

Mahatma Gandhi: An Apostle Misunderstood

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Abstract. Mahatma Gandhi has been an apostle of non-violence. However, Gandhi had been and is still misunderstood by many as a leader. Very often he would withdraw a mass movement during India's freedom struggle against the British. As Gandhi was a firm believer in non-violence and he would never compromise with it. Hence, he would often retort to withdrawing a particular movement. These decisions would often leave many of his followers confused. My paper would highlight on the reasons of Gandhi being misunderstood as a leader not only at the political, social and economic levels but also by his family members. The paper aims to remove this misunderstanding, which has clouded our thoughts about this great leader, by interpreting the opinions of various authors. The paper will also lay stress on the relevance of Gandhi in today's times.

Keywords: Non-violence, Champaran, Non-Co-operation, Khilafat, Harijan, Vaikam.

1. Introduction

We often are in the habit of associating a personality who becomes synonymous with a movement or with the making of a nation. Similarly, Mahatma Gandhi, like many other world leaders is considered to be representing the Indian independence struggle. While browsing through the pages of the history of Indian independence, one finds that no leader is as 'tall' as Gandhi. He mesmerized the entire Indian nation (1915-1947) through his novel methods of non-violence and non-co-operation. Non-violence wasn't a new concept in India. It's a common concept among Hindus and the followers of Jainism in India. Non-co-operation was a new concept which he had thought upon during the Khilafat Movement. According to Louis Fischer, Gandhi was meditating on a word that would sound like a slogan and summarize the entire programme of action. This, he found in the word 'non-co-operation'. Gandhi was of the opinion that non-co-operation was 'negative enough to be peaceful but positive enough to be effective'. Though Gandhi had taken up the cudgel of independence struggle, and he was a leader *par excellence*, has not stopped many commentators from criticizing and questioning his mode of operation.

2. Areas of Controversy

The areas of controversy surrounding Gandhi that will be discussed in the following pages:

- Gandhi: a hijacker of the national movement
- Gandhi's role in Non-Co-operation and Civil Disobedience Movement
- Gandhi's role among the depressed classes
- Gandhian economics
- Gandhi and the partition of India

3. Gandhi : A Hijacker of the National Movement

As we read through the Gandhian era of Indian politics, we might notice that Mahatma Gandhi played a dominating role in the decision making process of the Indian National Congress often surpassing older leaders. We must understand one fact that when Gandhi came back from South Africa, there was a gap in the leadership of the Indian National Congress (INC). The Moderate form of politics of appeasement was at low ebb and there was no other leader whom the Indians could look up to. The fading out of the moderate form of politics can be stressed from the fact that they included only a handful of educated people who had little or no connection with the people at the grass-root level. As a result the Indian National Congress was still a

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‘microscopic minority’. The great Maharashtrian leader Bal Gangadhar Tilak was in Britain and Annie Besant[†] as a leader of the Home Rule League had lost her popularity. Therefore, it can be concluded that the stage was set for M.K. Gandhi to take up the responsibility and unleash an entire new form of struggle. We need to keep in mind that Gandhi was not keen to make a career out of politics. We can probably say that politics just ‘happened’ to him. Another example that can be mentioned here is that of the Champaran satyagraha.

Champaran is a place in the state of Bihar. Here landless farmers and peasants were forced to grow indigo instead of other food crops. These farmers were given little or no compensation by their British landlords. They were also under the burden of heavy taxation. A farmer from Champaran by the name of Rajkumar Shukla initially tried to persuade other important leaders for help. But seeing their luke-warm response, Shukla then decided to get in touch with Gandhi. Gandhi realizing the importance of the situation immediately agreed to help the farmers.

As an ‘intern’, his initial years in India after coming from South Africa, was spent in traveling the entire breadth of the country. He was thus, well aware of the situation in the country side and knew the level of colonial exploitation that was prevalent. This helped him in taking up the cudgel of the freedom struggle. Further, he made the Indian freedom struggle a mass movement where people from all castes and communities were included. Let us also not forget that Gandhi, after becoming a member of the Indian National Congress was given the ‘minor’ job of drafting the Congress Constitution. He thus got an opportunity to train and nurture a new form of the Indian National Congress. Gandhi knew that a mass movement involved a spontaneous interaction between the masses and the leader. According to Bipan Chandra, a leader has another job and that is to guide and educate people. This Gandhi did with accuracy. And Gandhi for this reason came to be respected. His qualities both as a lawyer and the fact that he belonged to the bania (business) caste helped him to understand situations and deal with them in an appropriate manner.

4. Gandhi’s role in Non-Co-operation and Civil Disobedience Movement

Mahatma Gandhi’s greatest controversies had been regarding his sudden calling back of a movement especially when it, according to others was at its peak. One cannot help but forget when Gandhi decided to join the leaders of the Khilafat Movement. Gandhi had wanted this as an opportunity for collaboration of both Hindus and Muslims to protest against the imperial system. But due uncontrolled circumstances like Kemal Pasha of Turkey making Khilafat a non-issue or the Mappila[‡] violence in the Malabar coast turning communal, Khilafat movement went astray. Gandhi had put a lot of emphasis on the need of mutual understanding between both religious groups. Unfortunately, many had mistaken him for giving too many concessions to the Muslims. On the other hand the Muslims were unable to trust Gandhi. In fact Gandhi in 1942 had categorically accepted the truth that he did not know how to bring about the unity between Hindus and Muslims.

Another incident that needs special mention is the tragic situation that took place at Chauri Chaura near Gorakhpur in the Indian state of UP. The slaughter of the policemen gave a severe jolt to Gandhi and he immediately decided to suspend the movement. The reason that Gandhi gave was that the country required some more time to prepare on the path of non-violence. Similarly, the satyagraha that was planned at Bardoli[§] in Gandhi’s own state of Gujarat was withdrawn. Young Congress leaders like Jawaharlal Nehru felt that the time was perfect for a confrontation. The withdrawal of the movement made many of Gandhi’s followers disheartened.

5. Gandhi’s Role among the Depressed Classes

After he was released from prison in 1924, Gandhi devoted himself totally to the cause of the ‘untouchables’. He also gave them a new name ‘Harijans’ or children of God. In order to cleanse Hinduism of its caste system, Gandhi went on to argue with the orthodox Hindus about its legitimacy. Gandhi was in

[†] Brown, *Gandhi :Prisoner Of Hope*, p. 153.

[‡] Chandra, *The Making of Modern India: From Marx to Gandhi*, p.191.

[§] Fischer, *The Life of Mahatma Gandhi*, p.254.

favour of reforming Hinduism from within. He therefore took a soft stand while explaining to the Nambudiri Bahmins at Vaikam^{**}. Educated Dalits like Dr. B.R. Ambedkar felt that a more radical stance was required. David Hardiman is of the opinion that Ambedkar, although he had later demanded separate electorates for Depressed classes, was to a certain extent, inspired by Gandhi. The main controversy of Gandhi on the question of Untouchables came when he went for the Round Table Conference and was surprised to find Ambedkar representing his caste and demanding separate electorates for them. It is imperative to state here that Gandhi had severe reservation regarding separate electorates.

6. Gandhian Economics

It might sound quite strange but Gandhi, was not in favour of industrialization^{††}. He had written in *Hind Swaraj* about it. He calls them evils of modern civilization. He said that people, under the influence of industrialization become factory slaves or slaves to materialism. This, according to him could lead people to morality and religion. He was in favour of village industries as majority of Indians were rural based and it would provide them with the much needed employment. Gandhi, according to Thomas Weber, did not want destruction of factory system but he wanted a regulation to prevent any kind of excess. He wanted decentralization of production and consumption which would take place near the source of production.

7. Gandhi and the Partition of India

People have often questioned the role of Gandhi in 1947 when India got its freedom. Some are of the opinion that he could have played a more proactive role in order to prevent partition of the country. It's wrong to say that Gandhi did not do much to save the country from partition. We must understand that he was never in favour of communalism in any form. Right from the beginning he had made efforts to unite Hindus and Muslims. As Judith Brown has mentioned that Gandhi, had to struggle in order to keep the Indian National Congress united. The British on the other hand left no stone unturned to divide the Indians. All efforts that Gandhi made was considered by many as trying to provide concessions to the Muslims. The Indian National Congress then was under the leadership of young leaders who were convinced that partition was inevitable. At the time of partition, Gandhi had become old and feeble. He had realized that both sides were adamant and therefore he could not do much to prevent this mishap.

8. Conclusion

To conclude, one has to agree that the controversies that Gandhi was embroiled in were a result of the fact that his ideas were in advance of his times. Morality for Gandhi was more important than anything else. That is why, when people resorted to violence he would decide to withdraw the movement. Probably it was because of this reason that Gandhi was upset with tribal protest movement as they took to violence. Gandhi's ideas along with him as a person are both a mystery to many. But a little more thoughtful effort will make us realize the relevance of Gandhi's ideologies even today.

9. Acknowledgement

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^{**} Hardiman, *Gandhi In His Time and Ours*, p.128.

^{††} Brown, Parel (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion*, p. 139.