



Sachin Kame, Untitled, Acrylic on canvas, 2008, 47 x 71 in
Image from the exhibition BHPU, courtesy of Saffronart

The age of Gandhi

AS THE WORLD STANDS ON THE THRESHOLD OF A MONUMENTAL CHANGE, LEAVING BEHIND THE DEBRIS OF COMMUNISM AND CAPITALISM, IT IS TIME TO LOOK FOR A NEW IDEOLOGY.

COULD MAHATMA GANDHI HOLD THE ANSWERS?

by **Jamuna Rangachari**

Many people are turning to Gandhi in the wake of recent terror attacks," reported newspapers post the traumatic Mumbai terror attacks. The book sales of his autobiography and other books had increased steadily since the Jaipur blasts, with people realising increasing-

ly that anger and violence cannot really resolve anything.

In another part of the world, Barack Obama's victory in the US Presidential elections could not have been a better tribute to Martin Luther King's dream of an America where all human beings would have equal

rights, and this too was an indirect tribute to Gandhi, who influenced King.

Winning over hearts

The municipal corporation of Delhi that had not implemented the RTI for months, was forced to do so after a peaceful, determined satyagraha put up by the volunteers of Parivartan, an NGO committed to the implementation of RTI. Notably, this step was taken after many attempts at approaching and convincing the officers in charge.

Arvind Kejriwal, co-founder of Parivartan and winner of the Magsaysay award, is certain that satyagraha and RTI combined can solve all the problems of the country as it aids 'involvement' of the people in all sectors.

Purna swaraj

Gandhi's talisman of seeing whether an action/policy benefits the poorest of the poor still needs to percolate at all levels so that we achieve true freedom for all or purna swaraj.

This, to Gandhi, was not an idle dream. He suggested methods that could make such a thing possible – sarvodaya (projects that benefit all), gram swaraj (village self-governance) and swadeshi (local production), being some of them. Though India is now independent, the challenges in these areas remain glaringly unresolved.

For a two-digit growth figure is not really a cause for celebration if it is not combined with social equity and justice. One cannot have a country with multinationals, malls, and ostentatious consumption at one level, and farmers' suicides and extreme poverty at another.

Whether we get into a cycle of violence and retributions or work actively towards purna swaraj, entirely depends on us.

Gram swaraj

With crowded cities gasping for breath and innumerable villages lacking the means of sustenance, we are seeing a skewed developmental model that needs to be tackled urgently.

Fortunately, there is hope. The Panchayat Act and Panchayati Raj and the recent NREGS act can ultimately drive developmental efforts to the village with good leadership, paving the way for the gram swaraj envisaged by Gandhi where, "every village is its own republic, independent of its neighbours for its own vital wants and yet interdependent for many others in which dependence is necessary."

Land reforms

Land reforms now have another serious angle with a food crisis deepening the world over. The success, though with certain limitations, of Acharya Vinoba Bhave's Bhoodan movement in the 1950s, inspired the setting up of Ekta Parishad, an organisation that seeks to ensure that the state implements existing land and agriculture laws or creates new ones that are favourable to the poor and landless.

Its chairman, P V Rajagopal, a Gandhian, who played a role in convincing the Chambal valley dacoits to surrender, is extremely concerned that the Adivasis are being displaced and ignored in the development agenda of the country. He says, "We are now in a situation where an Adivasi could be asking us, "in order to promote your supermarkets, why are you destroying our supermarkets?" pointing out that the Adivasis had a totally sustainable relationship with the forest which provided food, medicine and shelter to them – a fact that has many lessons for us.

Sarvodaya

A wise patriarch or matriarch knows that it is absolutely essential to ensure that whatever family action they take must be acceptable and fair to all members of the clan, whatever their age, income, talent and ability. 'Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam', says a Vedic epithet – the world is your family. Therefore, when one views the community, country and even the world as a family, one's actions represent sarvodaya, the well-being of all. All actions that we take are to be value additions to this world and never harmful,



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Such a perspective happens to be economically viable too. Jaswantiben Popat's Lijjat Pappad, Anna Hazare's village development, Mohammed Yunus' micro credit operations and many more are examples of how this is really a win-win formula.

Global issues

On the other hand, globalisation has not made the globe a better or safer place, as one would have hoped. We have many means of transport but do not know if we can reach our destination safely. We have more than adequate goods but do not know how long the world will remain environmentally habitable. We can grow crops on a huge scale but do not know the means to survive if one harvest fails.

Climate change and environmental degradation are caused mainly by consumerism and can be tackled by heeding his statement that the earth produces enough to satisfy everyone's need but not everyone's greed.

Consumerist overdrive

'Carbon footprint' is a common term used today but Gandhi had pointed out the dangers of overflowing materialism much earlier. He once said that a good parameter to use to check whether one should do or acquire something was to extrapolate it to the whole population. What if everyone owned a Maruti car, bought brand names, or had six-figure salaries? Obviously, the earth would not be able to sustain this. What cannot be used by the many should be eschewed by the few, he advocated, for it militated against the principle of natural justice.

Environment

Long before the damaging consequences of chemical manure and technology-heavy farming had come to light, Gandhi was

already writing against them.

The starvation and even suicides of farmers remind us of the dismal agricultural scene in many parts of India. Does Gandhi hold the answers here too?

Shital Sharma from the University of Agriculture, Dharwad, avers, "Organic farming is truly in keeping with Gandhi's principles as "it is sustainable agriculture that ensures the farmer remains self-reliant; it is beneficial economically to the farmer in the long run and is beneficial to the health of the consumer." He is quite certain that with this approach, the agriculture scenario would improve and the farmers would be more in control of their lives.

Ethics in business

'Satyam fraud', we read with horror. Within a week, another giant software company was reported to be following unethical practices. With faith going to an all-time low, people woke up to the fact that ethics and business can never be divorced, a fact Gandhiji pointed out ages ago.

This is being recognised more and more in business. "Trusteeship in business, the way shown by Gandhiji, is the only way to succeed in the long run," said Anu Agha, ex-chairperson of Thermax in a recent conference on Humane Capitalism.

N R Narayana Murthy, named one of *The Economist's* top 15 most-admired global leaders, takes one of his most important business lessons from Mahatma Gandhi. Quoting him in a talk at Stanford University, Murthy told listeners: "Be the change you want to see in the world." Murthy is also actively involved in many educational initiatives with his wife, Sudha Murthy.

Indeed. Gandhi's principles of trusteeship, which affirms that the rich should hold themselves as trustees of the wealth they possess, and his discernment that the means are as important as the ends, are eternally relevant for responsible business.

Sarva Dharma Samantva and religious conflict

The Ram-Rahim Nagar slum residents in

Behrampur, Ahmedabad, have truly shown such an example. With a mixed population of Hindus and Muslims, a Hanuman temple and dargah existing side by side, the residents have ensured that the unrests in 1969, 1985, 1992, and 2002 have not disturbed the harmony in their area. They have even housed and provided relief to the riot-affected people in 2002 in a nearby mosque. Residents keep nightlong vigil so that no outside elements can enter and spread rumours and hatred among them. They are a sterling example to those who remain uncertain on whether peace can truly prevail in mixed groups when communal passions are stirred up.

In our battle against terrorism and fanaticism, the negative manifestations of religion, we often try hard to distinguish between secular values and religious values, religion and spirituality, dogma and faith but sometimes, these distinctions become merely a play with words. Gandhi recognised correctly that ‘sarva dharma samanatva’ – respect for all faiths is really the tonic for communal harmony. The key word is respect. For, it is not

mere tolerance, but respect that brings about harmony and one of the best ways this can be achieved is the praying together of everyone with prayers of all religions, as Gandhi did personally and with inmates of his ashram.

Gandhi, revisited

The unique thing about Gandhi is that he himself was a striking reminder of the principles he espoused, rather than merely a theorist, which is why each step of his journey is important.

One must also remember that the principles of Gandhi are heavily inter-linked, for instance, one cannot apply ‘sarvodaya’ and not ‘sarva dharma samanatva’, as well-being of all essentially includes respect for all faiths. Similarly, ahimsa is essential for sarvodaya.

So, really, once one starts, all of them will start becoming a part of oneself and the society and hopefully the entire world, slowly but surely. ☯

Modified and updated from the Life Positive April 2007 cover story, Walking the Mahatma's talk.

We welcome your comments and suggestions on this article. Mail us at editor@lifepositive.net

