

Gandhi in Amrit Kaal

His ideals of non-violence and communal harmony remain relevant 75 years after his assassination



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JANUARY 30 THIS year will mark 75 years since Mahatma Gandhi fell to an assassin's bullet while on his way to hold the daily prayer meeting at Birla House. It is a poignant counterpoint to the Azadi Ka Amrit Mahotsav celebration marking the 75th anniversary of India's independence. Gandhi's ambitions for India went far beyond the achievement of political independence from colonial rule. For him, the people of India could not be truly free without social emancipation, economic empowerment and, above all, a shared sense of solidarity and empathy transcending multiple identities of language, religion and cultural traditions. It is his vision that permeates the Constitution of India which remains the sheet anchor of Indian democracy.

Throughout history, the world has seen many kinds of leaders of men and women. Some have been conquerors who let their swords speak to power. Others connected their followers with the intangible power of the spirit. These were the great religious and spiritual leaders whose legacy still has the power to both unite and divide our world. Some became leaders by conjuring up the worst of our instincts. Others led multitudes by bringing out what is most noble and uplifting in our nature. One kind leads by igniting hate. Another by spreading love and compassion. For one, the threat and use of violence is indispensable to the exercise of power. For the other, the courage to resist violence is what empowers people. It is easy to see what kind of leader Gandhi was. He made the most humble and poverty-stricken Indian feel that he was a participant in something larger than himself, something that, for the first time, gave him a sense of agency. This laid the basis for the success of Indian democracy, with the most humble voter wielding the power to change his own destiny through his electoral choice. It is being argued that violence against the colonial rulers also played a role in gaining independence for India and those who struck violent blows against them must also be celebrated and paid homage to. That does not detract from the direct connection between India's democracy and the legacy of

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non-violence inherited from Gandhi. Non-violent political and social change, which is so fundamental to democracy, is a Gandhian bequest.

In honouring revolutionary leaders who embraced violence as an instrument to defeat colonial rule, one should resist the incipient temptation to glorify violence as a legitimate instrument to achieve political ends in general. One may argue that revolutionary violence against colonial rule was legitimate and should be acknowledged, but it should also be made explicitly clear that in an independent democratic state, there is no room whatsoever for any recourse to violence. Gandhi understood clearly that violence, once unleashed, rarely stays selective, which is why even against colonial rule he preached non-violent resistance.

Gandhi gets the credit for transforming what was an idea of Indian independence among a small educated and English-speaking elite into a mass and people-centred movement. He gave the struggle for freedom a vernacular dimension, rooted in India's own civilisational heritage. He knew from his own experience how easy it was to slip comfortably into the ranks of a privileged elite and lose touch with the mass of Indian people. It was this concern which led him to suggest that, after India gained independence in 1947, the Congress disbanded itself as a political party and remained a mass movement dedicated to the social and economic transformation of the people of India. His concerns have proved prescient as a two-track India emerged after Independence, one which used its English language education as a passport to economic and social advancement while pursuing policies that dispensed minimal entitlements to those at the lower ends of the economic and social ladder. It failed to empower them to ascend the ladder through education and acquisition of skills. In a certain sense, we are witnessing the revolt of the vernacular against self-entitled elites and this is being tapped into by the more adept political formations. But we do not see the kind of movement towards empowerment which Gandhi envisioned for his new India. We are back to the poli-

tics of entitlement with the distribution of welfare as benign offerings from the state and its leaders. Gandhi's legacy points the way to an India of empowered citizens and we should reflect deeply on how and why we seem to have lost our way.

Having travelled through the length and breadth of undivided India, Gandhi was aware of the civilisational anchors which underlay its endurance and was able to use them to forge an overarching national identity. But he was also aware that there were deeply ingrained fault lines which could erupt and engulf the national project. These fault lines could be social, such as the caste system and the horrendous practice of untouchability. They could be religious and communal such as the Hindu-Muslim divide. Gandhi was uncompromising in condemning untouchability and rejecting distinctions based on caste, creed, and religion.

Gandhi was a devout Hindu and acknowledged that Indians in general, whether Hindu or Muslim, Sikh or Christian, were all devout adherents of their respective faiths. For him India could only be a secular country, with all religious faiths co-existing in harmony and in mutual respect. The Partition of India was a deeply wounding experience for him which he took as a personal failure. It is an irony that he was assassinated for ostensibly allowing India to be divided based on religion when nothing was more distressing and tragic for him. Till the very end he used his immense prestige and reverence among the masses to stop communal riots and indiscriminate slaughter. It is even more important today to reflect on Gandhi's legacy as the communal fault line is bubbling to the surface again.

As we celebrate the Azadi Ka Amrit Mahotsav, let us also recall how the Gandhian values of non-violence, inclusiveness and communal harmony enabled India to establish a unique democracy achieving momentous economic and social transformation through the ballot box rather than through the barrel of the gun.

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