

Gandhi and Human Rights

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Abstract

Human rights can only be achieved through an informed and continued demand by people for their protection. Human rights education promotes values, beliefs and attitudes that encourage all individuals to uphold their own rights and those of others. It develops an understanding of everyone's common responsibility to make human rights a reality in each community. Human rights education and training constitutes an essential contribution to the long-term prevention of human rights abuses and represents an important investment in the endeavor to achieve a just society in which all human rights of all persons are valued and respected.

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Human rights are the rights a person has simply because he or she is a human being. Human rights are held by all persons equally, universally, and forever. Human rights are inalienable: you cannot lose these rights any more than you can cease being a human being. Human rights are indivisible: you cannot be denied a right because it is “less important” or “non-essential.” Human rights are interdependent: all human rights are part of a complementary framework. For example, your ability to participate in your government is directly affected by your right to express yourself, to get an education, and even to obtain the necessities of life. Another definition for human rights is those basic standards without which people cannot live in dignity. To violate someone’s human rights is to treat that person as though she or he were not a human being. To advocate human rights is to demand that the human dignity of all people be respected. In claiming these human rights, everyone also accepts the responsibility not to infringe on the rights of others and to support those whose rights are abused or denied.

Gandhi won world renown by his doctrine and practice of nonviolence. His writings and works, however, have many facets touching almost every aspect of human life. It is not yet possible to objectively assess his historical significance. Much of his writings and practices could be subjected to varied interpretations. Indeed, they mean many things to many people, the more so since his death. But one aspect of his seems beyond controversy that he was endowed with a clear vision of human rights and human values; what do they mean in this technological age and in the ages to come? In his writings and, what is of much more significance, in his day-to-day life, he preached and practiced the principle that the ultimate sanction of authority and of public policy rests in the respect for the dignity of the individual and his welfare.

To have a critical evaluation of Gandhi’s views on the human rights, it is pertinent to recall here what is generally referred to as the “revolutionary developments of the middle twentieth century” in terms of international concern with human rights. From the dawn of civilization, the rights of man, derived from the laws of Nature, from religion, from human experience and from observation and reflection, have been a refuge against arbitrary use or determined depredation by the human might, a rallying cry of resistance to tyranny and oppression. With the passage of time, these “rights” gained

Recognition in a systematic way in different forms in various parts of the world. They found expression, for instance, in the Greek political system and in Roman Law in Europe and the “Panchayat System” in India. The Magna Charta (in England), the American Declaration of Independence, the French Declaration on

the Rights of Man, and the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia could be cited as important landmarks in the evolution of the concept of human rights. For the people of the non-Western world of the colonial era, a declaration of great historical significance was the clarion call made at the turn of the century, in India, by Bal Gangadhar Tilak: "Swaraj is my birthright, I shall have it".

Each of these declarations and institutional frameworks, referred to above, made important contributions, but lacked conceptual totality of what constitutes human rights. Each of them was either narrowly sectarian or generally vague. For instance, in the Greek political system, "rights" existed only for "citizens" and not for "aliens" or "slaves". Likewise, the American Declaration followed by a constitutional arrangement ("amendments") contained fairly exhaustive guarantees for the rights of the individual but in practice, their operational aspect was confined to those who constituted what was abbreviated. as WASP (White, Anglo-Saxon, and Protestant). The blacks (of African origin) of the land were referred to as "negro" but not as a man. Again, the French Declaration of Rights of Man (Equality, Liberty and Fraternity) lacked precise meaning and content. The Bolshevik Revolution of Russia viewed human rights in the context of class struggle.

It was by the middle of the twentieth century that there emerged, as a result of the convergence of several historical forces (including developments in science and technology), a concept of human rights universal in its approach, comprehensive in its content (including inter alia a set of economic rights, right of people to self-determination, rights of stateless persons, refugees, etc.) and reaffirming the principle that man is the measure of all things. Besides, what amounted to a revolutionary development was the principle of international concern with human rights. This development found expression in the Charter of the United Nations-the first international instrument which, in unequivocal terms, asserted the fundamental obligations of the world community to promote human rights and fundamental freedoms for all without regard to race, color, sex, language, or religion. Before 1945, any human rights question was considered to be a matter between a state and persons within its territory-an issue of domestic jurisdiction. As such it was beyond the reach of international law and was of no concern for the international community.

The introduction of human rights into the sphere of international relations was a revolution of tremendous proportions; and what marked the emergence of the United Nations as distinct from all other preceding international organizations and institutional arrangements was its commitment to the proposition, to quote U. Thant, that "the eventual objective of all its functions and activities is the well being of individual men and women."

During more than three decades of its activities, the United Nations has adopted a number of declarations and conventions restating and elaborating its commitments for human rights. Not that these instruments and related UN activities have helped usher in an effective international order of human rights. Far from it; defiance and gross violations continue unabated.. What is, however, of great historical significance is the identifying of goals and the setting up of norms for universal application-just the beginning of a long and hazardous journey. Furthermore, the norms or standards identified are based on the fundamental principle that the respect for individual human dignity is derived from universally accepted values and that therefore abuses of human rights, wherever they may occur, are a legitimate subject for international concern.

What has emerged as universally accepted goals were prefaced by the ideals and practices of Gandhi in at least two fundamental respects. First, rights inhere in human beings as individuals irrespective of one's religion, race, color, nationality, etc. Secondly, man is the measure of all things.

Universalism

Gandhi's life and teachings have a universal appeal. He believed in the essential unity of man and the underlying unity of all nations. He did not make any distinctions between religions, nations, or races. To him, the fundamental problems of the human conditions know no national, racial, religious, or ideological frontiers. In this regard some of his quotes bear citation: "We are all tarred with the same brush. We are members. of the vast human family... Humanity is not divided into compartments. They may occupy one thousand rooms but they are related to one another..."

To him, there was no distinction between one set of human beings and others. Why should then he crusade for Indians alone: God has cast my lot in the midst of the people of India, I should be untrue to my maker if I failed to serve them. If I do not know how to serve humanity... My mission is not merely the freedom of India, though today it undoubtedly engrosses practically the whole of my life and whole of my time. But through the realization of freedom of India, I hope to realize and carry on the mission of the brotherhood of man... We want freedom for our country, but not at the expense of the exploitation of others. . . I want freedom for my country (but) I would not be deserving of that freedom if I did not cherish and treasure the equal right of every other race, weak or strong to that freedom."

Gandhi's views on respect for all religions and the gospel of brotherhood are widely known and need not be repeated here. What needs to be stressed is that Gandhi practiced what he preached. One can visualize Gandhi's courage of his

convictions by recalling that, as early as 1898, Gandhi, a caste Hindu, shared his home and food with his Christian, Parsee and Hindu (Tamilian) clerks in Durban, South Africa. His statement that in my experience “I have known no distinction between relatives and strangers, countrymen and foreigners, white and colored, Hindus and Indians of other faiths, whether Musalmans, Parsis, Christians or Jews”, was fully warranted by the manner of his life which was like an open book. Likewise, his life-long crusade against the elimination of untouchability and his respect for women as equals demonstrate his universal respect for all human beings.

Individualism

In the writings of Gandhi, incredibly voluminous as they are, one may find some contradictions, some puzzling points, yet there runs one common thread, one central theme and one criterion, to measure all socio-economic, political, or organizational alternatives, and that is what constitutes good for the individual. He was against industrialization because in an industrialized society an individual is likely to lose its identity and human dignity and also because it concentrates production and distribution in the hands of the few. Would he then not suggest the industrialization of India?

“I would, indeed, in my sense of the term. But I am, seeking to industrialize the village in a different way... Simple tools and instruments and such machinery as save individual labor and lighten the burden of the millions of cottages, I should welcome... What I object to, is the ‘craze’ for what they call labor-saving machinery. Men go on ‘saving labor’ till thousands are thrown on the open streets to die of starvation. I want to save time and labor, not for a fraction of mankind, but for all. . . Today machinery merely helps a few to ride on the back of millions. I am aiming, not at eradication of all machinery but limitation. The supreme consideration is man. The machine should not tend to make atrophied the limbs of man.... Gandhi was willing to make exceptions. For instance, in the case of the sewing machine, which he found as one of the few useful things ever invented. But in that case, there would have to be a large-scale industry for making sewing machines and at a cheaper rate too. But then Gandhi said: “I am socialist enough to say that such a factory should be nationalized or state-controlled.”

On another occasion, he says: “Pandit Nehru wants industrialization because he thinks that if it is socialized it would be free from the evils of capitalism. My own view is that evils are inherent in industrialism, and no amount of socialization can eradicate them”.

He was against industrialization even when controlled by the State for the common good because as he said, “he looked upon an increase in the power of State

with the greatest fear because although while apparently doing good by minimizing exploitation, it does the greatest harm to mankind, by destroying individuality which lies at the root of all progress.”

He further argues: “If the individual ceases to count, what is left of society. No society can possibly be built on a denial of individual freedom”. Gandhi was however not for unrestricted individualism. As he said: “I value individual freedom but one must not forget that man is essentially a social being. He has risen to his present status by learning to adjust his individualism to the requirements of social progress. Unrestricted individualism is the law of the beast of the jungle. We have to learn to strike the mean between individual freedom and social restraint. . .”

As regards economic rights, there is hardly any difference between what Gandhi propounded and what is enunciated in the relevant declarations and conventions adopted by the United Nations.¹¹ He wanted an economic system that guarantees the minimum necessities of life to all. No one should suffer from want of shelter, food and clothing. He was against economic inequality and the exploitation of the poor by the rich. To achieve these objectives, however, he did not seek a change in the system but change in the individual’s heart.

From the foregoing, no one should be left in doubt that Gandhi’s teachings and practices fully reflected the fundamentals of human rights. Indeed, it is not difficult for a Gandhian devotee to trace back all the principles enshrined, for example, in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in the writings of Gandhi.

However, there is also the other side of what Gandhi preached, His concept of the individual is so much loaded with his gospel of God, Truth, nonviolence, religion, and spiritualism as to relegate the reality of the individual to the background. He sees in man what he ought to be, and this according to his own vision, rather than what he really is. He envisaged the highest goal to which man could aspire as the perfect observance of brahmacharya which he defined as the “control of the senses in thought, word and deed.” In such a vision, the individual becomes the negation of what constitutes the natural urges of human beings. Why, one may ask Gandhi, one has to renounce what gives personal pleasure, such as the sexual urge, in order to be a perfect human being. The personal pleasure taken in moderation need not dissipate energy; rather it would renew it. Again different human beings have different urges or have the same urge but of different intensity. If one really wants to renounce certain desires, it is his right; but if he does not, why should he give up his right to what he considers enjoyment and could be an excellent human being nonetheless?

Gandhi’s individual could, so it seems, either be a saint or a mentally disturbed one, not a normal human being. He denies his individual par excellence

even the basic right to life, i.e, the right of self-defense. If there is a choice between killing one who attacks you or getting killed, Gandhi would advise the latter course as preferable.

Indeed, the creed of nonviolence had become such an obsession with him as to regard it as the panacea of all evils. For instance, instead of seeking changes in the economic and social structure for the solution of ills that plague society, he sought “change of heart” of the evil-doer through nonviolence. He clearly saw the evils of capitalism but sought to destroy its evils by bringing about a change of heart in the “capitalists”, by reminding them that “your wealth is not yours, it belongs to the people. Take what you want for your legitimate needs, and use the remainder for society.”

Gandhi attacked “untouchability” but he did not condemn the caste system which breeds it. For the most part, he accepted the traditional divisions into vocational categories. There should be four castes so that we may reproduce the old system of four “varnas”, he wrote in 1925. Moreover, they should include adherence to hereditary occupation “to prevent competition”, based on birth, although in rare instances an individual might display talents appropriate to some other caste. He further added: “Every child has a natural capacity for his hereditary occupation, and should take it up, unless he discovers in himself an exceptional attitude for another.” This Gandhian attitude not only ignored the influence of the environment in contrast to heredity but also the right of every individual to a “higher”, better environment in which to develop other capacities. “For years I have puzzled over this problem”, criticized Jawaharlal Nehru, “why with all his love and solicitude for the underdog, he yet supports a system which inevitably produces it and crushes it.”

Gandhi would not even let his individual fight for his rights. His advice to him is to seek the higher goals of life, that is, to “reduce oneself to zero”. Pray, what does it mean? “It means”, to quote Gandhi, “to be the last in receiving good things, to serve everyone, not to expect gratitude and to be first in suffering. One who thus reduces himself to zero will always be absorbed in his work”

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