

Essay on Mahatma Gandhi – An Apostle of Peace

“Generations to come, it may be, will scarce believe”, wrote Einstein, “that such a one as this, ever in flesh and blood walked upon this earth.”

Mohandas Karam Chand Gandhi was born on October 2, 1869, at Porbandar, a small town on the western coast of India which was then one of the many tiny states in Kathiawar. He was born in a middle-class family of the Vaishya caste. His grandfather had risen to be the Dewan or Prime Minister of Porbandar and was succeeded by his son Karamch and, the father of Mohandas. Putlibai, Mohandas's mother, was a saintly character, gentle and devout, and left a deep impression on her son's mind.

When Gandhi was born the British rule had already been established in India. The uprising of 1857, known as the Mutiny, had merely served to consolidate the British adventure into an empire. India had effectively passed under British tutelage, so effectively indeed, that instead of resenting alien rule the generation of educated Indians was eager to submit to the “Civilizing mission” of their foreign masters. Political subjection had been reinforced by intellectual and moral servility. It seemed that the British empire in India was safe for centuries.

When Gandhi died it was India, a free nation that mourned his loss. The disinherited had recovered their heritage and the “dumb millions” had found their voice. The disarmed had won a great battle and had in the process evolved a moral force such as to compel the attention, and to some degree, the admiration—of the world. The story of this miracle is also the story of Gandhi's life, for he, more than any

other was the architect. Ever since his grateful countrymen call him the Father of the Nation.

And yet it would be an exaggeration to say that Gandhi alone wrought this miracle. No single individual, however great and powerful can be the sole engineer of a historical process. A succession of remarkable predecessors and elder contemporaries had quarried and broken the stones which helped Gandhi to pave the way for India's independence. They had set in motion various trends in the intellectual, social, and moral consciousness of the people which the genius Gandhi mobilized and directed in a grand march. Raja Rammohan Roy, Ramkrishna Paramhansa, and his great disciple, Swami Vivekananda, Swami Dayananda Saraswati, Dadabhai Naoroji, Badruddin Tyabji, Syed Ahmed Khan, Ranade, Gokhale, Tilak, Aurobindo Ghosh, and Rabindranath Tagore, to name only a few. Each one of them had in his own field created a consciousness of India's destiny and helped to generate a spirit of sacrifice which in Gandhi's hands became the instruments of a vast political-cum-moral upheaval. Had Gandhi been born hundred years ago he could hardly have achieved what he did. Nevertheless, it is true that but for Gandhi, India's political destiny would have been vastly different and her moral stature vastly inferior.

But though Gandhi lived, suffered, and died for Indians, it is not in relation to India's destiny alone that his life has significance. Future generations will not only remember him as a patriot, politician, and nation-builder but much more. He was essentially a moral force, whose appeal is to the conscience of man and therefore, universal. He was the servant and friend of man as man and not as belonging to this or that nation, religion, or race. If he worked for Indians only it was because he was born among them and because their humiliation and suffering supplied the necessary incentives to his moral sensibility. The lesson of his life, therefore, is for all to read and follow. He founded no church and though he lived by faith,

he left behind no dogma for the faithful to quarrel over. He gave no attributes to God save truth and prescribed no path for attaining it save an honest and relentless search through means that injure no living thing. Who dare, therefore, claim Gandhi for his own except by claiming him for all?

Another lesson of his life that should be of universal interest is that he was not born a genius and did not exhibit in early life any extraordinary faculty that is not shared by the common man. He was no inspired bard like Rabindranath Tagore, he had no mystic visions like Ramakrishna Paramhansa, he was no child prodigy like Shankara or Vivekananda. He was just an ordinary child like most of us. If there was anything extraordinary about him as a child, it was his shyness, a handicap from which he suffered for a long time. No doubt, something very extraordinary must have been latent in his spirit which later developed into an iron will and combined with a moral sensibility made him what he became but there was little evidence of it in his childhood. We may, therefore, derive courage and inspiration from the knowledge that if he made himself what he was, there is no visible reason why we are not able to do the same.

His genius, so to speak, was an infinite capacity for taking pains in fulfillment of a restless moral urge. His life was one continuous striving, an unremitting sadhana, a relentless search for truth not abstract or metaphysical truth, but such truth as can be realized in human relations. He climbed step by step, each step no bigger than a man's, till when we saw him at the height he seemed more than a man. "Generations to come, it may be, will scarce believe", wrote Einstein, "that such a person as Gandhi, ever in flesh and blood walked upon this earth." If in the end, he seemed like no other man, it is good to remember that when he began he was like any other man.

Struggle for Freedom and Martyrdom:

The British were unable to control the situation in India which was steadily becoming worse. Famine and disorder had sapped the foundations of imperial prestige. Britain emerged from the war victorious but physically exhausted and morally sober. The general elections of 1945 returned the Labour party to power and Mr. Attlee, the British Prime Minister, unwilling to lose India altogether by persisting in the Churchillian policy of blood and iron, promised "an early realization of self Government in India." In the meanwhile, elections were to be held and a Constituent Assembly convened to frame a constitution for a united India. A Cabinet Mission arrived from England to discuss with Indian leaders the future shape of a free and united India but failed to bring the Congress and Muslims together. Having encouraged Muslim separatism the British were now unable to control it.

On August 12, 1946, the Viceroy invited Jawaharlal Nehru to form an interim government. Jinnah declared a "Direct Action Day" in Bengal which resulted in an orgy of bloodshed. Shootings and stabbings took place in many places in India. This blood-red prologue to freedom was pure agony for Gandhi. He was staying in the Bhangi colony (untouchable's quarters) in Delhi from where day after day he raised his voice against violence. But his voice seemed a voice in the wilderness.

Then came the news of a large-scale outbreak of violence against the Hindu minority in the Noakhali district of East Bengal. Gandhi could no longer sit quite. He must beard the lion in his own den and teach the two communities to live and let live if necessary at the cost of his life. If he could not do that his message of non-violence had fallen on deaf ears and the freedom to which he had brought India so near was not the freedom he had dreamt of. And so against the pleading of his Congress colleagues who did not wish that he should risk his life, he left for Noakhali in Bengal where the Muslim League

government was in power. While in Calcutta he heard that the Hindus of Bihar had retaliated against the Muslims repeating the outrages of Noakhali. Bitter sorrow-filled Gandhi's heart, for he always felt the misdeeds of his co-religionists more acutely than he did of others and Bihar was the land where he had launched his first satyagraha in India. As penance, he resolved to keep himself "on the lowest diet possible" which would become "a fast unto death if the erring Biharis have not turned over a new leaf." Fortunately, "the erring Bihari's were restored to sanity by this warning and Gandhi proceeded to Noakhali.

In the noble book of Gandhi's life, this chapter is the noblest. Just when political freedom was almost achieved and the State apparatus of power he renounced it and embraced the hazards of a lone pilgrimage to plant the message of love and courage in a wilderness of hatred and terror. In a region where 80 percent of the people were Muslim, most of whom hostile, where there were hardly any roads and almost no means of modern communication, where hundreds of Hindus had been butchered, women raped and thousands forcibly converted, and where hordes of unruly fanatics still roamed the countryside in search of loot and fresh victims. Gandhi pitched his camp, refusing police protection and keeping only one Bengali interpreter and one stenographer with him. At the age of seventy-seven, he went barefoot from village to village, through a most difficult countryside, where low, marshy patches had to be crossed on precarious, improvised bridges of bamboos. He lived on local fruit and vegetables and worked day and night to plant courage in the hearts of the Hindus and love in the hearts of the Muslims. "I have only one object in view and it is a clear one: namely, that God should purify the hearts of Hindus and Muslims and the two communities should be free from suspicion and fear of one another."

Thus he lived and suffered and taught in Noakhali from November 7,

1946, to March 2, 1947, when he had to leave for Bihar in answer to the persistent requests. In Bihar also, he did what he had done in Noakhali. He went from village to village, mostly on foot, asking people to make amends for the wrongs they had done to the Muslims. Unlike Noakhali he was besieged by worshipping crowds wherever he went in Bihar. He collected money for the relief of the injured and homeless Muslims. Many women gave away their jewelry. Harrowing tales were pouring in of the massacre of the Hindus in Rawalpindi in Punjab and but for Gandhi's presence, the Biharis might have again lost their heads in a frenzy of retaliation. "If ever, you become mad again, you must destroy me first", he told them.

In May 1947, he was called to Delhi where the new Viceroy, Lord Mountbatten had succeeded in persuading the Congress leaders to accept Jinnah's insistent demand for the partition of India as a condition precedent for British withdrawal. Gandhi was against partition at any cost but he was unable to convince the Congress leaders of the wisdom of his stand.

On August 15, 1947, India was partitioned and became free. Gandhi declined to attend the celebrations in the Capital and went to Calcutta where communal riots were still raging. And then on the day of independence, a miracle happened. A year-old riot stopped as if by magic and Hindus and Muslims began to fraternize with one another. Gandhi spent a day in fast and prayer.

Unfortunately, the communal frenzy broke loose again on August 31 and while he was staying in a Muslim house, the safety of his own persons was threatened. On the following day, he went on a fast which was "to end only if and when sanity returns to Calcutta". The effect was magical. Those who had indulged in loot, arson, and murder amid shouts of glee, came and knelt by his bedside and begged for forgiveness. On September 4, the leaders of all communities in the

city brought him a signed pledge that Calcutta would see no more of such outrages. Then Gandhi broke the fast. Calcutta kept the pledge even when many other cities were plunged into violence in the wake of Partition.

When Gandhi returned to Delhi in September 1947, the city was in the grip of communal hysteria. Ghastly tales of what had happened to Hindus and Sikhs in West Pakistan had kindled passions that burst into a conflagration when the uprooted victims of this tragedy poured into the city. In the frenzy of vengeance Hindus and Sikhs had taken the law into their hands and were looting Muslim houses, seizing mosques, and stabbing innocent passersby. The Government had taken stern measures but it was helpless without public co-operation. Into this chaos of fear and terror came this little man in the loin-cloth to bring courage to the frightened, comfort to the afflicted, and sanity to the frenzied.

On his birthday October 2, when messages and greetings poured in from all over the world, he asked: "Where do congratulations come from? Would it not be more appropriate to send condolences? There is nothing but anguish in my heart . . . I cannot live while hatred and killing mar the atmosphere."

His anguish continued and increased. Though his presence had calmed the fury in Delhi, sporadic violence had occurred. The tension was still there and the Muslims could not move about freely in the streets. Gandhi was anxious to go to Pakistan to help the harassed and frightened minorities but could not leave Delhi until the mood of the people was such as to assure him that the madness would not flare up again. He felt helpless and since, as he put it, "I have never put up with helplessness in all my life", he went on a fast on January 13, 1948. "God sent me the fast", he said. He asked people not to worry about him and to "turn the searchlight inward".

It was turned, although it is difficult to say how deep the light penetrated. On January 18, after a week of painful suspense and anxiety, representatives of various communities and organizations in Delhi including the militant Hindu organization known as . came to Birla House where Gandhi lay on a cot, weak but cheerful, and gave him a written pledge that “we shall protect the life, property, and faith of the Muslims and that the incidents which have taken place in Delhi will not happen again”. Gandhi then broke the fast amid the chanting of passages from the various scriptures of the world.

Though the fast had touched the hearts of millions all over the world, its effect on the Hindu extremists was different. They were incensed at the success of the fast and felt that Gandhi had blackmailed the Hindu conscience to appease Pakistan. On the second day after the fast, while Gandhi was at his usual evening prayers, a bomb was thrown at him. Fortunately, it missed the mark. Gandhi sat unmoved and continued his discourse.

It had been practice for many years to pray with the crowd. Every evening, wherever he was, he held his prayers in open ground, facing a large congregation. No orthodox ritual was followed at these prayers. Verses from the scriptures of various religions were recited and hymns are sung. In the end, Gandhi would address a few words in Hindi to the congregation, not necessarily on a religious theme but on any topic of the day. Whatever the topic, he raised it to a moral and spiritual plane so that even when he talked of a political issue it was as if a religious man were teaching the way of righteousness.

Sometimes these congregations were a few hundred only and sometimes they ran into hundreds of thousands, depending on the place where the prayers were held. Men of all faiths and of all political persuasions were free to come. There was no restriction. Sitting on a raised platform he was always an easy target. So far the only protection he

needed was the form of the unbounded adulation of the adoring crowds anxious to touch his feet as is the Hindu way of showing reverence. But now the times were not congenial. Violent passions had been aroused. Hatred was in the air. Hindu fanatics were impatient with his doctrine of love and looked upon him as the main stumbling block to their lust for vengeance against Muslim atrocities in Pakistan. As in Pakistan, so here, the cry of religion in danger served as a cloak of idealism for the demon of barbaric passions, he had been warned. The police were nervous. But Gandhi refused any kind of police protection. He cared not to live except by the power of love. Forty years earlier when his life was threatened by a Pathan in South Africa, he had replied: "Death is appointed end of all life. To die by the hand of a brother, rather than by disease or in such other way, cannot be for me a matter of sorrow. And if even in such a case, I am free from the thought of anger or hatred against my assailant, I know that will redound to my eternal welfare."

These sublime words proved to be prophetic. On January 30, 1948, ten days after the bomb incident, Gandhi hurriedly went up a few steps in the prayer ground in the large park of the Birla House. He was to attend a conference with the Deputy Prime Minister, Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel, and was late by a few minutes. He loved punctuality and was worried that he had kept the congregation waiting. "I am late by ten minutes," he murmured, "I should be here at the stroke of five." He raised his hands and touched the palms together to greet the crowd that was waiting. Everyone returned the greeting. Many came forward to touch his feet. They were not allowed to do so, as Gandhi was already late. But a young Hindu from Poona forced his way forward and while seeming to do obeisance fired three point-blank shots from a small automatic pistol aimed at the heart. Gandhi fell, his lips uttered the name of God (He Ram). Before medical aid could arrive the heart had ceased the beat that had beaten only love of man.

Thus died the Mahatma, at the hands of one of his own people to the eternal glory of what he had lived for and to the eternal shame of those who failed to understand that he was the best representative of the religion for which he suffered martyrdom.

The nation's feeling was best expressed by Prime Minister Nehru when with a trembling voice and a heart full of grief he gave the news to the people on the radio:

"The light has gone out of our lives and there is darkness everywhere and I do not quite know what to tell you and how to say it. Our beloved leader, Bapu as we call him, the father of our nation, is no more. . . The light has gone out, I said, and yet I was wrong. For the light that shone in this country was no ordinary light. The light that has illumined this country for these many years, and the world will see it and it will give solace to innumerable hearts. For that light represented the living truth, and the eternal man was with us with his eternal truth reminding us of the right path, drawing us from error, taking this ancient country to freedom . . ."

Such men cannot die, for they live in their achievements. There were many, each one of which, judged by the greatness of its execution or in its results for human welfare, would have made his name immortal anywhere in the world. He brought freedom from foreign subjection to a fifth of the human race. The freedom he wrought for India naturally includes that of Pakistan, for the latter was an offshoot of the former. Of no less importance was what he did for those who were once known as the untouchables. He freed millions of human beings from the shackles of caste tyranny and social indignity. By his insistence that freedom was to be measured by the well-being of the millions who were living in the villages, he laid the foundation for a new way of life which may one day well provide an effective alternative to both a regime and an acquisitive economy. His martyrdom shamed his people

out of communal hysteria and helped to establish the secular and democratic character of the Indian State.

The moral influence of his personality and of his gospel and technique of non-violence cannot be measured on any material scale. Nor is its value limited to any particular country or generation. It is his imperishable gift to humanity.