

Gandhi's Symbolism and Ideology in the Socio-economic and Political Arena of Contemporary India

Rajeev S.P*

Abstract

For the past couple of decades, the Indian socio-economic and political scenario has been discussed and construed from different frames of references, both within the country and outside. New jingles and formulas of change have been brought in or reintegrated within the systems. Things have changed, ideologies have been challenged and many changes have taken place owing to various socio-political restructuring in the country. Contemporary changes in the socio-political systems have made Gandhi a matter of debate more than ever before, and various authors publish diverse views on him. Gandhi remains a strong imagery for mass movements and development in India. Various campaigns and initiatives use or overuse the ideologies and symbolism of Gandhi. This reflective paper identifies the ways in which Gandhian symbolisms and ideologies are applied and/or debated in the contemporary world and analyses some of the major socio-economic and political developments from the Gandhian philosophy or ideology.

Keywords

Gandhi, symbolism and ideology, India

Introduction

Millions across the globe revere Mahatma Gandhi and his philosophical viewpoints were admired by many famous personalities. His words, pictures

* Department of Social Work, Rajagiri College of Social Sciences, Kochi, Kerala, India. Email: rajeev@rajagiri.edu

and ideals had ‘symbolism and cognism’ in functional aspects of the socio-economic and political systems (Chakrabarty, 2015). For instance, Einstein said “generations to come will scarce believe such a man as this ever walked upon this earth” and the U.S. Secretary of State, George C. Marshall called him “the spokesman for the conscience of all mankind” (Gandhi, 2017, 110). Contemporary Indian society interprets and reinterprets Gandhi’s philosophical stands and proactively engages in assessing him in the socio-political context. However, authors like Nandy (1998) believed that Gandhi was neither a conservative nor a progressive and there were many compromises in the life of Gandhi. This was meant to reveal that there were people who disparaged Gandhian views but he was ready to listen to the dissenters. It is also noted by some authors that Gandhi and his philosophies have become alien to many new generations. Valles (2012) for instance, explains a true anecdote in his book, *Gandhi: The Alternative to Non-Violence*, that people who speak Gandhi’s own language even confused Gandhi. It is in this context that Gandhi becomes a matter of serious deliberations in the changing socio-economic and political Indian scenario.

The Philosophical Stands of Gandhi and the People’s Movements

Gandhi was not compulsively conserving the past to protect the new situations but he was effortlessly transcending the dualism of orthodoxy and iconoclasm by preaching and following simplicity as a way of life. The half-dressed (half naked Sadhu Sanyyaswi) symbolism has brought the public to him (Chakrabarty, 2015) and made people from both the working class and the upper class give him the position of a leader. This was evident from his debut community mobilisation effort at Champaran (Chakrabarty, 2015). Gandhi’s simplicity has made a tremendous contribution to the Indian political make up. For decades it was accepted that politics is not something that can be equated to a job but is a humanitarian service.

Gandhi himself was a symbol of simplicity and an icon of inclusiveness and intellectual inspiration for the people who followed him. This has made Gandhi the uniting force and the formula for post independent India’s political arena (Chakrabarty, 2015). Gandhi advocated many inclusive

cultural restructuring practices that paved way for the new socio-political technology. This technology worked against colonial subjugation but gave the impression that the British could continue colonising India with a stratified society based on caste, occupation and other factors. Therefore Gandhi could mobilise masses in the lowest working class of people using his representation. The next most important element in Gandhian philosophy was his rediscovery of women as a civilising force in the new order society (Gandhi, 2017; Nandy, 1998).

Gandhi as a Symbol in Contemporary India

Publications on Gandhi are about his ideologies (socio-economic and political philosophies), historical involvements and his biographies, and all these three evolved in India and became the finest models of many national level initiatives (Chakrabarty, 2015). However, one of the critical questions that many people have today is whether Gandhi was with Hazare, the Bharatiya Janata Party or with Congress. It may be inappropriate to make Gandhi part of any of them but they all used Gandhi as a symbol of mass mobilisation or an impacting asset at times when they thought it necessary.

The right to information act as enacted in India is considered one of the most powerful acts of this type in the world. In 1996 a meeting was convened at the Gandhi Peace Foundation and a National level campaign for people's rights to information was kick started (Singh, 2010). Thus Gandhi and his ideologies bound people together for this historical act in India.

Anna Hazare, who emerged as a contemporary social activist known as a 'Gandhian', mentions Gandhi's views on establishing the meaning of education and the fight against corruption in his book, *My Village My Sacred Land*, although one cannot find a picture of Gandhi among the people who inspired him. His fight against corruption has incorporated the Gandhian symbol in order to mobilise the people of the country. A picture of Gandhi and his 'toppi' (cap) has influenced thousands and drawn many to the much planned social activism that India witnessed for Jan Lok Pal. This made corruption a central point of debate and deliberations in

the democratic processes thereafter. In the fight against corruption, Gandhi has become a vital part in the post independent India of the 2000s.

On 2 October 2014, Prime Minister Narendra Modi launched Swatch Bharat Abhiyan and he noted specifically that a clean India would be a tribute to Mahatma on his 150th birthday. Governments in India have been using Gandhi's ideology of personal hygiene as a way to spirituality and thus endorsing the values of hygiene practices in people. The Swatch Bharat Abhiyan as one of the dream initiatives of the government has incorporated Gandhi's ideologies and symbolism. The symbol of Gandhi communicates itself to people and binds them to the cause they stand for.

Many political debates have taken place on Gandhi agreeing and disagreeing with his ideologies and symbolism. The extreme dissenters went as far as glorifying Gandhi's mortal assassin (it is believed that the historical Gandhi is dead but the civilisational Gandhi survives (Chakrabarty, 2015). However, for all the agreements and dissents, Gandhi was an imagery of great significance that reverberates strongly amongst public opinion. Thus Gandhi continues to evoke many imageries of contemporary India.

Fasting as a Feeble Weapon in Contemporary Politics

In Gandhian satyagraha, fasting, which was purificatory as well, was defined 'as a great weapon in the armoury of satyagraha' (Chakrabarty, 2015: 68) and it is mentioned as something that Gandhi learned from his mother (Nandy, 1998). Gandhi used fasting as a self-purifying exercise to provide strong moral strength to the satyagrahee who himself is willing to endure self-suffering. Irom Chanu Sharmila, although not considered an idol, remains an icon of prolonged fasting to make her views heard by the ruling parties (Singh, 2016). The 16 years of fasting was a symbol of modern India's political disinterest in listening to the disagreements. The political disinterest in dissents causes the failure of fasting in contemporary India. The second Anna Hazare fasting was also a failure and it evinced in the words: "using this one trick pony alone may not work in the long term" (*The Economic Times*, 2 August 2012).

Dalits: Gandhi vs Ambedkar

The 'Annihilation of Caste,' the text of an undelivered speech by B. R. Ambedkar, was published as pamphlet taken up by Gandhi and followed the public debate between the two men on caste in India (Roy, 2017). This continues even in modern times and especially by the Dalits who print and circulate the document. They still consider Ambedkar as more influential upon them than Gandhi in public life. Roy's work (2017) addresses the caste system that persists amongst all segments of people, years after Gandhi and Ambedkar, and its presence is strongly felt in the 'Pedagogical Universe.' Just like the author of the book, Dalits believe the caste system will persist in India until a 'radical, revolutionary social change.' Therefore Dalits place Ambedkar symbolism above Gandhian symbolism and, as advocated by Ambedkar, the love for mankind and the doctrine of non-violence is to be emulated from the 'religious and social revolution of Buddha' (Ambedkar et al., 2016).

Reification of Ideologies in Economic Liberalisation

'Gandhi meets Pepsi' was a much discussed article title authored by feminist scholar Urvashi Butalia (1994, as in Kumar, 2006) and this vividly presents the current direction of economic liberalisation of India as a consumerist society. Her own words, as Kumar (2006) quotes, "Western culture is sweeping India." Butalia announces, with exaggerated effect: "India, which contains one-sixth of the world's population, is no longer aloof and mysterious. It has dismantled its trade barriers and liberalised its economy. The philosophies of its modern founders, Gandhi and Nehru, seem as far away as Sanskrit texts. We have satellite television. We are a market. We consume" (p.119). It is argued that the direction of India's economic reforms is influenced and impressed by the television and the western consumerist ideas, especially for the new generation. The Gandhian idea of simplicity has moved from the dining table to the planning table, due to the transnational consumerist influence and the economic liberalisation pandemics.

It is a real honour to Mahatma Gandhi to launch the National Rural Employment Guarantee Programme (MGNREG |) to enhance the livelihood security of people in rural areas in his name, as he always

envisioned the improved quality of life of villages in India. One hundred days of wage-employment is guaranteed to each household in rural India, which definitely enhances the purchasing capacity of people in villages (MRD, 2019) and is believed to be one of the key strategies in eradicating poverty and unemployment. However, one of the main economic indices of poverty which has been kept as 30-40 rupees needs to be revisited and raised sufficiently for a dignified life. The MGNREG programme is a vital one but the target set for self-reliance needs to be readdressed, whether it is done by the planning commission or Neeti Ayog.

Make in India and Swadeshi

For Gandhi, the Swadeshi movement represented by charka (spinning wheel) was a means to reach the goal of 'Swaraj' (Chakrabarty, 2015). According to Chakrabarty, although they were already there, Gandhi talked widely about Swaraj and practiced Swadeshi. Swaraj was ideally moulded by self-rule and economic, political and cultural self-reliance and was the step to the former, therefore they remained intertwined. Charka very well represented the people's movement as a visual rhetoric and attracted many to join the mission. It continues to be the symbol of self-reliance, especially in the villages (Brown, 2010). This is a symbol of inclusion, especially of gender, self-reliance and empowerment. Women spinning the wheel were the images that created the picture of domestic, economic and the sacred (valuable) and this was attuned to the cultural contexts of the concept of Swaraj that Gandhi envisioned (Brown, 2010). According to Brown, charka also symbolises three distinct ideas that swaraj would not come easily, and spinning did not prove to be an easy task but these needs could be provided at a relatively low cost.

The contemporary 'Make in India' campaign tries to present a totally new India through the silhouette of a lion on the prowl, made wholly of cogs that represent 'manufacturing, strength and national pride' to compete in the global economic inclination (www.makeinindia.com). On 28 September 2019, *The Economic Times* (2019), published a title 'Much before 'Make in India', Gandhi taught self-reliance' and it seems that the charka wheels spin to improve the strength of the country in production by using technology and aiming at self reliance. It highlights the necessity

of developing an economy of self-reliance whereas Make in India must be able to serve both the purposes of self-reliance and enhanced production. A campaign aimed at creating the nation as a consumerist market place alone will not create a sustainable situation. The contemporary campaign must be able to protect the country's culture that Gandhi's spinning wheel represented, and it needs to consider involving citizens in the sustainable symbol of the concept of an indigenous economy. The Make in India lion must be able to protect the self-reliant charka. The global economic slowdown experienced even in India made many economists think that the purchasing capacity of the rural masses in India needs to be enhanced. The economic policies must have 'people first and welfare best' norms as priority indices. The more placatory constructs such as 'integral humanism' could not be rendered into practical policy initiatives in the modern market-driven, globalised world' (*National Herald*, 14 October 2019) but should be considered. Gandhi's Hind Swaraj considers technology as an innovation with social responsibility and development as collaborating in goals, which are essential to nation building (Roy, 2007). Gandhi further ascertained that there is no distinction between economics and ethics. Puri (2015) quotes 'economics that hurt the moral well-being of a nation are immoral and therefore sinful and this very well explains the morality in economy that contributes to the formation of Swaraj.'

Morality in Politics

Gandhi's view on morality is spread across all aspects of life and living. His Satyagraha and fasting and all other means evidently suggested this morality. According to Gandhi, the fast at one level is deliberated to stimulate the morality that lay dormant in his fellow beings (Suhrud, 2007) and that kindles the right decision-making. He is against any sort of violence in politics, 'Gandhi's life, words, and death articulated the issue of violence as a moral concern in all its major aspects' (Coward, 2003: 83). These are the real concerns that the contemporary violence based political party grading systems have to address. Gandhi never muted the revolutionary potential of people but he has given it a direction of self-righteousness and truth.

Gandhi also showed his compatriots with his way of living how morality becomes not only a promise but also a decision in the political system. He practiced it throughout his life by taking up a fasting to death in order to give the second instalment of money under the terms of division of assets and liabilities to Pakistan as promised by India. Though many people tried to convince Gandhi about the use of money by Pakistan against India, those attempts were repugnant to Gandhi as he placed the morality of politics higher than any other options (Chakrabarty, 2015; Coward, 2003; Kumari, 2016). Although it was conceived by different people in different ways; for Godse it was an act of appeasement of Muslims (Godse et al., 2014). It was a lesson for Indians that politics must carry morality, whether it is to their own countrymen or to the transnational agreements. Gandhi's principle of morality in politics was a lesson for the creation of modern India and it reflects a political lesson and responsibility towards the cause it stands for. Gandhi faced these issues in a particularly acute form. Gandhi's teaching of non-violence (ahimsa) was at the heart of morality and of the good human life (Brown, 2009). Until recently, political service pertaining to nation building was not a paid job but a service to compatriots. The contentious issues of pension schemes and augmented salary packages for politicians should be discussed in this context and all citizens need to be informed of the relevance of such policy swings.

Space for Political and Ideological Dissent

One of the most decisive aspects of the contemporary political scene is the limited space for dissent and it is seen worldwide, including in India. The success of a democratic system depends on many diverse pillars and one of them is the space for dissents and their expression in dialogues, the process that leads to effective decision making. Gandhi provided many instances of listening to the disagreements and he emphasised the need for it. There were disagreements expressed by Tagore, Ambedkar, and Subash Chandra Bose on some of Gandhi's political suggestions and means (Kumar, 2006; Puri, 2015), but Gandhi was ready to listen to them. Kumari (2016) articulates one such instance from Gandhi's life. When India's freedom struggle was at its peak, Catherine Mayo published her blatantly imperialist book 'Mother India.' Mayo's prejudiced view of Indian culture

and traditions generated considerable controversy among the Indian literati who called on the British government to ban the book. Mahatma Gandhi is said to have dismissed Mayo's book, describing it as "the report of a drain inspector sent out with the one purpose of opening and examining the drains of the country to be reported upon." However, with characteristic irony Gandhi added that "every Indian ought to read the book." (Kumar, 2016: 154). There were also some other instances that flouted rationalisation and bemused Gandhi's followers and critics alike. He said, "My language is aphoristic, it lacks precision. It is, therefore, open to several interpretations" (Kumar, 2006: 155). This informs the political decision makers how to deal with criticisms and differences of opinion. These may seem paradoxical but they are the sources of information for better democratic practices.

Ideas of Pluralism and Inclusiveness

The ideas of pluralism and inclusiveness stem from the understanding of humanity. Against all odds, human values and humanism prevail as the basis of inclusive practices. In other words, civilisations (modern, or industrialised or rationalised) need to pay respect to humanity and human values. "For Gandhi, every civilisation was inspired and energised by a distinct conception of human beings. If that conception was mistaken, it corrupted the entire civilisation and made it a force for evil" (Parekh, 2001: 89). In India, one of the widely discussed and questioned decisions by a segment of the people is pluralism and inclusiveness. Sometimes religious fanaticism, extreme nationalism and historical reverberations create political and social unrest amongst the citizens. Gandhi believed that the very existence and strength of India is its pluralism and inclusive practices (Kumarasamy, 2006). Respecting pluralism and advocating for an inclusive India is neither an appeasement nor political favouritism but is a conduit for the creation of a modern civilised India.

Gandhi was one of the first persons to talk about Rama Rajya and some people criticised him for imagining this. However, for Gandhi this was a perfect place on earth which promotes pluralism and an inclusive nation. He himself explained in one of his speeches that "Let no one commit the mistake of thinking . . . that Rama Rajya means a rule of the Hindus. My

Rama is another name for Khuda [another name of God in Islam] or God. I want Khudai raj, which is the same thing as the Kingdom of God on earth.” His definition of Rama Rajya is renunciation all along the line. It means discipline imposed by the people on themselves” (Howard, 2013: 64-65). He was totally against extremist views and his vision was to make the nation think along the lines of a pluralistic culture that creates a nation of different colours. The political translation of Gandhi’s Rama Rajya is a perfect democracy, where no discrimination based on wealth, colour, race, religion, gender exists. Rather, justice is established, freedom of worship is respected and the freedom of expression is sanctioned in the society for all (Howard, 2013).

Secular, Democratic and Economically Self-Reliant India

Gandhi believed in a secular, democratic and self-reliant India and these are intertwined, so that they cannot be separated from one another. This has become the core idea of the Indian constitutional framework. Political wilfulness, importance of trust, law of personal responsibility and personal honesty and authenticity are some of the prerequisites of leaders who steer the nation towards development. When Sarvodaya refers to the ‘welfare of all’, the Swaraj (freedom and responsibility) becomes the means to it (Kumarasamy, 2006). The combined means of education, space for dialogue, reconciliation, personal responsibility, truth and non-violence would create a secular, democratic and self-reliant nation.

Gandhi on Sustainable Development

Gandhi’s way to sustainability is simplicity and limiting greed. In the modern world’s ‘runaway consumptive life style’ greed and violence create burdens on the global resources, including the environment (Rajvanshi, 2010). In the context of Sustainable Development Goals (UNDP, 2019), it is high time to think about Gandhian ways of achieving the goals. The ideological and philosophical role of India as a political and economic union provides an impetus towards achieving the global goals. A reformed life style, accommodating all beings on mother earth, anchored by personal responsibility for the wellbeing of self and others, piloted in the mode of

simplicity and nature friendly, is most essential and amenable to a sustainable world (Rajvanshi, 2010). Trivedi (2007) reflects the same means as the ways to a sustainable life. Rajvanshi (2010) further equates Gandhian ideologies to the contribution of India to the world for sustainability as India includes the spiritual thoughts of Buddhism, Jainism, the yogic system and Sikhism. He cites two distinct but interrelated aspects of simple living and high thinking as the Gandhian ways to sustainability and 'the need not the greed', whether for energy consumption or wastage make the world's resources sustainable for the future. Even in environment movements, limiting one's wants seem to be important elements for Gandhi (Ramakrishnan, 2013). The second part of the title of Slate's (2019) book reads as '*...Eating with the World in Mind*' and authenticates the differences between greed and need as practised by Gandhi. The development paradigms Gandhi proposed and practised are matters of high priority and he predominantly believed that industrialisation, if not sustainable, is not appropriate for rural India and its development (Trivedi, 2019).

Conclusion

In modern India, we have no historical Gandhi with us, but civilisational Gandhi is represented in many symbolisms and ideologies. When socio-political and economic unrest creep into the normal social order as a quandary or an intricacy, people tend to look at Gandhian symbols and ideologies as machineries to espouse. Political dissents and temperaments also use Gandhi as a means of promoting popularity and many use it as a marketing strategy. However, Gandhian symbolism reminds the good citizens of their duties and responsibilities in the creation of a modern civilised India. In the wake of the call for a second Gandhi, his ideologies are still reminiscent of the formation of a secular, democratic and economically self-reliant India, involving socio-economic and political inclusiveness, pluralism, truth and self-reliance.

References

- Ambedkar, B., Anand, S., & Roy, A. (2016). *Annihilation of Caste: The Annotated Critical Edition*. London: Verso.

- Brown, J. (2009). 'Gandhi and Civil Resistance in India, 1917-47: Key Issues.' In A. Roberts & T. Ash. (Eds.). *Civil Resistance and Power Politics: The Experience of Non-Violent Action from Gandhi to the Present* (pp. 43-57). Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.
- Brown, R. (2010). *Gandhi's Spinning Wheel and the Making of India*. London: Routledge.
- Chakrabarty, B. (2015). *Social and Political Thought of Mahatma Gandhi*. New York: Routledge.
- Coward, H. (2003). *Indian Critiques of Gandhi*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Gandhi, A. (2017). *The Gift of Anger: And the Other Lessons from my Grand Father Mahatma Gandhi*. New Delhi: Gallery Jeter Publishing.
- Godse, N., Godse, G., & Mehra, V. (2014). *Why I Assassinated Gandhi*. Delhi: Farsight Publishers and Distributors.
- Hazare, A. (2003). *My Village My Sacred Land*. Pune: Relegan Siddhi Parivar.
- Howard, V. (2013). *Gandhi's Ascetic Activism: Renunciation and Social Action*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- Kumar, S. (2006). *Gandhi Meets Primetime: Globalization and Nationalism in Indian Television*. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois.
- Kumarasamy, A. (2006). *Gandhi on Personal Leadership: Lessons from the Life and Times of India's Visionary Leader*. Mumbai: Jaico Publication House.
- Make in India. Website: <http://www.makeinindia.com/home>. Accessed 20 October 2019.
- MRD (Ministry of Rural Development). (2019). 'Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act 2005.' <https://nrega.nic.in/netnrega/home.aspx>. Accessed 16 September 2019.
- Nandy, A. (1998). *Exiled at Home: Comprising at the Edge of Psychology, the Intimate Enemy, and Creating a Nationality*. Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- National Herald. (2019). 'Embrace Manmohan's economic model,' says husband, Nirmala responds, Twitterati react too.' 14 October 2019. <https://www.nationalheraldindia.com/india/embrace-manmohans-economic-model-says-husband-nirmala-responds-twitterati-react-too>. Accessed 21 October 2019.
- Parekh, B. (2001). *Gandhi: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

- Puri, B. (2015). *The Tagore-Gandhi Debate on Matters of Truth and Untruth*. New Delhi: Springer.
- Rajvanshi, A. (2010). 'Sustainable Development: Gandhian Way.' In R. Mashelkar.(Ed.). *Timeless Inspirator: Reliving Gandhi*. Pune: Sakal Papers.
- Ramakrishnan, N. (2013). *Reading Gandhi in the Twenty-First Century*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Roy, A. (2017). *The Doctor and the Saint: Caste, Race and Annihilation of Caste—The Debate between B.R. Ambedkar and M.K. Gandhi*. Chicago: Haymarket Books.
- Roy, A. (2007). 'Homespun Wisdom Gandhi, Technology and Nationalism.' In D. Ganguly & J. Docker. (Eds.). *Rethinking Gandhi and Nonviolent Relationality: Global Perspectives* (pp. 223-244). London: Routledge.
- Singh, S. (2010). 'The Genesis and Evolution of the Right to Information Regime in India.' Paper presented at a regional workshop, 'Towards a More Open and Transparent Governance in South Asia' in New Delhi from April 27-29. <http://www.iipa.org.in/www/iipalibrary/RTI-PDF/Chap-4.pdf>. Accessed 24 July 2019.
- Singh, S. S. (2016). 'Irom Sharmila ends 16-year fast.' *The Hindu*, August 2. <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/Irom-Sharmila-ends-16-year-fast/article14562315.ece>. Accessed 22 August 2019.
- Slate, N. (2019). *Gandhi's Search for the Perfect Diet: Eating with the World in Mind*. Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press.
- Suhred, T. (2007). 'Emptied of all but love: Gandhi's first public fast.' In D. Ganguly & J. Docker.(Eds.). *Rethinking Gandhi and Nonviolent Relationality: Global Perspectives* (pp. 66-80). London: Routledge.
- The Economic Times.(2012). 'Brand Anna: Why Anna Hazare failed to attract crowds this time.' August 2. <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/brand-anna-why-anna-hazare-failed-to-attract-crowds-this-time/articleshow/15300298.cms?from=mdr>. Accessed 14 October 2019.
- The Economic Times*.(2019). Much before 'Make in India', Gandhi taught self-reliance, September 28. <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/much-before-make-in-india-gandhi-taught-self-reliance/articleshow/71349220.cms?from=mdr>. Accessed 12 October 2019.
- Trivedi, L. (2007). *Clothing Gandhi's Nation: Homespun and Modern India*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

- UNDP. (2019). 'Sustainable Development Goals.' <https://www.undp.org/content/undp/en/home/sustainable-development-goals.html>. Accessed 12 October 2019
- Valles, C. (2012). *Gandhi: The Alternative to Violence*. Ahmedabad: Navajivan Publishing House.