



Remembering Bapu

Let Us Practice, Not Preach Gandhi

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Every single year since MANUSHI was founded in 1978 we have kept the MANUSHI office open and functioning on Gandhi's birthday, October 2, as a tribute to the memory of Bapu – the greatest *karmayogi* of our epoch. Among other valuable lessons, Bapu also taught us that it is our *dharmic* duty to disobey bad laws. I believe the Government insults Bapu's memory by enforcing a compulsory holiday on his birthday on in all offices and even private business establishments.

If the Government must indulge in tokenism on Gandhi Jayanti, it would be more appropriate if it encouraged government employees to spend that one day cleaning up their messy offices and toilets with their own hands and observe a *maun vrat* (silence fast) on October 2. If those in power learnt to pay tribute to Gandhi's life by simple gestures like inculcating respect for physical cleanliness and encouraging their employees to keep their tables, their office rooms, corridors and toilets clean and orderly, it might trigger off a major transformation in their mind-set. A person who spends long hours everyday of his working life amidst the squalor, disorder and filth that have become the hallmarks of our *sarkari* offices is bound to have very low self-

esteem. And people with low self-esteem easily become petty tyrants and extortionists.

It is unfortunate that very few people take Gandhi's philosophy seriously enough to make it a guide for action in their own lives. Instead, it has become fashionable to cynically use his martyrdom as a sword to fight political battles with one's opponents, as is happening in the controversy surrounding Veer Savarkar's role in the assassination of Mahatma Gandhi.

I honestly don't care whether Savarkar was implicated by association rather than active collaboration with Godse who assassinated Gandhi. In fact, those who killed Gandhi did India a favour by saving him from the ignominy of

total marginalisation by his own Party as India came near Independence. After he had served their purpose, most Congressmen who took over the reins of power seemed to have found his services, his philosophy, and his ideas altogether redundant and dispensable. Had he lived longer, he would have probably been prevented from playing a meaningful role in the nation's affairs — just as he was pushed aside on the issue of Partition.

The conduct of the Congress Party had so begun to depress Bapu that he recommended it be disbanded as a Party and give way to new political formations. He appealed to all those who genuinely believed in the Congress ideology to go out and involve themselves in the task of rural reconstruction and work for *gram swaraj*. Unfortunately, all the causes dear to his heart, including his emphasis on probity in public life suffered neglect after Independence. Consequently, the image of politicians took a nosedive in post-Independence India. For example, in the heydays of the freedom movement, Indian films would depict a *khadi* wearing person with a Gandhi cap on his head as a symbol of the spirit of freedom, a belief in *swadeshi*, a commitment to selflessly serving the poor and the deprived. However, in today's Bollywood films, a person sporting these symbols is commonly used as a symbol of hypocrisy, greed and corruption.

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It is because his own Party stopped taking him seriously that most young people in India grow up thinking of Gandhi as a pious crank with very little relevance for the modern world. Even though many of the most important world leaders and statesmen and women who have played a creative moral role in shaping world history – be it Nelson Mandela, Vaclav Havel, Aung Sang Sun Kui or the Dalai Lama – draw their inspiration from Gandhi or feel connected with his world view, in our own country Gandhi is either worshipped in caricatured form or used as a meaningless icon. His name is often dragged in to fight partisan battles unrelated to his values and example.

The neglect of Gandhi's ideas and philosophy is also evident from the fact that we do not have even one world class institution in India doing research in Gandhi's philosophy. Institutions built in Gandhi's memory such as the Gandhi Peace Foundation and Gandhi Pratishthan are suffering callous neglect and indifference. Compare the research facilities they collectively offer with institutions named after Jawahar Lal Nehru such as the Nehru Memorial Library and Research Centre and you realize how little Gandhi matters for today's Congressmen. Let the Congress Party do a rough and ready survey to find out how many young Congressmen – corporators, district chiefs, even the new generation of ministers – have ever seen, leave alone read a book on or by Gandhi and whether they believe his ideas have anything to offer them in their own battle for survival within the Congress Party.

A Timely Favour

Instead of lashing out at the RSS and Hindu Mahasabha for the murder of Gandhi, the Congress Party owes them a debt of gratitude because had Gandhi stayed alive, he is likely to have led *satyagraha* after *satyagraha*

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against the Congress government's policies in post-Independence India. The Pakistani ruling establishment could get away with jailing their Frontier Gandhi, Abdul Ghaffar Khan, for most of his life. However, Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi could not have been subdued by such means. Therefore, his assassination was a timely favour for the Congress Party. By making him a martyr, Godse helped the Congress set him aside, put him up on a meaningless pedestal, pay token tributes to his memory once or twice a year and occasionally use his



quotations in speeches delivered in international fora to try to convince the rest of the world that the Indian government occupies high moral ground.

However, with all their flaws, Congressmen still have some legitimate claim to the legacy of Gandhi. Some in the Party, like the late Rajiv Gandhi and his helpmate Mani Shankar Aiyar, at least salvaged a small part of Gandhi's vision of *gram swaraj* to push for a measure of devolution of powers to Panchayats. But it is indeed sad to see the selective use of Gandhi by the Communists despite the fact that they were no less contemptuous of Gandhi in his lifetime than the worthies of the RSS. They called him an agent of the bourgeoisie, a running dog of imperialism, a class enemy of the poor and toiling masses. They accused Gandhi of unleashing the forces of obscurantism in Indian politics by mixing religion with politics. Their character assassination of Gandhi has proved more deadly than the actual assassination by Godse who with that one bullet confirmed Gandhi's status as an epochal world hero. By contrast, the character assassination of Gandhi by the Left encouraged an atmosphere of arrogance and disdain towards Gandhi by the educated elites of India. Even today for most leftists Gandhi is relevant only for the purpose of taking pot shots at the Sangh Parivar. If they take basic elements of Gandhi's vision seriously, their ideological core mandating permanent class war can not be sustained .

Those who romanticise violence against "class enemies" as a revolutionary act and have a tradition of celebrating bomb-throwing leaders and cadres as national heroes, do not have the moral right to condemn the cult of violence preached by the self styled revolutionaries of the Hindutva brigade. If one is not as unconditional

as Gandhi in accepting non-violence as an article of faith in politics, one has no moral rights to condemn others for using violence, simply because their notion of wrong doers is different.

This is not at all to say Gandhi was above criticism. He made many blunders – some Herculean ones – as for example, his launching of the *Khilafat* movement without understanding its implications either for India or for Turkey, his mishandling of Jinnah, and his refusal to accept the Motilal Nehru-Jinnah formulation on dominion status as an interim arrangement which might well have averted the Partition.

However, those of us who take Gandhi seriously with all his limitations ought not to use him for partisan purposes. Instead we should focus on imbibing in our own lives the following basic principles that would show that we respect Gandhi's message and methods:

1) Adopt truth and non-violence as the guiding principles of all our

actions and thoughts. This includes avoiding exaggeration, refraining from overstating our case. Most important of all, we must refrain from demonising our opponents.

2) Ensure that the gap between our practice and our precept is as narrow as possible. If we lead by example, rather than sermons, people will more readily forgive us our mistakes, especially if we have the humility and honesty to openly admit them rather than adopt an offensive strategy to cover up for our errors.

3) Build a politics around consensus and try to win over our opponents with sound reasoning, by grounding our politics on principles of fair play and justice, rather than trying to browbeat them into submission or silence by virulent attack.

4) Treat politics as a sacred mission, rather than as a means to acquire the power to manipulate and

subjugate fellow citizens. Power should be perceived as a limited and sacred trust rather than a means for self-aggrandisement.

5) Weigh each issue on merit and come up with creative solutions to problems rather than judge each issue through the prism of deadening ideologies, which become a substitute for creative ideas and promote servility of thought and emotion. The dead hand of ossified ideologies only creates stalemates and civil strife, which prevent India from moving along the path of progress and prosperity. Gandhi's truth was based on his attempts to understand and be finely tuned to the needs and aspirations of his people. He succinctly expressed his scepticism of ideology driven people in the following words: "I have a horror of all isms, especially those that attach themselves to proper names". □

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