

# Gandhi: The Pursuit of Truth and Simplicity

## ✘ GANDHI: THE PURSUIT OF TRUTH AND SIMPLICITY

By Michael Lewin

Friday, the 30th January 1948....

Nathuram Godse, an Hindu fanatic, drew a pistol from his coat pocket at a prayer gathering attended by Gandhi, and fired three shots into Gandhi's chest.

That evening, Jawaharlal Nehru made an emotionally laden speech to the Indian nation saying that:

"The light has gone out of our lives and there is darkness everywhere... Our beloved leader,...the father of our nation, is no more."

Gandhi had led India to full independence on a wave of unprecedented support. He was respected and revered by so many in India, and indeed, the wider world. A man of deep thought that encompassed political, economic, philosophical and spiritual dimensions that all found expression in his engaged actions – his life. But now, over fifty years after his tragic death, what relevance does Gandhian thought have in our ever changing, post – modernist world? Can his philosophy still inform our lives for the better? Can it still make a presence in our lives?

At the very core of Gandhi's thinking was a deep and profound

respect for ALL living creatures – this was the first reality. All life was considered sacred and ultimately interconnected. If we attempted to attack anyone, on whatever moral ground we thought to be appropriate, we were, in the final analysis, seen to be attacking ourselves. This view of the interdependence of all living creatures has its roots in Hindu and Buddhist scriptures and is sometimes expressed in the metaphor of Indra's Net where at each intersection of this infinite, cosmic web is a jewel that reflects all the other jewels in a collective of mutual coexistence. Gandhi had a deep respect for this web of coexistence, this inter interconnectedness of all creation, and it came to influence him profoundly throughout his life.

## **THE NATIONAL STATE**

The growth of the all powerful national state that was celebrated in the post modernist world, was severely criticized by Gandhi. He felt that the increasing dominance of the economic, industrial, military and bureaucratic structures of society, under this system of organization, were too dictatorial, too controlling. It gave away power to politicians, bureaucrats, ' experts ' who operated at the macro end of the scale and disempowered the general populace, who were, in the main, unable to participate at this level. The power bases within society should, Gandhi argued, be subservient to the real needs and aspirations of the community as a whole and be firmly embedded in the micro.

Work (which would utilize the greatest resource India had – its people) was strongly felt to exist as an expression of individuals' physical, mental and spiritual growth. It being – community based, democratically accountable, non- exploitative (of individuals and natural resources) and meaningful to those engaged in it. On the other hand industrialized, mass production of consumer products was seen to be, at the very least, questionable; involving as it does – the stimulation of artificial demands, excessive profiteering, cycles of boom and

bust and lastly, people's growing alienation from the work place and the wider society.

Indian villages, which had grown over thousands of years, were at the heart of Gandhi's philosophy. He envisaged India as a federation of these self empowered, self sustaining local communities (jewels in Indra's net) working together for the common good. He never wanted India to become a monolithic, centralized, national state – whether capitalistic, socialistic, or otherwise. However, after his death, Nehru introduced a modernization programme that turned its back on all the cherished ideals that Gandhi held dear and pursued a course of industrialization that consolidated, on an unprecedented scale, concentrated power for the national state. And so India joined the modern world that promoted, and still does, powerful economic 'imperialism' that sees the economic engine of growth and development as axiomatic because it leads to greater material prosperity.

But are we, individually or collectively, best served by this economic, expansionist system?

## **NEEDS AND DESIRES**

Clearly in our post – modernist, world of globalization and consumerism, where everything can be bought by a clicking of a computer mouse, we have lost something. In a system that treats people as 'economic units' for consuming more and more, there is a sense that many have become less and less – cut off, alienated from a dominating system that perpetuates instant gratification and greed.

Material desires are undoubtedly being met on record levels for a wide range of people but there still remains many for whom poverty is all too common. Gandhi believed in the concept of Sarvadaya (the welfare of all, not just the privileged few) and thought that the best way to achieve this was through voluntary simplicity ie, the re-working and reduction of our

consumption levels. This is driven by a moral / ethical imperative that brings, in its wake, a fundamental spiritual joy because it brings us to a position of shared equality.

Gandhi's legendary simplistic values and lifestyle demonstrated that personal fulfilment and contentment did not rely on material wealth.

**Civilization, in the real sense of the term, consists not in the multiplication, but in the deliberate and voluntary reduction of wants. This alone promotes real happiness and contentment.**

– *Gandhi*

In our world of 'having', where the dynamics of the market place secures ownership on as much material wealth as we can acquire, there is little time to reflect, or indeed act upon, Gandhi's notion of voluntary simplicity. Yet health issues are very much on the agenda today and look like they will remain that way for the foreseeable future. With our preoccupation set on busyness; the busyness of always 'doing', the busyness of always pushing and achieving, comes rising levels of stress related illnesses. But sometimes we are just too busy to notice – until it is too late....

The Protestant work ethic that is embedded in our society, that was successfully exported abroad, shows no signs of diminishing. Indeed many reports have suggested that we are working even harder and longer than ever before. The new technology that could free us from the 'nose to the grindstone' work culture has just enabled us to do even more.

Slowing down and letting go, lie at the heart of simple living which can reward us in so many nourishing ways, if we are prepared to listen attentively to its message. The choice is ours. Do we decide to keep on the treadmill of activity and acquisition, that can cause us so much damage, or do we follow the call of simplicity that can release us into a more

manageable, saner world?

**Poverty is involuntary whereas simplicity is consciously chosen. Poverty is repressive; simplicity fosters personal empowerment, creativity and a sense of opportunity. Poverty is both mean and degrading to the human spirit; but simplicity has a beauty and integrity that elevates our lives. Poverty is debilitating; simplicity is enabling.**

**– Duane Elgin**

Although Gandhi's views were sometimes seen as being too idealistic, there is undoubtedly an urgent need to address globalized inequalities that have increasingly surfaced in our world, otherwise great numbers of people will continue to suffer. We are all members of the same human family and we do need to work together to set collective goals that will elevate us all beyond the confines of restrictive individualism or nationalism.

Gandhi values and ideals can still make an impact in the world today – can still make an impact in our individual and collective lives, but are we brave enough to engage with them – am I?

**If I may say so without arrogance, my message and methods are indeed, in their essentials, for the whole world. I believe myself to be a revolutionary, a non – violent revolutionary. I am aspiring after a new order of things that will astonish the world.**

**– Gandhi**

And the question still remains, can we astonish ourselves ? !

***By Michael Lewin***

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