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ON REVISITING GANDHI

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Recently I saw Attenborough's film on Gandhi which I had seen earlier in 1982. Then I was 42 years' old and today 72 and I believe I have gathered much more experience and understanding about Gandhiji's role in freedom struggle, his charismatic figure and his magic appeal to the masses than I could when I was 42.

Yes, in between Prof. Akbar Ahmad of Pakistan who teaches in Washington University had invited me to discuss Gandhiji's theory of non-violence in his class and had shown some excerpts of the film. But then they were just a few excerpts and not the whole film which I saw yesterday. I could gain many insights about our freedom struggle too while seeing the film. Gandhiji was the tallest of all other leaders of freedom struggle.

Of course due to limited time the film hardly does full justice to Gandhiji's entire struggle. It gives short shrift to many aspects of his struggle. But then one could hardly do anything better. One gains insight into Gandhiji's mind about India when he delivers speech on home rule in a Congress session. All other leaders, Nehru, Jinnah, Sardar Patel and others demand home rule emphatically but Gandhiji says unless we keep the conditions of poorest of poor in India, home rule would just replace the British rulers with Indian ones.

How true Gandhiji's statement was. This is what Communists also said at the time of independence. It is even more true today that it was then. One cannot become non-violent just by theorizing about non-violence. Otherwise many of us would have been Gandhi. One must have deep insight into causes of violence and nature of vested interests. Also, Gandhiji was not only theorist but also practitioner of non-violence.

And for practicing non-violence there are some necessary conditions which must be fulfilled – truthfulness and simple living and truthfulness without simple living is not possible. Gandhiji totally gave up western style of living and adopted Indian poor peasant's style. A leader of millions of poor and starving people cannot have high style of living and yet be their leader. By the way that was great difference between Gandhi and Jinnah. Jinnah remained elitist throughout his life. Obviously he could never became a mass leader like Gandhi and could not acquire Gandhi's magic and attraction. Let alone entire masses, he could not appeal to even Muslim masses who were as much poverty-ridden as Hindu masses.

Another thing which made Gandhi much more acceptable to the masses was his deep understanding of both Indian cultural and spiritual ethos and idiom of his politics. The most interesting aspect of Gandhian philosophy was that he was deeply religious and spiritual and was yet secular. Jinnah and Nehru, on the other hand, were secular but not religious and spiritual. Gandhi was secular in Indian sense and Jinnah and Nehru in western sense. Communists also did the same i.e. became secular in western sense and despite the fact that they worked for poor masses and yet alienated themselves from them.

Yes, there is contradiction here but Gandhi resolved this contradiction in a creative way and his theory and practice of non-violence also endeared him to masses. It is also important although again apparently contradiction that though himself deeply spiritual (and even used religious idiom for his

politics) and yet he chose Nehru to be the Prime Minister of India who was so modern and even indifferent to religion, if not anti-religion.

He knew India needed both. While its civilizational aspect was deeply spiritual its future required modernity, science and technology and both should be creatively fused together. And he could do it with great ease. Our politicians hypocritically exploit people's religious sentiments today but Gandhi had deep insight into religiosity of the people and he used it in a non-exploitative way. Unfortunately we have hordes of political leaders who used religion most cynically for their political ends but do not have a single leader like Gandhi who could creatively identify with Indian masses and their religious and spiritual needs.

Gandhi could do it without patronizing a single religious leader or participating in any religious festival as our politicians do today.
He did not participate in any public performance of pooja or any other manifestation of public religiosity as our politicians do today. It was because Gandhi was truly religious and hence did not allow religion to be politically exploited. It was because his religiosity was not ritual but value-oriented. And he derived values from all religions unhesitatingly.

Our politicians go for rituals and not values. Rituals are harmless as far as vested interests are concerned but values directly conflict with interests and hence values terrify our politicians. Gandhi practiced values but then he was not a politician. And it is interesting to note that as freedom became a possibility Gandhi became more and more irrelevant more so when he advised the Congressman to wind up Congress as a political party and make it a social service organization.

Politicians pursue power and Gandhi pursued values. He was more interested in public service than power. Power is root of all conflict and our country got divided because politicians from both sides fought for power. How much for whom? Power to people and accountability for politicians should be real aim in democracy but then our democracy means power to politicians and people to be powerless, at the mercy of politicians.

More powerful politicians become more helpless people are rendered but in Gandhian democracy people are most powerful and politicians are merely their servants. But for that another condition is necessary i.e. the economy they develop should be need based, not greed based.
Gandhi always talked of the last man, development not for most powerful and rich but for least powerful and most poor. However, in Gujarat today Modi is found most 'suitable prime ministerial material'
precisely because he is developing greed-based economy, economy for most powerful and greedy rich, least accountable to people.

Today in India with its globalised economy Gandhi has become most irrelevant. Gandhi could talk and practice non-violence because he believed in need-based development and utterly simple way of life strictly based on elementary needs. For a comprehensive theory of non-violence, one must factor is (political) power and acquisition of riches, besides other factors. Narendra Modi's Government needed communal violence on an unprecedented scales to win elections through polarization on religious lines.

Gandhiji's another most powerful mantra was Hindu-Muslim unity i.e.
unity of people and without unity of people non-violence is not possible at all. Throughout his career Gandhiji beginning from his South African days his political discourse is based on Hindu-Muslim unity and he readily responded to Muslim request for Khilafat issue to consolidate Hindu-Muslim unity though even Jinnah found it unacceptable,

All the communal violence occurred in India because communalists were against Hindu-Muslim unity and their political discourse comprised Hindu nation and Muslim nation and not people's nation or people's power. Even today in India communal forces use religious temple as a symbol of power and result is communal carnage like Gujarat. Gandhiji, though a Hindu – Sanatani Hindu – but never used any Hindu symbol for his political symbol. Some may point out his use of Ramrajya but those who know Gandhi would agree that Ramrajya was not a Hindu symbol but a rajya which is freed of exploitation and where people could live fearlessly fulfilling all their basic needs. And anyway he compensated it by his frequent use of Hindu-Muslim unity whereas communalists use temple as an exclusive Hindu space and symbolizes Hindu power.

Let me reiterate that Gandhian politics requires mass-based politics and democracy is also all about that. The identity based politics can never be non-violent politics and it is later politics that our politicians resort to. Today there is not a single politician who can command mass following. There are politicians who command caste and communal following, of this or that caste and this or that community and such politicians can never practice non-violence though they may talk of it.

Caste and communal unity is the very basis of non-violence and non-violence is the very basis of democracy. Unfortunately still 62 years after our independence we do not have ideal democracy – democracy in which religion is profusely important but certainly not the basis of power and instead power is based only and only on people's unity and people's unity is on the basis of justice on one hand, and, people's dignity and rights on the other. Our democracy has not taken even first step in that direction. Gandhiji rightly pointed out in the discussion on home rule that without people-oriented politics we would be simply replacing the British with the Indian rulers. Gandhiji could not be more correct.

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