indian politicians before Gandhi had tended to oscillate between Moderate 'mendicancy' and individual terrorism basically because of their social inhibitions about uncontrolled mass movements. Gandhi's emphasis on non-violence made it easier for the Business groups, peasants, artisans, labourers, and most importantly, women to participate in the struggle. After the failure of the Rowlatt Satyagraha, Gandhi realized that simply combining the masses' negative consciousness with the procedural forms of a bourgeoisie legal regime wouldn't work. From there, he felt the necessity for ethical leadership or a group of leaders to train the masses along the lines of Satyagraha.

Having a paternalistic and parochial attitude towards the masses, he saw the mob through the Shakespearean lens and considers the masses as people without their own minds. So, according to him, they were susceptible to negative Manipulation or positive training under enlightened leadership and it was the Satyagrahis' responsibility to show them the way, and if something wrong happened, it was again Satyagrahis' fault. The unshakable prominence of the notion of non-violence as a mass activity that gave life to the concept of Satyagraha came from here. Furthermore, it was not necessary for everyone to understand this concept; instead, they were expected to blindly obey their leaders. He didn't expect everyone to be morally transformed, but he wanted them to understand the benefits of doing so. So, assuming him to be a man disconnected from reality would be a huge mistake, ⁸because he was not. He presented an alternate vision of nationalism, 'practical-idealism' that incorporated people from different classes or castes and made the movement truly popular.

British not only colonize India but they also colonize the mind of Indians. Through various theories and surveys, they established White supremacy and tried to legitimize their claim to rule India. At the same time, they talked about the degraded nature of Indian civilization and deny Indians any right to rule. Through their policies, they divide India into many groups or communities, which makes it difficult for nationalists to unite them and the task is still not completed. Britishers like Lyall and Risley dismissed the claims of nationalists by calling them an elite microscopic minority representing only themselves and motivated by the desire for power and patronage. ⁹

⁸ Naidu, M.V. Gandhian "Practical- Idealism": Non-violence. Article on JSTOR.ORG

⁹ Kumar, Ravinder. (1969). "Class, Community or Nation? Gandhi's Quest for a Popular Consensus in India," Modern Asian Studies 3 (4), pp. 360

After returning from South Africa, Gandhi, firstly, decided to tour India and interact with the people and notice that people had loyalties towards their religion, caste, village, language, region, etc. These loyalties were most sharply visible in rural areas but did not fade away in the urban areas. As the city is considered a free space, the poor working condition of labourers and the dilapidated condition of their household kept their attachment with their village alive. There was no concept of trade unions. They were exploited by mill owners, Gujrati grocers, Maratha jobbers, and Pathan moneylenders. So, what they have in these cities, were their parochial relations. For strengthening the national movement, he need to superimpose these existing loyalties to the concept of a political nation, i.e., to generate a feeling of national consciousness, but it was not an easy task. Gandhi led the Champaran and Ahmadabad Satyagraha which marked the beginning of his political career in India. These two Satyagraha were based on the issue of economics but the Rowlatt Satyagraha was purely a moral issue and it was not confined to a particular region or to particular social strata. So, instead of using the idiom of class, religion and morality were the basis of his appeal. However, in the beginning, it was difficult for Gandhi to connect with the masses and communicate their message to them. Judith Brown has argued that the main importance of these early movements lays in the recruitment of ‘sub- contractors’ who would serve as his life-long lieutenants—like Rajendra Prasad, Anugraha Narayan Sinha and J.B. Kripalani in Champaran, or Vallabhbai Patel, Mahadev Desai, Indulal Yajnik and Shankarlal Banker who acted as messengers between Gandhi and the masses whether it is peasants or mill workers.

However, considering peasants and mill workers as similar consolidated groups is misleading. Peasants can be considered ¹⁰as a consolidated class under the village headman in the village whereas mill-workers were more loyal towards their community rather than to their class which can be seen at several points. For instance, workers organized various strikes under jobbers but when, in 1908, Bal Gangadhar Tilak was arrested and trialed, there was a spontaneous outburst of strikes and riots in Bombay. This was not only because ¹¹Tilak was popular among mill workers but also because he was a Marathi or Maharashtrian. The Community orientation of identity became clearer when the mill workers of Bombay didn't respond to Gandhi's Rowlatt Satyagraha because Gandhi's coordination with Bombay mill workers was very less compared to Ahmedabad mill workers, instead, he was more collaborative with the Gujarati mill owners in Bombay. So, workers were divided on the basis of caste, language and culture, and at that point in time, filling this huge gap was not easy for Gandhi. However, by the time of the Non-cooperation movement, Gandhi was able to unite Bombay, Ahmedabad mill, and other workers

¹⁰ Ibid. 370-372

¹¹ Sarkar, Sumit. 1983. Modern India, 1885-1947. New Delhi: Pearson. Pp.158

with the Muslims and other communities. This was possible because of the 3 issues underlying the movement – “Punjab wrong, Khilafat wrong, and Swaraj within one year”. Gandhi was able to mobilize and organize different classes and communities around national issues and strengthened the national movement.

IV

Judith Brown talked about Gandhi’s mobilization techniques and how these evolved after returning from South Africa. When he was in South Africa, his mobilization strategies were very similar to those used in India. But when he entered Indian politics, he used the

Existing network of local leaders like Tilak and Besant. However, Gandhi’s relations with these local leaders were not always smooth and rift can be seen at times. For example, after the death of Gokhale, ¹²Gandhi was isolated in institutional politics. None of the contacts which were his stepping-stones from African to Indian politics led to a permanent road, and by the beginning of 1917, he was still more of a freelance preacher and social worker than a recognized politician. He became isolated from the institutionalized limited politics which made Gandhi emerge as a leader the masses comprised of peasants, labourers, artisans, and women who were earlier marginalized by the Indian nationalists.¹³

Shahid Amin talked about the image of Gandhi as “Mahatma” in the mind of Champaran peasants. The decision to invite Gandhi to Champaran was made on October 17, 1920, at a public assembly chaired by Moulavi¹⁴ and with Shankar Mishra as the speaker. Dasrath Dwivedi and Baba Raghav Das were the other two notable local leaders, and the former's speech about Gandhi's character became important in strengthening the peasant's popular imagination about Gandhi as a Mahatma. People's enthusiasm froze when the final date of "the coming" was set for Feb 8, 1921, and people were requested to donate to a National School fund, according to Swadesh, a popular journal that sparked mass mobilization. Gandhi’s popularity can be seen in the context of his arrival when 10,000 peasants arrived at the railway station surrounded by forests only to get the “darshan” of Gandhi. When the movement started, the masses followed the orders of Gandhi because they believed that Gandhi would end their misery, i.e., exploitation by Zamindars and administrators and the problem of widespread landlessness.

Judith Brown talked about how Gandhi’s simple attire, Hindustani language, appeals like liquor ban, and non-violence helped in developing a strong bond between Gandhi and his followers. He used to communicate with

¹² Sarkar, Sumit. 1983. *Modern India, 1885-1947*. New Delhi: Pearson. Pp. 170

¹³ Brown, Judith (1974) *Gandhi’s Rise to Power*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 50

¹⁴ Ibid. 48

the masses with a very paternalistic attitude. Judith Brown pointed out that morality was the most important for Gandhi. His actions and actions were based on it and he also wanted his followers, i.e., Satyagrahis to abide by moral principles.

Jacques Pouchepadass talked about the role of different stakeholders in the Champaran movement. He argued that the main role in mediation was not played by the so-called subcontractors of Judith Brown but by the small-town intelligentsia (Rajkumar Shukla, Sant Raut, and Khendar Rai), local mahajans, and traders who resented planter competition in moneylending and trade, and a few village mukhtars (attorneys) and school-teachers. He also talked about Gandhi's role in the context of directly challenging the authority and Transforming a local issue into a national one which led to the abolition of the tinkathia system.

By 1919-1920, Gandhi emerged as the undisputed leader of the masses. He used the earlier prepared ground and launched the first truly all-India movement, i.e., the Khilafat- Non-cooperation movement. He deliberately mobilized the masses around three issues- 'Punjab wrong', the 'Khilafat wrong' and 'Swaraj'. These issues were related to every section of society. So, he was able to bring Hindus, Muslims, peasants, labourers, middle-class, artisans, etc. together. Gandhi used the same tactics which he used earlier but this time he was giving more emphasis on Hindu-Muslim unity and tried his level best to keep the movement violence-free but when the violent event occurred in Chauri Chaura, he withdrew the whole movement which was at its peak only because he did not want to compromise on the question of morality. Also, Gorakhpur was the only district that had shown political discipline and organizational skill times and again, and also it was the only district that had a well-entrenched congress from top to bottom. Thus, the Chauri-Chaura crowd was not just another mob of men gone rogue, Gandhi could not trust the people from the other parts of India to remain stuck to Gandhian principles. So, he advised the guilty and repentant to hand themselves voluntarily to the Government for punishment and make a clean confession. He also urged the workers in the Gorakhpur district to leave no stone unturned in finding out the evil-doers and deliver them into custody. So, we can see that Gandhi's actions and decisions were very unpredictable and he lead the masses on his own terms.

V

Gandhi had more influence over people's minds than other leaders, but it wasn't through violence, weapons, or terror; it was through his convictions, his pursuit of truth and nonviolence, love, bravery, and justice, and his devoted service and sacrifice for humanity.

Throughout his political career, he remained stuck to these principles and also trained Satyagrahis on the same lines. Through his attire, leadership quality and principles, Gandhi was able to bring a diverse society under the same umbrella and mobilize them for the sake of national independence. For Gandhi his morality was above everything, Gandhi was so sure about his concept of ahimsa and truth, that when jallianwala bagh massacre happened, he returned his Kaiser along with the Zulu War Medal and the Boer War Medal. In his letter to the Viceroy of India, he explained that he could¹⁵ no longer wear these honors with a clear conscience while his Muslim countrymen were wronged regarding their religious sentiments. He condemned the Imperial Government's actions in the Khilafat matter as immoral and unjust. Gandhi emphasized that his commitment to non-cooperation stemmed from these events, and he could not respect or hold affection for a government that perpetuated such wrongs. This act underscored his deep connection with the masses and his dedication to their sentiments, reinforcing his image as the Mahatma and strengthening public support for his cause.

V

Conclusion -

Mahatma Gandhi's unparalleled influence as a leader transformed the Indian national movement from an elitist and limited endeavor into a mass struggle encompassing diverse segments of society. Prior to his arrival, the movement was characterized by the narrow interests of a small group of western-educated elites. Gandhi's introduction of principles such as Satya (truth), Ahimsa (non-violence), and self-discipline resonated widely, attracting people from various backgrounds and broadening the movement's base. Drawing inspiration from Western thinkers and traditional Indian philosophies, Gandhi's vision critiqued the materialism and industrialism of the West, advocating for a return to simpler, self-reliant ways of living epitomized by Khadi and village industries. His critique was not merely economic but also moral, challenging the very foundations of Western civilization and promoting a model of development rooted in ethical and communal values.

Gandhi's strategies were deeply intertwined with his moral beliefs. He emphasized non-violent resistance, or Satyagraha, as a powerful tool for achieving justice without resorting to violence. Despite occasional pragmatic deviations, such as his support for military recruitment during World War I, Gandhi's commitment to non-violence remained central. This non-violent approach enabled broader participation in the movement, including

¹⁵ Sarkar, Sumit. 1983. Modern India, 1885-1947. New Delhi: Pearson. Pp. 159

marginalized groups like Peasants, laborers, artisans, and women. His ability to communicate effectively with the masses, using simple attire, local languages, and culturally resonant symbols like the Charkha, helped forge a strong connection with ordinary people. Gandhi's paternalistic yet inclusive leadership style encouraged the masses to follow his lead, trusting in his moral vision for India.

The Champaran and Ahmedabad Satyagraha's marked the beginning of Gandhi's direct involvement in Indian politics, demonstrating his method of transforming local issues into national ones. His success in mobilizing diverse groups around common causes during the Non-Cooperation Movement further solidified his leadership. Gandhi's approach was both practical and idealistic, seeking to unite India's diverse population under a shared national consciousness while adhering to high ethical standards. His influence extended beyond political mobilization; it challenged the colonial mindset and inspired a profound psychological shift among Indians, fostering a sense of self-respect and empowerment.

Ultimately, Gandhi's legacy lies in his unique ability to blend moral philosophy with political action, creating a powerful and enduring model of non-violent resistance that not only advanced India's struggle for independence but also left a lasting impact on global movements for justice and human right.

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