

# Gandhi's Reformist Agenda for India and its Present Relevance

## Abstract

Gandhiana is no virgin field for study and research. In fact, it is an over-cultivated field giving myriad intellectual yields. Secondly, Gandhian ideas, more often than not, appear too familiar to be discussed in any *de nova* way. However, I am firmly of the opinion that truth even told umpteenth times neither loses its luster nor its luminosity. In fact, such a revivification is neither reiteration nor repetition of an old tale. Every time it is told, it assumes a new form with a new import. As such, it results in resuscitation and revivification of its ever green message. It is with such a conviction that I have selected the present theme for my lecture: Gandhi's Reformist Agenda for India and its present relevance. This is one of the areas of Gandhian which remains to be highlighted. Besides, it appears to be of great relevance in the context of problems confronting the Indian society today.

In this paper, I propose to concentrate on Gandhiana round a set of five questions. They are: what are the major items of Gandhi's reformist agenda for India? What impact did they have on the Indian society? What were the major instrumentalities through which he tried to give a concrete shape to his ideas? What is its present relevance? How could they be revived in the present India?



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## Introduction

First of all, let us discuss Gandhi's reformist agenda. As we know, Gandhi never considered himself Justus a political leader, whose only mission was to oust the British from the Indian soil. In fact, he considered his mission to be much bigger than that: encompassing the regeneration of the Indian society, and establishment of the brotherhood of man<sup>1</sup>. He made it clear in *Hind Swaraj* that more independence of India would not be enough; a whole lot of changes would have to be brought in the Indian society. He had tried some of these ideas during his South African sojourn at Phoenix settlement and the Tolstoy Farm. However, after coming to India in 1915, he started his mission for India more vigorously. Sabarmati Ashram which he funded and eleven vows which he took along with other ashram inmates was symbolic of his resolute resolve to pursue his mission with verve and vigour. As a practical visionary, he wanted to chalk out a concrete plan for the regeneration of the Indian society. Being aware that India basically lives in rural areas, he promoted programmes like Khadi, village industries, etc. so as to give a new momentum to the rural economic life. But along with that, he wanted to change social values and norms having firm grip on the minds of the Indian people. He also had to rework the mind-set, more particularly of the upper castes Hindus. Thus, he strongly believed that a set of new economic programmes along with a new mindset of the people would lead to a revolutionary change in their lives. Here, we would be studying his reform programmes at two levels: (a) socio-economic programmes and (b) his programmes for a reformed Hinduism. Let us first look at some of his socio-economic programmes. Some of them are:

One, Gandhi was fully aware that on account of the dominance of Brahmanic culture in Hinduism, the dignity of labour has never been given its due place. For, manual labour was considered to be undertaken only by the lower castes. From his South African days, with his experiences of Phoenix settlement and Tolstoy Farm, he had come to strongly believe that everyone must earn his bread by the 'sweat of his brows'. This was the basis of his oft-quoted theory of bread labour which, he underlined, was to be applicable to everybody irrespective of his economic and social status. He tried this idea both at Phoenix and Tolstoy Farm. But when he funded Sabarmati Ashram in Ahmedabad, he introduced the principle of bread labour among the inmates of the ashram and through them; he tried to take it to the larger society. In his ashram, everyone was supposed to perform

manual work ranging from kitchen to the field. Such an arrangement was to end the existing division of labour between mental and menial work as we as between upper castes and the lower castes, which has been one of the most baneful practice of Brahminism in India<sup>2</sup>.

The underlying principle which he wanted to drive home to the people was that there is nothing like noble or ignoble, polluting and non-polluting division in respect of physical labour. To him, every kind of physical labour was and none polluting. In fact, he moved a step further by underlining the fact that cleaning of latrines, which was traditionally supposed to be performed by the untouchables, was not an ignoble but an ennobling task. This was a direct assault on the traditional view of Hindu society which had kept this job reserved only for the untouchables believing in the worst kind of holism and hierarchy. And it was on the basis that the untouchables were segregated and kept at a distance from the upper castes households. In fact, this was the foundation of the practice of untouchability in Indian society. Gandhi challenged this practice to its foundation and virtually spent his life in fighting against the demon of untouchability. In this respect, he worked as a great modernizer and religious reformer carrying the battle to the citadel of Hindu orthodoxy and its principle of pollution and purity. Under his moral prodding, a large number of congressmen started doing the scavenging job as a part of their household work. Quite a few of them opened their own ashrams spread all over the country to work as the living laboratories of these new social and religious values. The major campaign which was launched against the practice of untouchability during 1933-34 was indicative of his will and determination to eradicate this inhuman practice from its roots. It is an entirely a different thing that it still persists, though in a much less rigorous form<sup>3</sup>.

A second area where he tried to change the social values was in respect of accounting both in private and public domain. He insisted upon the principle of strict accounting both of public and private funds. This was a part of his insistence on the means. Whether he derived it from his *bania* background as many of scholars believe is not that important. What is of crucial importance is that through it he tried to create a new mindset among the public workers or even in the private life of the people. It has several social implications. In the first place under his influence, many Congressmen started making budget for their own household and in the process, kept an eye on day to day expenses. This made them frugal and taught them the art of living within their own means which, in turn, enabled them to spare more time in the cause of the nation. More importantly, Gandhi was careful in accounting of the public fund and thus inculcated a deep sense of integrity and transparency in

raising and managing it. He did not spare anybody including Kasturba, Manilal Gandhi and Mahabir Tyagi even if there was the slightest ground for misuse of public fund. This gave a sense of confidence among the donors for public fund and also helped in keeping the public life clean and immaculate. The real significance of Gandhi's strict management of public fund could be understood when it is contrasted with present day public life when we find that a large number of public works are engaged in the business of pocketing public fund through false accounting and even indulging in direct embezzlement<sup>4</sup>.

A third social value which Gandhi tried to promote in a big way was the time management. In traditional India, perhaps due to rural life, punctuality and time management were missing both from our private and public lives. Our early nationalist leaders had also fallen in the popular pattern, and had never insisted on punctuality and time management as a social value. It is true that even in the western society punctuality was a by-product of industrial revolution. Despite his vehement rejection of modernity, time management and punctuality was one of the major social values which Gandhi imbibed in a big way. This also counters the charge that his opposition of modern civilization was total absolute. He had imbibed the spirit of punctuality during his South African sojourn and took to it in a big way after coming to India.

He was aware that public life in India was one of laxity and non-challenge and even the culture of meeting people by appointment was missing. Our culture milieu made a big departure as he insisted on meeting people by appointment. So much so, that he refused to see even prominent people if they tried to see him without prior appointment. He made it a point to assign every minute of his working hours to a particular work and that was one of the reasons of his enormous productivity. His time for sleeping, prayer, walking was fixed to the minute as he wanted to devote every second to the cause of the nation. Every wasted second was an act of sacrilege for him as it adversely affected the national cause. Same spirit of punctuality he introduced in conducting public meeting. He once chided Tilak for being late for a public meeting. To a great extent, a sense of punctuality and time management was introduced in our public life at his initiative and insistence.

Fourthly, in the realm of politics, he brought about equally important changes. Prior to his entry on the Indian political scene, it was a widely held belief that politics and religion belong to entirely two different genres. Even Tilak, tallest among our national leaders, was of the opinion that real politics could not be guided by didactic and normative principles which were supposed to be appropriate and operative only in the realm of

religion and spirituality. Gandhi contested it and he insisted that this was on account of the lack of understanding about the true nature of religion and politics. For him, real religion goes much beyond ritual ridden, organized religion mostly as a handmaid of priestly classes. There is, he asserted, a religion transcending all organized religion with ethical and moral behavior at its base<sup>5</sup>. Similarly, for him politics was not meant just for a power game, it could be an instrument of service to the people particularly to the poor and the downtrodden. Hence, both religion and politics, he averred, could join hands on the common ground of moral and ethical action. Perhaps, he derived this new formulation about the true nature of religion and politics by his deep study of the Bhagavad Gita particularly its concepts of *Loksangraha* and *yajna*. Thus, Gandhi opened a new channel of communication between the political and spiritual elite; between the public workers and the people at large. Such a new and changed perception of religion and politics has several implications for our public life. One, that even people with spiritual bent of mind could participate in the political process of the country. In the process, he solved the age long problem of the Indian tradition where the *pravriti* (action-oriented life) and *nivriti* (renunciation and *moksha* seeking life) were supposed to be as different as chalk and cheese. Spiritual minded people working for their individual *moksha* (redemption) were supposed to lead a life of social recluse whereas people with political bent of mind always involved in the game of power politics in which every move was fair and justifiable. Gandhi removed such artificial barrier between religion and politics and made them stand on the common ground of ethics and morality<sup>6</sup>. This was a seminal contribution of Gandhi which virtually heralded a new era in socio-political spiritual life of India. What is more, in this respect, he differed as much as Tilak and Savarkar who wanted to use religion as a ploy to promote the political cause of the country. In sharp contrast to all of them, Gandhi stood on the sound foundation of secularism. He tried to rid both religion and politics of their historical accretion and excrescences. His was not the attempt to mix up religion and politics, which has disastrous consequences for the country. His 'call' was not to mix religion with politics; rather his clarion call was to secularize religion and spiritualize politics. There was not even an iota of communalism in his being was amply demonstrated by his work in Noakhali, Bihar and his fasts in Calcutta and Delhi and ultimately by his martyrdom in the cause of communal harmony. Whether he succeeded or failed in his mission is not that important. That he tried sincerely in this historic task is the real issue. Of course, the ultimate result of his effort at communal harmony was a mixed one; whereas the partition of

India recorded his failure, but the retention of the secular foundation of India even in the course of communal frenzy was a creditable achievement.

Quite related to the issue of religion and politics, was his theory and praxis of symbiotic relationship between the ends and the means. There is a long tradition of real politics underlined by Kautilya Machiavelli and even Kari Marx that the ends justify the means. In other words, all kinds' means are good enough for the pursuit of good ends. Gandhi challenged it and even in 'Hind Swaraj' he likened the means and the ends as the seed and the tree. He went to the extent of saying that as will be the means, so will be the ends. All along in his political pursuits both in South Africa and India, such a perspective was an integral part of all his programmes and actions. In this respect, he stood out from most of his leading contemporaries both in India and abroad<sup>7</sup>.

#### **Gandhi as a Reformer of Hinduism**

No study on Gandhi would be complete without examining his role as a reformer of Hinduism. It is relevant to note that, Gandhi came from a background of liberal Hinduism both in terms of his family background as well as the socio-religion environment of Saurashtra. Added to this was his interaction with Theosophists during his stay in England which further strengthened his liberal religious outlook as the latter as a group strongly believed in equal respect for all religious traditions. But in the process, he also became acutely aware of his Hindu identity as it happens with people living in a far off land away from their cultural milieu. His visit to South Africa brought him in live contact with all three strands of Semitic religious tradition – Islamic, Jewish and Christian. A solid section of his supporters in South African struggle were Muslims of Indian origin. And some of his close associates like Kallenpach were of Jewish origin. Besides, his contact with the churchmen in South Africa brought him in close contact with the Christian tradition. What was more, through Tolstoy and other thinkers, he came into a live contact with a new liberal tradition of Christianity which was challenging in dominant variant as it had got too much aligned with imperialistic expansion of the West. Similarly, he was all along in touch with Raja Chand bhai, the Jain saint, who was also known for his liberal religious outlook. In a word, his religious thought was enriched by myriad sources each marked by liberal religious outlook. In the process, his basic religious outlook-respect for all religions and firm rootedness in a broad Hindu tradition was further strengthened. His liberal outlook was further strengthened by his study of William Mackinitire Salter's book 'Ethical Religion' which underlined the fact that ethical action was the heart of religion as without morality, religion could not subsist. All this was in keeping with Gandhi's own

understanding of religion. But he never lost sight of his rootedness in Hindu tradition which was widely reflected when he had delivered four lectures on Hinduism during March 1905 under the auspices of Theosophical Society of Johannesburg in South Africa. In those lectures, apart from making a rapid survey of Hinduism, he tried to present its basic tenets primarily in the tradition of advaitic Vedant. In those lectures, he had identified three basic tenets of Hinduism; (i) Brahman exists and is the real substratum of the entire creation; (ii) *Atman*, basically of the genre of Brahman, also exists all time; and (iii) that it is possible for *Atman* to achieve *moksha*. So far the paths leading to *moksha* was concerned, Gandhi, without going into the debate over the superiority of any one among the three ways of Jnan, Karma and Bhakti, asserted that performance of good deeds, imbibing compassion for all beings and he was also aware that all actions, including good ones, have binding force putting man in the endless cycle of birth, death and rebirth. To remove this binding stain, Gandhi asserted, action would have to be performed without attachment to fruits. In the process, action would lose its binding force and, hence, it would not stand in the way of attainment of *moksha* by the seeker. This was the philosophical foundation of his faith as Hindu which he retained all through his life with minor variations here and there. This was also reflected in his letter to Jamnadas Gandhi written during 1913, in which he virtually reiterated all these points<sup>8</sup>.

After coming to India in 1915, he came into contact with the mainstream of Hinduism including Hindu orthodoxy that

*bhagvad Gita's* message was for non-violence. But Gandhi stuck to his position and during 1920, he wrote to pieces on Hinduism to enunciate and expose his understanding of Hinduism. Since doubts had been raised about his Hinduness, he asserted in these writings that he was not only a Hindu in a broad category but a Sanatani Hindu. To assert his position he defined a Hindu as follows<sup>9</sup>.

'A Hindu is one who believes in the existence of the Atman and the Paramatman and, believe further that Atman is never born and never dies but, through incarnation in body, passes from existence to existence and is capable of attaining moksha.... the supreme and human striving'

This was virtually a reiteration of his intellectual position on Hinduism as enunciated in his four lectures delivered in 1905. But he also asserted in those very writings his firmly held idea of equal respect for all religions. Besides, he asserted that since, all the scriptures had been conveyed through the agency of man; hence, all of them had inherited certain imperfections in the process. Hence, they will have to pass the test of reason and morality. To quote his word;

(i) 'I do not believe in the exclusive divinity of the Vedas. I believe the Bible, the Koran, and Zend-Avesta to be as much divinely inspired as the Vedas'<sup>10</sup>. This was nothing but the reiteration of his philosophy of Sarvadharmasamabhava.

More radical was his assertion that the orthodox custodians of Hinduism like present Shankaracharya and Shastris had no monopolistic right over the interpretation of Hindu scriptures. As he wrote:

'I most emphatically repudiate the claim (if they advance any such) of the present Shankaracharya and Shastris to give correct interpretation of the Hindu scriptures. On the contrary, I believe that our present versions of these books are in most chaotic state'<sup>11</sup>.

It is in the above perspective that Gandhi reformist project for Hinduism could be understood. He always believed that the attempt to reform any religion must come from the insiders. Therefore, initially he was not willing to give much role to the state in the process of my religious reformation. Some of the major aspects of his reformist projects for Hinduism were as follows:

In South Africa apart from his radical view disfavoring untouchability, he did not have much contact with the caste system as one of the major problems of the Hindu Society. After coming to India he came face to face with the caste system and its implication for the Hindu society in general; and the national movement in particular. Initially, he was confused and even used *Jati-vyavastha* and *Varna Vyavastha* interchangeably. But subsequently he drew a distinct line of demarcation between the two. Initially, he even defended the caste system on the ground that 'it was a natural institution' as it helped in maintaining 'self-control' and limit of one's purview of action. He did not even object to the practice of putting restriction on interdining and inter-caste marriage. But on the issue of untouchability, he made a categorical statement that it was not an integral part of Hinduism.

But by 1920 he ended up by defending *varnasystem* as being 'Fundamental, natural and essential parts of society. And he even pleaded that it had saved Hinduism from disintegration. But he did not approve of multiplication of caste and sub caste which are the result of historical accretion. At that stage to tackle the multiplicity of castes and sub-castes he suggested as a remedial measure their fusion in four major groups restoring it to the old *Varna* system. But he made it clear that among these four divisions there was no question of high or low or superior or inferior. They only represented diversity of outlooks and modes of life. Therefore, at that stage, unlike many other social reformers, he did not favour its abolition. Nor did he favour interdining and intermarrying except in some exceptional cases. But his stand on untouchability

was uncompromising; the institutionalization of which he considered as 'the height of injustice and cruelty'. He pleaded for the untouchable to remain in the Hindu Society.

We find gradual development of his views on *VarmaVyavastha* underlining its egalitarian nature. In 1927 he underlined his views regarding *Varma* in the following.

'In my opinion there is no such thing as inherited or acquired superiority. I believe in the rock bottom doctrine of *Advaita* and my definition of *Advaita* excludes totally any idea of superiority at any stage whatsoever. I believe implicitly that all men are equal'.

Similarly, on the issue of intermarriage and interlining his views also changed as he did not consider it as a part of *Varma* system. And he went to the extent of saying that a Brahmin who marries a *shudra* girl or vice versa commits no offence against the law of *Varma*. By 1933 he came to believe that marriage, eating and drinking are personal matters not necessarily connected with the *Varma* system. Thus, gradually he came to believe that *Varma* system of his conception hardly existed in India at the present days. Hence, he suggested that at the moment in India only one *Varma* is left, i.e. *shudra*. So all of them must accept that they belong to *shudravarna*— common class.

But he never repudiated his faith in the pure and pristine form of *Varma* system. He projected his vision of the ideal *Varma* society as follows as might emerge in the future.

'They (the untouchables) in common with the rest will be absorbed in the *shudras*. Out of these the other three *Varnas* will be absorbed in the *sudras*. Out of these the other three *Varnas* will gradually emerge purified and equal in state though differing in occupations. The Brahmins will be very few. Fewer still will be the soldier class who will not be hirelings or the undertrained rulers of today, but the real projector and trustees of the nation laying down their lives for its service. The few will be the *shudras* for in a well ordered society a minimum amount of labour will be taken from fellowmen. The most numerous will be the *Vaisayasa Varma* would include all professions, the agriculturists, the traders, the artisans, etc.'<sup>12</sup>

In the light of the above survey of evolution of Gandhi's views on caste system, *Varma* system and on the issue of untouchability, it is clear that he again and again referred to the ideal *Varma* system. But he gradually came to realize that it could not be restored to its pristine form in the present time. Starting with the fusion of different castes to four *Varma*, he went to the extent of suggesting that prevailing circumstances only viable way was to consider everybody belonging to the *shudra Varma*. But he hoped that *Varma* system with four fold divisions without any touch of holism

and hierarchy will in his conception of the ideal society.

But on the issue of untouchability, he maintained a consistent line of thought and even went to the extent of saying that he would prefer to go out of Hinduism if the practice of untouchability persists. He even went to the extent of saying that there could be no *moksha* for him as he was passionately attached to the cause of elimination of untouchability.

A second aspect of his reformative project was related to visits to temple and idol worship. Though he himself rarely visited any temple, but he did concede that temple visit and idol worship might be needed for the common man to strengthen his faith. But he supported temple entry for the Harijans as a part of Hindu community it was their inalienable right. Though he never considered temple going and idol worship as an integral part of Hinduism, but he did not oppose it.

A third area of the Hindu belief system wherein Gandhi made a distinct contribution was the theory of *karma*. In plain language, the theory of *karma* and its concomitant that of rebirth means that 'as you would sow, so would you reap' In other words, every action of man bears some fruits, good or bad depending on the nature of his action, which one would have reaped. And this chain of action and its fruits is not broken by the intervention of death. Rather the chain transcends death and follows the man like shadow in his next life. In fact, his status in the next including *yonis* (specie) would be also decided by his past *karma*. How did Gandhi look at these formulations on *karma* and rebirth. Of the two, Gandhi had definite opinion on rebirth and reincarnation. He went to the extent of saying that one could not claim to be Hindu unless he believes in rebirth and reincarnation as without it there would be no hope for the regeneration of the fallen souls. But on the issue of action and its consequences he did not look at the whole issue in a deterministic way. For him if the causal linkage between the present status and past *karma* was to be taken, deterministic, then there would be no basis or justification for any kind of social work as it would amount to an act interference in the natural law of *karma*. Rather he went to the extent of saying that the theory of *karma* and serving the poor are perfectly compatible. He found support for his view from the Gita's concept of *lokasangraha* and *jnana*. As a votary of the Gita he argued that when an action is performed in the interest of others (*lokasangraha*) and is presented as an offering to God, it loses its binding force. In a word, the theory of *karma* and social service performed for sake of *lokasangraha* actually opens a new path of *moksha*. Besides, Gandhi also argues that though the man carries a part of his *sanskara* to his next life, but it does not mean that the whole process is nothing but deterministic. In

fact, man is also endowed with 'free will'. Thus present good deeds would lessen the burden of his past *karma* freeing him from its consequences to a great extent. Besides, good deep performed presently will also work as the fixed deposits for his future life and Gandhi found himself in agreement with Gita that a man ultimately becomes what he wishes to be (XVIII:3). On both these counts, Gandhi made a seminal contribution to a new interpretation of the *karma* theory<sup>13</sup>.

Another reform relating to the thought processes of the people he attempted to bring about was a new reconciliation between reason, revelation and intuition. He strongly believed that all religions are equally based on revelation. But it is also fact all of them without any exception have been communicated through the agency of human beings. Hence, they are bound to suffer from some kind of imperfections. Besides, in the course of their historical developments, they are bound to gather some accretion and excretion which, by their very nature, would be external to the real nature of their pristine and pure forms. Hence, there is a need to test them on the anvil of human rationality. At the same time he underlined the limitation of human rationality if one makes a fetish of it. Besides, he also believed that apart from human reason, there are equally valid other epistemological tools, viz. intuition, word of the realized souls and the like. In fact, Gandhi was not so much impressed by Brahminic intellectual tradition as by non-Brahminic medieval saints and their spiritual experiences. Hence, even the scriptures will have to be interpreted in the light of one's own spiritual experiences. But he never failed to underline that all this will have to go by the board if it was repugnant to human reason. Even his 'inner voice' on the basis of which he took most of the decisions would have to pass through the test of reason. Even his choice of the Bhagavad Gita as the source book of most of his ideas was a deliberate and well thought out act. Of all the world scriptures, the Gita is the most inclusive and free from rites and ritualism. In fact, in a strict sense, it is not a scripture of any one religion, but it could be the scripture of all religions.

Primarily Gandhi derived three basic concepts from his study and interpretation of the Gita. In the first place, he argued that both his concepts of non-violence and *satyagraha* are in consonance with the basic teaching of the Gita. In the process, he asserted that the battle scene at kurukshetra referred to in the Gita was mostly allegorical and did not refer to the actual war. It was the symbolic of the war that consistently goes on in the human heart between the force of the good and the evil. And which is why the real tenor of teachings and preachings of Lord Krishna to Arjuna is to free him from the grip of delusion and prompt him to perform his *swadharma* in a

detached manner. Therefore, it could safely conclude that the central teaching of the Gita favours non-violence rather than violence. And which is why he formulated his principle of non-violent non-cooperation, viz., *satyagraha* as an effective tool to fight the evil. For *satyagraha* could be used to fight any act of injustice, Besides, in the process, it would expand the arena of godly tendencies as both of them would emerge as co-partner in search of truth. He also supported it by his own interpretation of two key concept of the Gita, namely, *lokasangraha* and *jnajna*. The concept of *lokasangraha* interpreted to say that even spiritual mined people would have to be active in the secular field for sake of societal good. Similarly, from the concept of *yajna* he deduced his formulation that everyone is spiritually bound to contribute to the societal good by performing his *swadharma* with detached and selfless service to the people. And to him, that opens the road for *moksha*.

To sum up our entire discussion, it could be safely said that Gandhi occupied a unique place as a social-religious reformer in the Indian history. On the one hand he asserted the soundness of the Indian spiritual tradition, but on the other he did not hesitate to integrate some of the positive aspects of the western intellectual tradition, particularly derived from the 'Other West'. In fact, he integrated them and in the process he sorted out some of the problems of the Indian tradition which has accreted in the course of its historical development.

Hardiman has a valid point when he asserts that Gandhi introduced some of the western values like ethical religion, financial transparency, punctuality and time management, service to the poor and the dispossessed etc. in the lexicon of the Indian political life. Besides, he underlined the soundness of the 'other Indian tradition' and not the Brahminic tradition. His life, through his work could be easily located in the *sant-parampara*, the tradition of the Indian medieval saints like Kavi, Guru Nanak and others. However, unlike them he plunged headlong in the battle of Swaraj. But by going beyond the outer Swaraj in terms of national independence, and by underlining his concept of inner Swaraj he still retained his spiritual moorings. In a word, he occupies a unique place among the galaxy of socio-religious reformers of India as he tried to bring the Indian tradition in tune with the modern times, by ridding it of historical accretions. Besides, he also rejected the distortions of modern civilization like extreme individualism, lopsided secularization of society, its naked pursuit of a culture based on materialism and consumerism. But he was not against modernity per se. In fact, he would go down in history not only as a great modernizer of Indian but also a progenitor of a new

concept of modernity or what Hardiman calls as 'alternative modernity'.

Now I wish to discuss the relevance of some of the reformist ideas of Gandhi in the context of the emerging problems of today's Indian society. But before doing what, a word would be in order to explain what exactly is meant when we talk about the relevance of the ideas of any seminal thinker. Every seminal thinker grapples with the problems of his times as well as points the way which is of everlasting importance. That is why thinker like Plato, Aristotle, Machiavelli, Locke, Hegel, Kant and Marx continue to be discussed and debated during all the times. Nearer home our Upanishadic rishies, Adi Shankracharya, medieval saints like Ramanujam, Tulsidas, Kabir and other keep on holding the center stage of intellectual discourses. All these thinker have contributed so decisively that they could never become irrelevant. One or other aspect of their thought continues to be useful and relevant for every generation. In fact, the real test of any great thinker is that he has to be as much relevant to his own times as well as times to come.

It is in the above perspective that the issues of relevance of Gandhian reformist ideas in the context of modern Indian society could be discussed. It is true that a cursory look at the various walks of Indian society makes it clear that Gandhi and his ideas like, *Satyagraha*, *swaraj*, *swadeshi*, trusteeship and a new art of living are not to be seen in any aspect on Indian society. Not only that, our current fascination for liberalization, globalization and privatization has gone totally against the ethos of Gandhian thinking. Apparently in such a despairing situation one is discouraged to talk about the relevance of Gandhian in the present context. But a deeper and closer look at the accumulated problems confronting our people goes a long way to underscore the relevance of Gandhi in the present time. What is more, some of these problems, going beyond the boundaries of India, cover the entire world. It is in the context of these serious problems facing humankind, the real relevance of Gandhi and his thought could be understood.

Let me focus and elucidate some of these problems. In the first place, the symbiotic relationship between man and nature had been disrupted to such an extent that there is a serious threat to very existence of the cosmic order. Secondly, marginalization of millions of semi starving people is not an issue could be any longer put under the carpet. This is a breeding ground for violence and perpetual conflict for which no tangible solution is in sight. Thirdly, despite all liberals and Marxist claims of putting the common man on the centre stage of economic and political system, it appears not only a distant dream but also virtually a mirage as it keeps receding with

every new generation. The emergence of a powerful elite group both in Liberal and Marxist system is such a glaring fact that it could be hardly brushed aside. Fourthly, the emergence of a new world order with the pre-eminent position of United State of America virtually leading to unipolar world is creating havoc with the lives of many countries like Iraq, Afghanistan and Libya. All these have set people thinking about the present scenario and looking for a way out from the gathering storm and encircling gloom. It is against this background the relevance of Gandhi and his ideas have started becoming part of worldwide intellectual discourse. The primary reason for knocking at the door of Gandhi for finding solutions to these problems is that most of the other intellectual option has been tried without much success.

However, here we are not concerned with the entire gamut of Gandhian ideas. Our primary focus here is on some of his reformist ideas which we have discussed in the preceding page. To my mind, there are five areas of Indian society where in Gandhian ideas sound very relevant. In the first place, violence has assumed an alarming form in every walk of our national life. Here comes the importance of Gandhian concept of non-violent way of life. It is to be noted that Gandhi not only enriched the religious concept of non-violence but also brought it to mundane level which could be applied in the day to day life of every one irrespective of their diverse social locations. This non-violent way of life demands restructuring of every facet of life viz. religious, political, economic, social and so on. It is such a reordering of our way of life in different fields which alone could help us to find solution for our present problems.

Secondly, religion is becoming a source of perpetual conflict among followers of different religious faiths. Major reasons for such conflict is a kind of competition of one religion over the other by pointing out the lacuna of other faiths and ignoring such diverse issues as own weaknesses. Here comes the relevance of Gandhi's concept of *Sarva Dharma Samabava* or equal respect of all religions. This is multifaceted concept covering it's the peaceful co-existence of various religions, interfaith dialogues to narrow down the differences, integrating the best elements from the other faith into one's and equal respect of other religions. Gandhi developed his concept of *Sarva Dharma HSambhavain* the face of growing communal discord among the different religious groups especially among Hindus and Muslims. This problem of communal discord between Hindus and Muslims continues to be a major problem even today. His concept *Sarva Dharma Samabhava* goes beyond the western concept of secularism where the primary concern was separation of religion and politics. Gandhi even went beyond the concept of multiculturalism which is becoming so popular in

the western political discourse. But as it has been pointed out by Amartya Sen that in most of the countries of the West it is 'plural monoculturalism' and not the genuine multiculturalism that is gaining ground. It is worth mentioning that Gandhi's concept of communal accord goes beyond both plural monoculturalism and multiculturalism. That is why scholars have described Gandhi's concept as constructive multiculturalism. It goes a long way in addressing religious fundamentalism and cross border terrorism arising out of it.

Thirdly, the modern Indian society faces a number of challenges in the social front for a long time. Traditionally, Indian society has been marked by, what the sociologists call, hierarchy and holism. Though some ground has been covered during preceding decades but a lot remains to be done. Three major groups of Indian society which still remains to be integrated are tribals, scheduled castes and certain sections of Muslim community. The major threat to the Indian social fabric comes from the nonintegration of the above groups. Problems like Naxal violence, religious fundamentalism and a number of local violent outbursts are nothing but the manifestation of the continuing and deep seated divide in our society. All claims of inclusive growth and development with human face have failed to touch even the surface of the problem. It is in the context of these issues that the remedies Gandhi suggested to overcome the crisis become relevant even today. It is well known fact that Gandhi favoured reconciliation between the interests of individual, communities and the nation. His fight against untouchability and his incessant efforts to build up a bridge between Hindus and Muslims were integral parts of his policy to build up a composite and inclusive social order for India that prompted him to continue his efforts till the last days for his life. One could easily visualize his vision of India by going through his speeches during the Second Round Table Conference held 1931. Despite the best effort of the British government supported by some of the sectional leaders to paint him as representative of only caste Hindus, he held his ground and rightly claimed that he represented virtually the entire population of the country. A bird's eye view of his life would clearly reveal that his claim was not that of politician but of someone who has dedicated his life for creating such a India. Even the circumstances surrounding his assassination vindicated both his life and his honour. Even today the , kind of problems on the social front which the Indian society is facing calls for Gandhian approach.

A fourth area where Gandhi sounds very relevant is the need for laying a sound foundation for counter-culture in India. It is evident that a new political elite mostly drawn from the middle castes and dalit sections of our society has to a great

extent succeeded in taking over the reigns of political power in the country. But dominant social and cultural values which have turned out to be a drag on the Indian society continue to rule the roost. Hence, the real challenge before the new political elite is to build up a counter-culture drawn from their own experience. Some of the components of new culture could be (a) dignity of labour; (b) an non-ostentatious lifestyle putting a curb on consumer culture, (c) a social order free from holism and hierarchy and a (d) new work ethics. It is clear that some of the socio-cultural ideas of Gandhi as discussed above could provide a sound framework for a new socio-cultural awakening in the country. What is more, today Indian social situation in much more congenial for such an awakening than it was in the days of Gandhi. A number of new sections of the Indian society have joined the mainstream whose life's experiences are nearer to the kind of counter-culture which Gandhi want to build up. Hence a lot could be achieved in this direction provided there is a strong will and determination on the part of the new elite.

A fifth area wherein Gandhi sounds much more relevant is in respect of three major instruments of social change which he forged during our freedom struggle. They are: constructive programmes; EkadashVrata (Eleven vows) and Satyagraha. Constructive programmes comprising eighteen items, if implemented properly could change the face of India even today. It covers each and every walk of Indian life underlining the role of civil society in the process of social change. It could also free the people from dependence syndrome i.e. looking up to the State for every king of freebies and favour. It could restore the initiative of the people and civil society. It must be noted that Gandhian constructive programmes is entirely different from the kind of social work sought to be done by today's NGO. Gandhi conceived it as a system based on committed social workers rooted in the community and not like the present one which is basically becoming carrier oriented.

Ekadash Vrata also sounds extremely relevant today. man is losing his moral and ethical moorings and putting him back on the moral track is one of the most challenging task before Indian society. among the eleven vow's only five yamas (satya, ahinsa, asteya, brahmacharya and aparigraha) were taken from the old system and the rest six viz. fearlessness dignity of physical labour, elimination of untouchability, swadeshi and equal respect for all religions were based on Gandhi's own experience from the field. Thus, ekadashvrata was taken as means to internalize the high moral values and to bridge the real gulf between profession (kathans) and practice (karani). In view of the present degeneration of our political culture, these vows appear relevant



today more than even during the days of our freedom struggle. It goes without saying that Gandhi's most important instrument of social change remains as relevant as ever. In fact, the recent events in the Islamic and Communist world have proved, if at any proof was needed, that Satyagraha (non-violent resistance) is the only effective means for social and political change even the areas of hard-boiled dictatorship.

One may legitimately ask that if Gandhian ideas were so relevant, why were they discarded on the eve of independence even by his close followers like Nehru Patel, Rajendra Prasad, C. Rajagopalachari and others. The explanation is not too far to seek. Those were the days when there was great lure and fascination for the western model of polity and economy. What gave it an added fascination was the admixture of some Marxian elements in the planning process of the country. However by 1980s it became clear that the State could not deliver the goods. That led to the greater reliance on the market forces leading to the phases of globalization and liberalization. But market forces turned out to be unequal to the task. All these development have brought the sensitive minds of the world to the door steps of Gandhi.

India stands today at the most critical juncture of her life. The gulf between the rich and poor is ever widening. What is more, the fever of consumerism refuses to subside. Violence has taken an endemic form. Politics has reached its nadir as it has become nothing more than an instrument of self-aggrandisement. Even the civil society appears to be in the grip of cynicism and despair. In the current scenario some of the reformist ideas of Gandhi appear to promise some light at the end of the dark tunnel. However the most question remains who would put these on the national agenda.

Certainly, the organized political parties could not be expected to commit political *hara-kiri* by adopting and implementing some of these ideas. Where does the hope lie then? One could see several silver linings amidst the present encircling gloom. Of course, the greatest hope lies in the capacity of the Indian people to act in resolute and determined manner at this critical stage of our national life. The people who threw away the British imperial rule and emergency rule of Indira Gandhi could not be expected to lie low in slumber for all time to come. Besides, they are bound to be spurred by recent happening in the world where the authoritarian governments have been thrown out. In India the movements of Anna Hazare has raised the basic issue, though it may not have all the trappings of Gandhian movements. When the things go beyond certain points, the people do act. That is the real hope which has never been belied in history. There is no reason why this land of Gandhi would be an exception to

such a universal rule. There lies the hope for future action.

#### References

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4. *Ibid*, vol. 27 pp. 284-5, vol. 39, p.125.
5. Quoted in R.C Pradhan, 2011, *Reading and Reappraising Gnadhi*, New Delhi.
6. *Ibid*, p. 206, see also my paper "Relevance of Gandhi's Politics in Present India", *Dialogue* (Quarterly), New Delhi, vol. 14, No. 1, pp. 100-112.
7. "They say 'means after all means'. I would say 'means are after all everything'. As the means so the end". See in Nirmal Kumar Bose, *Selctions from Gandhi*, p. 36.
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9. CWMG, vol. XVIII, p. 184.
10. see Pradhan, p. 184.
11. *Ibid*, p. 175.
12. For Gandhi's view on Varna system and Caste System see CWMG vol. 25, p. 25, vol. 26, p. 65, vol. 27, p. 260 on Caste System see vol. 19, pp. 329-31 vol. 20, p. 8, vol. 80, pp. 222-4. see also Pradhan's *Raj to Swaraj* chapter on Indian Freedom Struggle and the Backward and the Dalit Movements.
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