

Some essentials of Mahatma's Philosophy as Foundations of a Re-emerging
Nation and
Rediscovery of Humanity

By

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Let me express, at the outset, my delight on being back in Patna, after many decades. This was the place where I learnt a lot more about democracy, and the dangers of autocratic rule than many shelves worth of books. As a young lawyer, I responded to the call for Total Revolution by Shri. Jai Prakash Narayan, that great son of Bihar and a moral beacon for a generation of youngsters who came of age at a time when many of the greats of our struggle for independence had passed away, and the nation faced a crisis of confidence – of morals and of democracy, and indeed seemingly was abjuring the foundational belief in essential and inalienable human dignity of its citizens. Bihar of those years taught me lessons in moral courage – arguably the greatest of all lessons for any Indian who seeks to participate, in small or large measure, in the task of building a nation that cares for the weakest first.

Let us recount a few facts of history, to frame the rest of the speech. Bihar has been the “karmabhumi” for some of the greatest of Indians. From Buddha to Emperor Ashoka and Mahatma Gandhi to Ram Manohar Lohia, and of course Lok Nayak JP, Bihar seemed to provide the strength for resistance, and the moral compass to recognize that the task of any civilization is to serve the cause of finding peaceful co-existence based on justice that recognizes the inherent and inalienable dignity of every human being. That we are gathered here to speak about the Mahatma, 102 years after the historic Champaran Struggle, I hope is a signal of the ever readiness of Bihar to always be receptive soil to the inescapable task of every generation re-discovering its moral compass and staying steadfast in leading lives of dignity. We must also note that exactly 100 years have elapsed since the passage of the infamous and draconian Rowlatt Act which extended the war time legal authority of the State for indefinite preventive detention without effective trial and judicial

review. Of course, I am sure that most people would also remember that Mahatma Gandhi bathed in the waters of Arabian Sea and led a procession to a temple to mark the onset of the first nation-wide non-violent disobedience movement. That a century later, in a free India that was made possible by what the Mahatma had initiated, we still hear advocacy of the need for Rowlatt Act style control of our citizens has to necessarily viewed as an immense tragedy.

In about thirty years after that historic struggle for justice in Champaran, India - a land, and more importantly its people, that had been enslaved for a few hundreds of years by a foreign colonial power - emerged as an independent nation-state. A nation that had been convulsed by repeated violence for well over two thousand years re-emerged on the basis of a struggle of re-instantiation of a civilizational ethos with roots in the finest thoughts of human beings ever expressed. The power of truth, of essential one-ness of humanity, and the principle non-violence were justifiably expected to guide us, as well as rest of the humanity, to a safer destiny. It has become fashionable for some people to now claim, based on dubious factual assertions and unsustainable analysis, that the Mahatma had nothing to do with either independence or the re-emergence of the nation. Worryingly, such claims go distressingly further – it has also become common place for some misguided people to claim that the message of the Mahatma is even less relevant in the world of today. To so claim, let us make very clear today, is to turn our back, not only on the Mahatma but also the finest impulses of our ancient civilization. A more brutal betrayal of India we would not be able to countenance.

Before I proceed any further, let me therefore make it abundantly clear my utmost humility to have been asked to speak on the occasion of the 150th birth anniversary of one of the greatest human beings to have ever graced the Earth. That an intellectual giant like Einstein could gasp and say that future generations would scarce believe that one like the Mahatma ever walked amidst us, or even hardened politicians like Leon Blum, then a former premier of France – after remarking that he had never met the Mahatma, did not know his language and that he had never set foot in India – declared “... yet I feel the same sorrow as if I had lost someone near and dear....[T]he whole world has been plunged into mourning by the death of this extraordinary man” should give us a preliminary idea as to why I must necessarily feel humble, and yet privileged to speak about the Mahatma.

We must remember that when he was killed, by a cowardly assassin, the World had just emerged from centuries of international conflict, and devastating wars on a global scale that led to the killing of scores of millions. Humanity was tottering on the precipice of the Atomic age, staring at the real possibility of destruction of all life on the Earth. Intense competition for resources, and consequent conflicts for geo-political domination, all founded on the misguided philosophical frameworks that posited an unhindered pursuit of material growth, with the humane core of our very beings being set aside, was roiling humanity in series of existential crises. India itself had just emerged from hundreds of years of colonial rule on the basis of a struggle premised on principles of non-violence, but many parts of it had given in to atavistic impulses of the most horrible kind - where neighbours raped, mutilated and killed each other in wanton frenzy and rage - coldly stoked by forces and world views that had greater stake in conflict and dehumanization, rather than in

peace and welfare of humanity. The World was about to enter into an all-encompassing arms race, in which the needs of the living – of the poor and of the voiceless majority – were to be sacrificed on the altar of desire to kill. The death of Mahatma – the apostle of peace – at the hands of an assassin misguided by a philosophy of hatred - not merely shocked the world, but gave it pause to rethink about the madness from which the Mahatma had sought to lead it from. The sheer incongruity, of the life of one of the greatest apostles of peace being ended by a bullet, seared the imprint of the shame of immorality of our ways for all times to come. The United Nations lowered its flag for a man who had nothing, bar a few simple personal effects, had no home and held no official position. As one of Mahatma's autobiographers, Louis Fischer, would remark: "Humanity lowered its flag".

The reasons are probably not that difficult to grasp, if only we allow ourselves to search our core selves. As most reasonable people began to understand that the forces unleashed by certain ideological paradigms would devour the World itself, they also began to grasp the significance – through the haze of machismo and the smog of hatred – of the message of non-violence that the Mahatma had been relentlessly preaching and practicing for decades. Even to the men of war, who had spent a lifetime training for and waging war as an alleged pragmatic necessity of human existence itself, insistence on non-violent resolution of conflicts – nay even making non-violence a primary pillar of life, individual and social – seemed to provide a doorway to an inner conscience at the very root of our biological and spiritual existence. Netaji Subhas Bose, one great son of India who quarreled with the Mahatma's philosophy and sacrificed his life waging war to get India's independence, in the midst of that very war implored his fellow countrymen to follow the

“Father of the Nation”. George C. Marshall, a five star general of the US Army, and Chief of Staff of United States – one who had overseen one of the greatest expansions of war time machinery - was groping to explain the bereavement felt on a universal level. Out of that groping he declared:

“Mahatma Gandhi was the spokesman for the conscience of mankind.”

It would be unreasonable to expect that in the course of a fifteen to twenty minute lecture one would be able to explain comprehensively Mahatma Gandhi’s philosophy. Indeed, he was not a philosopher in the conventional sense – i.e., someone who wrote extensively as an academic philosopher. He was an activist in search of peaceful co-existence premised on foundational equality of all human beings. He walked over seventy thousand miles, amidst the poor and the destitute of India, even as the privileged had begun to travel many thousands of miles in a single day via air. His writings spread across many scores of thousands of pages – from correspondence to his lectures and writings – coupled with his thousands of acts of great courage, sacrifice and moral fibre, seem to bring ready tears to the eyes of all reasonable men and women. His life itself was a continuous explication of his core philosophical insights. Mahatma’s was a life-long search for a philosophy in action, whether personal or public. As a lifelong student in search for that philosophical perfection, his was a quest for the truth to abolish falsehood, to find inner balance and external harmony. Hence, while the contexts and descriptions of his actions could change, his core beliefs about what it is to be a human being, as individuals, as members of societies and broader broader humanity, and even the World at large, remained firm.

Non-recognition of the vastness of his philosophy of action, both private and personal, even by his admirers misdirects the query, or rather queries, about the man, his life, his philosophy and significance for our times. Consequently, for purposes of this lecture, what I propose to do here is sketch, in broad brush strokes, two divergent visions about nature of human beings, the one that essentially posited that man is only or can only be evil and/or greedy and the other more optimistic vision of human nature – the one that the Mahatma kept re-affirming throughout his life as a social and political activist. By a “vision” I mean here a pre-analytic framework that ontologically specifies the outer limits of what human nature is capable of. And by sketching the framework of such ontologies, and contrasting them, I submit we can also begin to glean the primordial importance of Mahatma and his philosophy to the formation of India as a nation-state and indeed the charting the future course of mankind itself.

The first vision, or ontological specification, of human nature is essentially informed by an understanding that human beings are at their core, evil or necessarily only greedy as a consequence of biological and material impulses to be selfish. There are principally two normative frameworks of social and individual action that stem from such an impoverished view of human nature. The first one, probably akin to a Hobbesian perspective, views human nature as being only capable of evil and hence to be always under the thumb of the Leviathan. If one specifies that human beings are incapable of forming associations and leading lives on anything other than selfish motives, and that these are held to be invariant and unchangeable, then the question would be about whether social and individual action based only on such impulses are to be treated as good or bad from the perspective of the

collective. If viewed as bad, the conclusions then are that the collective interest, determined by dominant and controlling voices, would trump over individuals and smaller associations in a totalitarian communist form of social and political organization. If the perspective is that actions premised solely on selfish motives are all that human beings are capable of, and that it will lead to the best outcomes for all or most – or if we speak tautologically, whatever is achieved is to be treated as the best in any case -, then the dominant voices in laissez-faire markets (in which unhindered pursuit of material satisfaction of ever burgeoning needs was to be the sole normative guide) would determine what goals are to be pursued and how the benefits of social action are to be distributed. In both the views, material foundations of human desires are the sole determinants of what is possible for human beings.

Mahatma Gandhi's vision was diametrically opposite to the impoverished view of man's nature and what he can train himself to be. From his deep insights in the finer thoughts of ancient Indian philosophy, all tested on the anvil of empathy and principles of non-violence, and compared with and validated by other empowering thoughts from across the World, the Mahatma derived the principles of non-violence and nobility of means. If one were to look for Upanishidic foundations of Mahatma's philosophy, it would have to be the two great "mahakavyas": (i) "Aham Brahmasmi" and (ii) "Tatvam Assi". It is the recognition of the indefeasible "Brahman", the universal principle or primordial content in all – as the essence of every human being, and indeed every life form – according to the Mahatma that would necessarily lead to non-violence, and peaceful co-existence. Consequently, for the Mahatma, man was always capable of achieving greater perfection – a perfection that limits the impulses from the material constraints and makes

him or her be in touch with his/her own inner self and that of the others. The recognition of this truth, and constantly seeking to affirm it in every action – and if one were to fail, to accept failure as an inescapable part of human journey and make ceaseless striving as the essence of being human – according to the Mahatma would deliver us from excessive greed, ego and hence of the impulses to view others as beings of lesser valence. It is the ability to view “others” as of lesser valence – irrespective of whether the “other” is a human being or any other biological entity – was posited by him as leading us astray from the path of truth towards endemic and unending cycles of violence and counter violence.

A good bit of modern scholarship, from both the sciences and the social sciences, now validates the correctness of Mahatma Gandhi’s propositions. Yuval Noah Harari, one of the leading contemporary scholars – in socio-biological history – posits that what enabled mankind to become a successful species was not merely the growth of the size of the brain, but the development of the abilities to coalesce and cooperate in achieving abstract goals and values. In a parallel sense, Amartya Sen’s life-long work has been the explication of the Gandhian view that neither biology nor identity are to be viewed as the limits of what values we choose in setting the course of social action and organizing the distribution of consequent benefits. In a World that is hurtling towards potential environmental disaster, and irresponsible nuclear sabre rattling has again begun to inform international discourse, we need to recognize that it is Mahatma Gandhi’s philosophy that sets the correct normative course. And it starts by imagining human beings as being capable of living in accord with the mahakavyas “Aham Brahmasmi” and “Tatvam Assi”. Gandhian thought necessarily sets aside the impoverished view of nature

of man as inherently limiting, and insists that we can set much higher standards of action for ourselves and live by them.

It is truly unfortunate that many modern commentators, even so called liberals, have begun to view Mahatma Gandhi's role in the freedom movement as but one part – and for some even a minor part. Their analysis is essentially wrong. Such thoughts, I humbly submit, simply misunderstand the totality of “freedom” that Mahatma Gandhi tried to lead our country into. His was a battle not merely to get the British to leave the country, but also lead the country to a stage where it can discover the true potential of the genius of its immense humanity.

As demonstrated in Champaran itself, the battle for India's freedom was not merely political, but a reclamation of its soul. A soul that had wandered from its sublime moorings, in the finest of human thoughts and impulses. For twenty two hundred years after Ashoka, barring a few intermittent periods of sanity in which the core principles of essentiality of human beings informed our striving, we had been wracked by the brutalities of discrimination, hatreds and violence. While the national spirit continued to exist in dim memories, the construction of the new nation-state could not have been premised, as the Mahatma repeatedly stressed, on any set of principles other than the truth of essentiality of human dignity, and the realization of that truth through service to the weakest. Consequently, conquest of impulses of greed and rage and eliminating them as the organizing principles in our individual lives and our collective actions were to be the value premises that we seek to strive for.

At the risk of oversimplification, I would buttress the above with an observation. That, if we were to view a nation-state as a zone that is free of conflict in which the human potential of each and every citizen can be nurtured and realized, then obviously we would also have to abjure violence as a way of resolving our conflicts. One might argue that the legal set up of the State would ensure such a result. However, the Mahatma realized and repeatedly stressed that such a view would necessarily be misleading. Mere declaration of a legal state, based on pious principles, did not mean that its peaceful existence would be immediately assured or even sustained indefinitely. The obvious danger was of course the nation-state itself falling into the hands of the rapacious elite, who refused to abjure violence or insatiable greed. The second danger was the oppressed thinking of equality, and of freedom, as an opportunity and a right to oppress the previous oppressor. This, state of dehumanization – that Paulo Freire and Ram Manohar Lohia described as the weakness of totalitarian approaches – would only continue human misery, trapping human beings in an unrealized and conflicted state. For the Mahatma, not only were the principles of non-violence based on recognition of indefeasible essentiality of humanity in every human being deontological necessities, but also utilitarian imperatives. A nation - that had been riven by deep seated prejudices, discriminations of status, religion and separated by region and languages - needed a larger motive that could move the collective soul. That is what the Mahatma supplied to India. If we can even begin to contemplate of ourselves as a genuine nation, of one people taking their rightful place in humanity, willing and able to contribute to the larger goal of protection of life itself on the Earth, then surely that was made possible only by the one and only Mahatma in living memory. We necessarily have to think of Subhas Bose declaring, in the midst of organizing war, Mahatma Gandhi to

be the “Father of the Nation” as a recognition of that essential role of the life of the Mahatma and is his philosophy.

What I have been attempting to do, for the past 15-20 minutes, is to try and summarise, to the best of my ability, the greatest philosophies of action – individual and collective – that has ever been genuinely attempted by a man on Earth. The hope is that we can all reflect again and again on his thoughts and evaluate the current discourse, in India and the World, on the anvil of the transformative philosophy that the Mahatma specified as the only feasible framework for rediscovery of the true India and indeed the true humanity. Let me recount what Mahatma said in his own words:

“Constitutional and democratic government is a distant dream so long as non-violence is not recognized as a living force, an inviolable creed, not a mere policy.¹... Science of war leads one to dictatorship pure and simple. Science of non-violence can alone lead one to pure democracy²..... You will face defeat if you use your swords; not only that, but your swords will be turned against your people, men and women alike.³... A votary of ahimsa remains true to man’s faith if the spring of all his actions is compassion, if he shuns to the best of his ability the destruction of the tiniest creature, tries to save it, and thus incessantly strives to be free from the deadly coil of himsa.⁴..... Use truth as your anvil, non-violence as your hammer and anything that does not stand the test when it is brought to the anvil of truth and hammered with ahimsa, reject as non-

¹ Vol LXVIII, p. 390, The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi.

²Vol LXVII, p. 404 Ibid

³ Vol. XVIII, p. 64, Ibid

⁴ Vol XXXIX, p. 279, Ibid.

Hindu.⁵

It would of course be superfluous for me to go beyond what the greatest of human beings, the Father of our Nation, had said:

“No matter how weak a person is in body, if it is a shame to flee, he will stand his ground and die at his post. That would be non-violence and bravery.⁶.... We should never fear but always worship truth. We should do that which our heart believes to be true.⁷”

May we always be the children of Gandhian thought, and be the messengers of truth and non-violence.

⁵ Vol XXVI, p 374, Ibid.

⁶ Vol XCIII (Suppl Three), p. 29, Ibid.

⁷ Vol. XLII, p. 208

