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Gandhi's enduring example: the Power of Non-violent Action

Almost everyone has heard of Gandhi. In the remotest corners of the world there are Gandhi statues and squares and streets named after Gandhi. Who was Gandhi and what was his message at the time he lived and led my country to freedom and what is his relevance for the modern world and for Tunisia today? In the words of Mary E. King, a biographer of Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr., 'Gandhi was ... a pioneer in leading eight militant struggles – against racism, against colonialism, against the caste system, for popular democratic participation, against economic exploitation, against the degradation of women, against religious and ethnic supremacy, and on behalf of nonviolent methods for social and political transformations. Because of the breadth of his concerns, there is, in a sense, a different Gandhi for each reader ... As long as there is strife, hostilities, ethnic cleansing, religious unrest, internal conflicts and threats of military occupation, people will turn to Gandhi. His usefulness will not end unless conflict ceases.'

The first 20th century leader to successfully confront the cult of violence and the injustices of racism, colonialism, casteism and other such political and social evils, and who fashioned an effective non-violent strategy for doing this, was Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, revered by millions as the 'Mahatma', or Great Soul.

In a century that has the dubious distinction of being the most violent in history he confronted, non-violently, the largest, most powerful empire in the world and secured freedom for India, which then had a fifth of the world's population, and induced wide-ranging political, economic and social change within it. He subsequently inspired non-violent people's struggles which achieved decolonisation worldwide, ended racial oppression in USA and South Africa and terminated dictatorships in Poland, Rumania, Czechoslovakia, East Germany, Latvia, Lithuania, Philippines, Russia, Chile, Serbia, Georgia and Ukraine. His continuing inspiration is seen in the heroic struggles of ecologists, environmentalists and others worldwide. Besides, he has more books written about him and more information centres and societies all over the world to promote his non-violent strategy than any other modern leader.

It was not a given or something automatic that India should have waged a non-violent struggle to win her independence: in the first 15 years of the nineteenth century, violent revolutionary fervour had gripped the imagination of young leaders in India who wished to end the huge injustice and mental and physical enslavement to which India was sentenced by colonialism. Several

British officials were assassinated. Many revolutionary societies grew which preached bomb-making and violence. Into this atmosphere, Gandhiji came from South Africa where he had first practised his ideas of non-violent political action or *Satyagraha* with significant success, and started to speak about truth and non-violence. Initially scoffed by many Indian leaders, Gandhi succeeded in getting the Indian National Congress, and the Indian people, to adopt his non-violent strategy for national liberation only because of his total identification with the poverty-stricken Indian people, high moral stature, innovative communication, management and strategising skills and the impressive results his *Satyagraha* campaigns produced 1920 onwards.

His dedication to non-violence was uncompromising. In 1918 he launched a non-cooperation movement nationwide which involved the Indian masses for the first time. However, when some violent incidents were committed by the people against some policemen, Gandhiji cancelled the whole movement even though it had built up an exhilarating momentum, stating that the people needed to be trained better in the ideal of non-violence, to the bewilderment of the Indian people and the rest of the Indian National Congress leadership.

This 'militant non-violence', Gandhi said, was 'not a weapon for the weak. It is a weapon for the bravest and the strongest'. This non-violence, as always in Gandhian thought, meant not only avoiding violent action, but cleaning the heart of hatred and bitterness. In Gandhi's words, 'hate the sin, but love the sinner'. The impact of Gandhian thought on national liberation, anti-dictatorship and anti-racism movements was profound and transformative, I will mention here only a few: Martin Luther King Jr. was won over to Gandhian non-violence in 1956 after hearing a lecture on it. He visited India in 1959 to learn from Gandhi's disciples about the tools to practise it. On his return, he wrote that he was convinced that non-violent resistance is the most potent weapon available to oppressed people in their struggle for freedom. Starting from the Montgomery bus boycott of 1961, Dr. King used the weapon of *Satyagraha* for eight years, achieving more advancement for American blacks than had been achieved in the hundred years since the Civil War.

In the South African struggle against apartheid, Nelson Mandela has acknowledged the debt of his country's struggle to Gandhian thought and techniques. He has stated 'though separated in time, there is a bond between us, in our shared prison experiences, our defiance of unjust laws and in the fact that violence threatens our aspirations for peace and reconciliation.'

In diverse other struggles against oppressive regimes around the world, including in Chile, Bolivia, countries of Eastern Europe, Gandhian ideas and tools have been successfully deployed, thus vindicating Gandhi's belief that if the cause is just, and you are prepared to struggle in the way of truth and non-violence, and to undergo self-suffering, then victory will undoubtedly be yours.

Gandhiji's socio-economic impact is as striking as his political impact. His determination to stop the unjust treatment of the lower castes of the traditional caste system of India, his assertion of the importance and sanctity of manual labour, his tireless efforts at fostering Hindu-Muslim unity, his insistence on the participation of women in our freedom struggle which contributed directly to their emancipation and his call for a simple sustainable lifestyle and conservation of natural resources were all major elements of his leadership and were concerns on which he thought and wrote constantly.

In 1919, there was great concern about the fate of Ottoman Turkey and particularly about the Caliph's continued control of Islam's holy places. Gandhiji fully supported the struggle of India's Muslims to ensure a just settlement for the Ottoman Caliph and launched a combined struggle for self-rule in India and for the revision of the post World War I Treaty of Sevres imposed on Ottoman Turkey from October 1920 to March 1922. Gandhiji worked till the end of his life to ensure unity between Hindus and Muslims and for safeguarding all rights of Muslims within India.

The impact of Gandhi's call was most dramatic in the case of women's participation in public life and their emancipation. He called on Indian women to join the freedom struggle. Initially they came as volunteers at Congress sessions but became active participants in the non-cooperation movements, the movement to violate the unjust British law which prohibited Indians from making salt, and the movement to boycott foreign cloth. Thus, women who had never stepped out of their homes overnight started picketing liquor shops and burning foreign cloth. At Gandhiji's behest, there grew also a love for simplicity and a move away from ostentation in women's dress. Indian women for the first time in their history thus combined their roles as wives and mothers with their new roles as 'non-violent warriors'. With independence came full legal equality for women with men and universal suffrage.

Gandhi stressed the importance of indigenous languages and rootedness in one's own culture. He encouraged the use of Indian languages in political speeches and writings. His impact on the style of dress and food of wealthy Indians was stark: rich lawyers, businessmen and princesses gave up their clothes and furnishings and cars and splendid horse carriages, and began wearing coarse hand-spun and hand-woven clothes and eating the simplest Indian food. In Gandhi's own words 'I want the culture of all the lands to be blown about my house as freely as possible. But I refuse to be blown off my feet by any. I refuse to live in other people's houses as an interloper, a beggar or a slave'.

Finally, what is Gandhi's message to us in today's world? Gandhiji said 'My life is my message' and this is perhaps true of no political leader to the degree to which it is true of him, with his total openness and transparency, his insistence on preaching only what he practised. His only guidance came from what he called his 'inner voice'. The truths he asserted were: one man can make a difference, strength comes not from physical capacity but from an

indomitable will, he who fears, fails, and if no-one else joins you in a righteous cause, walk alone.

Gandhi's enlightenment revealed itself also in his deep respect for all religions other than his own, even though he was a devout Hindu. He often said that he was as much a Muslim, Christian, Sikh, Buddhist, Jain and Parsee as he was a Hindu. At his prayer meetings there were readings from all the holy books. He also freely forgave those who were his bitterest critics and enemies, and spoke only of his regard and admiration for them. In his own inspiring words, 'if we want to cultivate a true spirit of democracy, we cannot afford to be intolerant. Intolerance betrays want of faith in one's cause'.

We have seen a wonderful example of Gandhian non-violent political agitation in the Revolution for Dignity & Liberty that the Tunisian people wrought so bravely nearly 3 years ago. The spirit of non-violence and peaceful resolution of conflict can be kept alive if there is a sufficient will for it.

In affirming that 'Each of us must be the change we wish to see in the world', Gandhiji was calling upon each one of us to provide leadership in our respective spheres whether in government, business, the military, as teachers or students. Every day we are confronted with situations of untruth, injustice, propaganda or violence. By refusing to go along with it, by confronting and combating it without violence, we can make a positive difference to the little world around us. Gandhi's example can thus be followed by the humblest as well as the greatest among us.
