

Reading Gandhi in a Post-Pandemic World

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The tragic experience of the Coronavirus pandemic showed us that solidarity among individuals and nations is not a mere event in today's world, but a moral exercise of vital importance for humanity. Therefore, celebrating Mahatma Gandhi seventy-three years after his assassination is not an insignificant ceremony of remembrance, but an urgent and pressing matter of coexistence and dialogue among the members of the human race. It is against this background that we read and practice Gandhian ideas in our world. How much of this Gandhian canon is within the grasp of a younger generation today, across spectrum, it is difficult to say. But there is no gainsaying the fact that reading and practising Gandhi today is absolutely essential for human solidarity in a world cruelly injured and divide by the recent pandemic.

There is no shadow of doubt that Gandhi remains a thinker for our times. We read him not because he is the father of the modern Indian nation, but because he raises embarrassing and critical questions for us. Moreover, if Gandhian nonviolence is a proud heritage of the human race, it is not only because it helped to free India from the British rule, but also because it continues to address social, political, economic and environmental challenges confronting humanity around the world. As such, Gandhi not only belongs to our time, but he also belongs to our children's children. Perhaps, because Gandhi was well aware of two fundamental evils that continue to split our world in two: economic inequalities and religious intolerance. Gandhi considered both of these as forms of violence. On religious intolerance, he proclaimed: "There is no such thing as religion overriding morality. Man, for instance, cannot be untruthful, cruel and

incontinent and claim to have God on his side.... That religion and that nation will be blotted out of the face of the earth, which pins its faith to injustice, untruth or violence,” Consequently, Gandhi believed that there is no room in religion for anything other than compassion. In his opinion, if people desired follow the path of religion, they had to do nothing but good. In this context, opposing the political and spiritual dimensions of Gandhian nonviolence to the violent and fanatic readings of Islam, Hinduism, Christianity and even Buddhism is not only way to salvage the message of empathetic interconnectedness in all these religions, but also to bring back the lost confidence in humankind’s natural disposition to friendship.

As for the economic inequalities, Gandhi suggested the two ideas of equal opportunity and equal distribution exemplified by the concept of trusteeship. Here again, as in the example of religious compassion, Gandhi emphasis was on human dignity and ideals like self-rule and social justice. Gandhi's idea of trusteeship arose from his faith in the principles of non-possession and service. It is true that through his faith in trusteeship Gandhi still continues to interrogate our capitalist and utilitarian ways of life. “I adhere to my doctrine of trusteeship”, he affirmed, “in spite of the ridicule that has been poured upon it. It is true that it is difficult to reach. So is nonviolence.” And he added in the same line of thought: “The question how many can be real trustees according to this definition is beside the point. If the theory is true, it is immaterial whether many live up to it or only one man lives up to it. The question is of conviction. If you accept the principle of ahimsa, you have to strive to live up to it, no matter whether you succeed or fail. There is nothing in this theory which can be said to be beyond the grasp of intellect, though you may say it is difficult of practice.”

It goes without saying that the essence of the Gandhian philosophy of struggle against injustice as to recognize that in a world of intolerances and inequalities, it is only a nonviolent

response that can enable right to prevail over might. Today we live in a world where might is controlled by the fear of death, either from a pandemic or climate change. But as we go ahead with our challenges, we should think once again of the talisman that Gandhiji gave us: “whatever you do, please ask yourself, does it help the poorest man in his worst situation”. So the million-dollar question is: what would have Mahatma Gandhi done if he were alive in 2021?

Undoubtedly, if Gandhi would have been alive and back among us, he would have been branded as a heretic, not necessarily in religious terms, but as a marginal and dissenting mind in our post-secular societies. He would also have protested against the political madness around the globe, but he would have been even more scandalized by the fact that nearly 36% of the world's population continue to live in extreme poverty.

Gandhi's practical idealism was all about love and compassion for others. Unfortunately, since Gandhi's death this virtue has been less present in our thoughts and actions. The rise of the pandemic in our global world showed us that we have lost our art of living. We now live in a world of moral blindness that Gandhi considered to be suicidal. However, we do not expect our world to look constantly toward Gandhi. That would have been too lucky. But we expect at least our children to seek enlightenment from Gandhi's thoughts and actions in order to be able to think about the challenges which remain ahead. A heavy responsibility continues to rest on the shoulders of all those who believe that many Gandhian moral and political principles are still relevant for our suffering humanity in a post-pandemic world.