



**Professor Dilipkumar Mohanta**  
Former Vice-Chancellor  
University of Kalyani and  
Sanskrit College and University  
[dkmphil@gmail.com](mailto:dkmphil@gmail.com)

## Is Gandhi Irrelevant Today? \*

**Dilipkumar Mohanta**

*"Never make a promise in haste. Having once made it, fulfil it at the cost of your life." M.K. Gandhi*  
*"Fling away your promise if it is found to be wrong." - Rabindranath Tagore \*\**

### Abstract:

My intent in this paper is to examine some questions, often, raised about M. K. Gandhi. Some of these questions are: i) Should we call Gandhi a philosopher? ii) Does not the idea of 'Charkha' symbolize backwardness? iii) Does Gandhi's thought carry any relevance today? iv) Does Gandhi not maintain unscientific and dogmatic attitude towards life and the world? v) Is not his idea of trusteeship with non-violent means for Sarvodaya an absurd Ideal? vi) Can we totally ignore the relevance of Gandhian thought in the 'war-mongering' world? There are many such questions that confront Gandhi's posterity. Therefore, a continuous reevaluation of Gandhi's thought is a desideratum to understand the claims by both proponents and opponents of Gandhi. However, the paucity of space dictates that we cannot take up all the issues listed above afflicting an understanding of Gandhi and have to restrict ourselves to one or two of them, sometimes directly and sometimes indirectly. Firstly, we will seek clarity of the sense in which Gandhi may be called a 'philosopher', not a philosopher. After this, we shall mainly concentrate on two points: firstly, Gandhi's idea of cottage industry symbolized by 'charkha' and so-called opposition to big industry. Secondly, Gandhi's emphasis on morality as an essential condition for politics and religion also attracts our attention for evaluation. Any examination of other points of criticism and objections raised against Gandhi's view are left outside the scope of this paper. Our approach is critical and without any bias to either of the mutually exclusive views. In conclusion, we shall argue that Gandhi's words about 'Charkha' are not to be understood in 'plain and literal' sense but in 'symbolic and deeply suggestive' sense, especially in the context of industrialization. It is undeniable that some aspects of Gandhi's thought can still show some light of hope in the midst of doom and despair.

**Key words:** philosopher, charkhā, peace, conflict resolution, rāmarājya, morality in politics

### 1. Discussion:

#### 1.1 Let us begin with a question: In what sense Gandhi is a philosopher?

As a practical man Gandhi has changed or modified his views many times on certain issues and it is advisable to take *the later* and *not the former* view on the same subject in our present



consideration.<sup>1</sup> Keeping this in mind, let us begin with an explanation of the term ‘philosopher’. The term ‘philosopher’ may be used in two senses. In the *narrow sense* a philosopher is a theory-builder on the basis of his academic experience and independent thinking. A thinker of this type is usually called an ‘academic philosopher’, for example, a teacher seen in our colleges or universities or institutions. Gandhi himself would not claim to be a philosopher in this narrow sense. However, there is a *broad* sense in which the word ‘philosopher’ is also used. In this sense, it means a thinker who has keen interest in comprehensive analysis of the truth or theorizing his experience independently and critically. Acumen of creative, critical and independent thinking is a hall mark of philosophical enterprise in this broad sense. In this sense, some ideas of Gandhi could be considered as *indirect contribution* to social, political and environmental philosophy. Neither barren intellectualism nor extreme existentialist outlook has any place in Gandhi’s thought. Gandhi was a firm believer in God and to him, “not a leaf moves but by His (God’s) will”<sup>2</sup> and the nature of Truth or Divinity is ineffable. In this *broad sense* the word philosophy is *indirectly applicable* to Gandhi. Now, if by the word ‘philosophy’ we do not understand ‘the graveyard of dead ideas’ then some ideas of Gandhi must be treated as potentially philosophical, especially in moral, social and political and environmental spheres.

Gandhi was a believer in the essential unity of human beings and all that lives. He was a critic of mechanization of production that threw thousands out of work. He contextualized the teachings of old scriptures so that they could suit the present purpose. Gandhi himself said that among schools of Indian religio-cultural tradition his thoughts were influenced by Vaishnavism, Jainism, Buddhism in general, and the *Bhagvadgītā* in particular. But he did not confine himself to the Scriptures but added social values to the Scriptures to suit the needs of his time. He was also influenced by the Western cultural tradition. Gandhian thought is a product of both the traditions, an intersection of diverse ideas sowing the seed for the posterity of humanity. It is said that truth and non-violence are the two main pillars upon which Gandhi built up his thought. Gandhi was a social-political activist who wanted to change the society through an uplift of all (*sarvodaya*) during his opposition of the British Rāj. So he wanted to include all Indians without differentiation to join hands in his mission of attaining independence. Gandhi wanted to test all claims made in any tradition in the light of reason and experience. He considered the role of morality and spirituality to be mandatory for both individual and society.

## 1.2 Influence of Gandhi on Thinkers and Leaders of posterity:

Gandhi had influenced many thinkers and leaders like Martin Luther King Jr., Nelson Mandela who was known as the ‘Gandhi of South Africa’, philosopher Arne Naess and many others. Naess

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<sup>1</sup> see, *Harijan*, 29.04.1933:2

<sup>2</sup> Bhattacharya, Sabyasachi. 2008:161, *The Mahatma and the Poet: Letters and Debates between Gandhi and Tagore, 1915-1941* (5<sup>th</sup> edn.) (New Delhi: National Book Trust).



was influenced by Gandhi's conception of unity that exists in all forms of life. Naess acknowledged the inspiration that he received from Gandhi for shaping his philosophical arguments for the protection of environment. Naess was an admirer of Gandhi since 1930 as he states, "I am inevitably influenced by his metaphysics which to him personally furnished tremendously powerful motivation and which contributed to keeping him going until his death."<sup>3</sup> Gandhi warned us about the misuse of natural resources. He favoured the recycling of natural resources and this was evident in his principle of 'water preservation' in his ashrama. He thought that there are enough resources in Nature to meet our needs but always there is dearth in Nature to satisfy our greed. It is more than 100 years that he told us why and how we should preserve water and stop misuse of water. Environmental awareness was taught by Gandhi in his life both in South Africa and in India.

Besides, it is claimed that Gandhi brought values to politics. Gandhi asserted that politics ought to be based on moral and social values. He viewed human life as a whole and as a multi-dimensional unity. Gandhi's followers believe that his standpoint about social and political thinking is all inclusive and harmonious for the welfare of all. They argue that in the midst of war and its devastating impact on the whole of humanity we may look back afresh to Gandhi's view on *Ahimsa*, *Swarāj*, *Sarvodaya* and *Trusteeship* as valuable inputs for reconstruction of new world order, especially on self-reliant village reconstruction. Gandhi believes that through *ahimsā*, non-violence an individual can be morally transformed and this is derived from another belief that human beings are potentially divine, the reservoir of good qualities in the sense of Vaishnavite understanding of God. For Gandhi, man is basically good and man has the ability to improve his present condition. He optimistically asserts that "in the application of the method of non-violence, one must believe in the possibility of every person, however depraved, being reformed under humane and skilled treatment."<sup>4</sup> Gandhi treated *ahimsā* as a moral principle and asked his countrymen to 'cooperate with good and non-cooperate with evil.' 'No violence is a rule of conduct' for human society and the dignity of human being is upheld by it. It is claimed by his followers that Gandhi's preaching was the result of his actual life practices. However, his opponents thought it to be an exaggeration of what was factually true. They cite many instances in favour of their view. However, any assessment of this claim and its opposition is kept outside of the scope of this paper.

## 2. Controversial Consequences of Gandhi's thoughts and actions:

**2.1** Let us now consider our main concern in this paper that concentrates on a general question that ends up often with some controversial consequences. Is Gandhi against industrialization of

<sup>3</sup> Naess, Arne. 1987: 38 "Self-realization: An Ecological Approach to Being in the World." *The Trumpeter* (4(3): 35-42).

<sup>4</sup> *Harijan*, 22.02.1942:49.



India? The criticism of Gandhi's emphasis on 'charkha' may be right if it is taken strictly in the 'literal' sense. It is impossible to deny that only by cottage industries the villagers cannot be self-sufficient to meet the necessities of their present lives. The opponents argue that even "Gandhi's opposition to rapid industrial and technological progress is not conducive to the material progress of the downtrodden masses. His un-experimented ideas on industrialization can neither serve the present-day interests of the nation nor remove the poverty of the millions of Indian masses."<sup>5</sup>

There is some truth in such criticisms. But what Gandhi said in those days had been originated from a different consideration. The profit from the big industries at the cost of exploitation of the poor natives was opposed by Gandhi. On the other hand, the micro-level effort has also a spiritual background for achieving self-reliance by innovation and manual labor. Today we are to understand 'Charkha' as a 'metaphor' which is 'suggestive' for revival of village economy from the point of view of micro-level economy encouraging most of the villagers to achieve self-reliance. Gandhi considered the then actual picture of the country.

2.2. Let us examine another inter-connected question: Does 'Charkha' (the Spinning Wheel) really symbolize backwardness in attitude? Consideration shows that 'Charkha' is symbolic in understanding of Gandhi's vision of self-reliant India. Gandhi in his *Autobiography* wrote, "I am engaged in the revival of the spinning wheel.... I am, therefore, concentrating my attention on the production of 'khadi'. I swear by this form of *Swadeshi*, because through it I can provide work to the semi-starved, semi-employed women of India. My idea is to get these women to spin yarn, and to clothe the people of India with *khadi* woven out of it."<sup>6</sup>

It is evident that Gandhi is not against using a machine for production although he is certainly against mechanization of life. Gandhi is against the violence of machinery and its process of turning human beings into 'slaves'. In such a situation the rush for industrialization will surely turn both human beings and Nature into a commodity. In other words, with the passage of time everything will turn to be a 'commodity'. It will lead us to a state of 'curse of technology'. Poets, philosophers, music-cognisor—everybody will be no more important to that society and thereby ultimately human civilization becomes 'dry, borrowing and worthless'. Gandhi firmly expressed his belief when he said, "Economics that hurt the moral well-being of an individual or a nation are immoral and therefore sinful. Thus, the economics that permit one country to pray upon another are immoral".<sup>7</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Satyanarayana, Y. V. 1988:88, *Marx and Gandhi*, (Visakhapatnam: Andhra University Press).

<sup>6</sup> Gandhi, M.K. 2000, (1927): 413, *An Autobiography*. (Ahmedabad: Navajivan Publishing).

<sup>7</sup> Karunakaran, K. P. (qtd). 1969:32, *New Perspective on Gandhi*. (Shimla: Indian Institute of Advanced Study).



The apparent contradiction and inconsistency in Gandhi may be addressed in the light of 'contextuality principle'. There is also a spiritual aspect of *Charkha*. "For Gandhi, the spinning wheel became not only a means of economic upliftment of the poor, and not even simply an emblem of India's freedom movement, but also a means of de-polluting one's inner being and re-connecting oneself with the Creator."<sup>8</sup> Gandhi's concern is the common people's interest. His *Charkha*, both 'metaphorically' and 'spiritually', stands for the protection of the interest of the common people; it cannot be surrendered in the hands of capitalists who will control the industry. He is not against using machine but against mechanization of life for the benefit of a few at the cost of the interest of the villagers. In those days Indians were required to buy clothes made in England. That policy inevitably led to exploitation of the helpless poor Indians. Gandhi wanted the situation to change. So, he proposed the alternative of switching over to 'Khadi' — an indigenous, man-centric method of producing yarns for clothing materials. *Khadi*, as an alternative to the existing system of exploitation, and 'Charkha' being an instrument of producing 'Khadi', became a symbol of 'self-reliance and freedom' for the masses. 'Charkha' is the material production-base that alone can sustain the revolutionary spirit (i. e. production of *khadi*) and as such it can also be viewed as conveying a cultural message that in-discrete industrialization is admissible only if it can properly benefit majority of our rural folks. It is easy to see that this message contains both moral and spiritual components. In other words, fast and in-discrete industrialization must not be used as a means of exploitation of a vast number of poor for the benefits of a few capitalists. Kulkarni refers to Nandini Joshi's book *Development without Destruction: Economics of the Spinning Wheel*. There it is argued that "The charkha stands for simple life and high thinking. It is a standing rebuke against the modern mad rush for adding material comfort upon comfort and making life so complicated as to make one doubly unfit for knowing oneself and one's God."<sup>9</sup> Gandhi thought that there is an inseparable tie between economics and pure spirituality. Pure spirituality teaches to sacrifice. It is not an option for a selfish person who wants power to make profit, because profit makes him happy. A spiritual person cannot be happy by harming others. Spirituality is a transition from 'one-self' to 'others'; an extension one's own self to others. Here the so-called 'other' is not opposite to me; but other is rather as good as me. Gandhi tried to emphasis on this tie as a spiritual message through charkha. He wrote, "It is because the message of the spinning wheel is supremely spiritual for this land that it has got tremendous economic consequences as also political consequences."<sup>10</sup>

**2.3** Today if we are to evaluate Gandhi, we must consider his time and surroundings. But in all our effort of policy making his love and spiritual concern for the common people must be underlined. A true spiritual person is always ready to sacrifice his own happiness for the sake of

<sup>8</sup> Kulkarni, Sudheendra. 2012: 166. *Music of the Spinning Wheel*. (New Delhi: Amaryllis Publishing House).

<sup>9</sup> Kulkarni, Sudheendra. 2012: 61, *Music of the Spinning Wheel*. (New Delhi: Amaryllis Publishing House).

<sup>10</sup> *Young India* on 15.09.1927.



happiness of others. He is a compassionate being. The indicative meaning of 'Charkha' in the context of industrialization may be understood with reference to its spiritual dimension.

To Gandhi's critics, a counter-question may be asked here: Has Gandhi not spoken of 'talisman'? The idea of 'talisman' tells us that when one is in a doubt about taking a decision or a step, one must consider how a particular action would impact the poor of the country. According to Gandhi, we must ask ourselves if the step we are going to take would make the life of the poor any better. Expressing a very deep sense of social value Gandhi said, "I will give you a talisman. Whenever you are in doubt, or when the self becomes too much for you, try the following test: Recall the face of the poorest and the weakest man or woman whom you may have seen and ask yourself, if the step you contemplate is going to be of any use to him or her. Will he or she be able to gain anything by it? Will it restore him or her to a control over his or her own life and destiny? Then you will find your doubts melting away."<sup>11</sup> Gandhi's vision of revival of village economy is based on micro-level economy where each member is engaged in some work, may be in cottage industry or other. Gandhi wrote extensively on rebuilding our villages and published in *Harijan* and *Young India*. Gandhi believed that the problems related to unemployment, hunger etc. in those days could somehow be addressed through this and by forming a mutual trust the common property may be looked after involving every member of that trust.

It is unfortunate in Gandhi's own country that his vision of the *Talisman* has not been put into practice and our political power-structure has tacitly rejected his Ideal and made him an idol of worship in our rituals. If we want to have a truly humanized society in India we cannot ignore efforts for a decentralized village economy with the use of machine in such a manner so that it does not affect the basic features of our society with the freedom of human spirit. What Gandhi is opposing is surrendering the human spirit. This is evident in what he said, "What I object to is the craze for machinery, not machinery as such. The craze is for what they call labour-saving machinery. Men go on 'saving labour' till thousands are without work and thrown on the open streets to die of starvation. I want to save the time and labour, not for a fraction of mankind but for all. **I want the concentration of wealth, not in the hands of a few, but in the hands of all.** Today, machinery merely helps a few to ride on the backs of millions. The impetus behind it all is not the philanthropy to save labour, but greed. It is against this constitution of things that I am fighting atrophy the limbs of man. ... Factories run by power-driven machinery should be nationalized, state-controlled. The supreme consideration is man."<sup>12</sup> Niharranjan Ray, in his Introductory Address, says that Gandhi used the word 'Swaraj' to mean "the democracy of the masses and for the masses, and since the vast masses of India lived in villages, the pivot of

<sup>11</sup> Bose, N. K. (Ed.). 1948 2):65, *Selections from Gandhi*.

<sup>12</sup> *Young India*, 27.04.1921:129.



*sarvodaya* democratic state of his vision was the villages of India conceived in an ever-widening oceanic circle.”<sup>13</sup> Gandhi’s insistence on ‘Charkha’ may be regarded as a shield to protect India’s nativist identity, while critiquing colonialism.

### 2.3 Education involving Innovation and Value is the Key of Sustainable Development:

Gandhi used to believe in innovation, the key to sustainable development, and therefore, for him, our basic education should provide room for it and also training in value education. In view of this, we may think of his ideas on education with extensional meaning and say that our education system should not be under the tight control of politics. If the practice of immoral political control of education compromising the merit factor continues, there is no hope for India to be a developed country in future. Politics devoid of morality in practice encourages corruption with the support of political people or party in power and denies distributive justice to common people living in society. Such a government works for the benefits of the rulers and not for the ruled. It also breeds unholy alliance or nexus between politicians and corporate houses. Unfortunately, this is a very common phenomenon in the consumerist society of South-East Asia.

It is interesting to remember what Will Durant remarks in his book *Pleasures of Philosophy* on that consumerist society, which is an outcome of blindly imitating the materialistic culture. According to Will Durant, “The last stage of matter is the gang-men rule. Criminals flourish happily in our large cities, because they are guaranteed the full protection and cooperation of the law. If they belong to the Organization, or have friends in it, they have every assurance that if they commit a crime they will not be arrested, that if they are arrested, they will not be convicted, that if convicted they will not be sent to jail, that if jailed they will be pardoned, that if un-pardoned they will be permitted to escape.”<sup>14</sup> It seemed that Will Durant, who wrote his book a long ago, was completely right in visualizing what in the name of democracy is happening today in many countries. Gandhi could foresee this about India and that is why, we believe, Gandhi talked about morality as a necessary condition for politics and sustainable development. Here Gandhi’s ideas are also relevant to reverse the undesired and undesirable trend in education sector today.

### 3. An Examination of Scepticism about the relevance of Gandhi’s Thought: Is Gandhian Thought feasible?

But we cannot also ignore the fact that there is much more scepticism about the relevance of Gandhi’s Thought. Some critics said that Gandhi did not practice what he preached and that he

<sup>13</sup> See, in Biswas, S. C. (Ed.). 1990 (1969):9, *Gandhi Theory and Practice Social Impact and Contemporary Relevance*. (Shimla: Indian Institute of Advanced Study).

<sup>14</sup> Will Durant. 1929:208, *The Pleasures of Philosophy*. (New York: Simon and Chuster)





was very much dominating. The case of Subhas Chandra Bose's resignation as the Congress president and Gandhi's interference is often referred in this context. Let us consider some of these questions under this broad head: Is Gandhian Thought feasible? Many modern scholars doubt the feasibility of Gandhi's thought. They say that Gandhi's vision of Ideal Society is a utopia and irrelevant. It has no taker, because it is against progress. His vision of 'self-reliant' India is based on Swadeshi, and Swaraj. But the root of these is "rural in taste, backdated in thought" and his idea of trusteeship with non-violent means is no less than 'a stoneware made of gold' or like that of a 'square-circle'.

It is objected that his project of Hindu-Muslim unity failed to attract politicians even before 1947 and as a result of that failure, Pakistan was created with the adoption of the 'two-nation-theory' with religion as the basis for it. Gandhi's ruthlessness is expressed when he opposed Subhas Chandra Bose as elected president of the then Congress party in 1939 and Gandhi's declaration that Dr Pattabhi Sitaramaiya's defeat was 'his own defeat'. It is also expressed in his choice for Nehru as his successor in spite of some difference with him. Again, he was, like many other leaders of India were, "helpless spectators to the attacks and violence committed against Hindus in Pakistan".<sup>15</sup> Many people think that Gandhi was a clever politician with outward saintly dress and he 'be-fooled' people. Every year he is remembered on his birth day, the second day of October, only as a historical leader in politics of colonial India.

Even India's first Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru was quite skeptical about the feasibility of Gandhi's idea of trusteeship. "Is it reasonable to believe in the theory of trusteeship to give unchecked power and wealth to an individual and expect him to use it entirely for the public good? Are the best of us so perfect as to be trusted in this way?" asked Nehru.<sup>16</sup> However, later on Gandhi himself admitted that there were many impracticable elements and this confession was posthumously published by his secretary Pyarelal.<sup>17</sup> It is historically true that his capitalist friends did not give their wealth as trustees for the benefit and welfare of the poor. It is pertinent to see what was said in this context by J. B. Kripalani who worked for Gandhi more than three decades. He said, "Gandhi was rather disillusioned in the end and held that his capitalist friends could never become the trustees of the people... (they) went to him for their own purposes... but Gandhi could not turn the heart of even one capitalist. They remained what they are".<sup>18</sup> Gandhian Outlook and Techniques present many such Utopian ideas such as Gandhi's proclamation that "Socialism begins with the first convert..."<sup>19</sup> However, it cannot be

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<sup>15</sup> Karunakaran, K. P. 1969:84, *New Perspective on Gandhi*. (Shimla: Indian Institute of Advanced Study).

<sup>16</sup> Nehru, Jawaharlal. 1936:528, *Autobiography*. (London: Penguin Books)

<sup>17</sup> *Harijan*, 25<sup>th</sup> October 1952:291.

<sup>18</sup> Kripalani, J. B. 1953: 116-117, *Gandhian Outlook and Techniques* (New Delhi: Government of India)

<sup>19</sup> *Harijan*, July 13, 1947:232.





denied that there are some elements of truth in what is said by Gandhi's critics. But we will not elaborate our critical discussion of it here as it deserves another full-length paper.

But when we talk about Gandhi's remark about socialism we must discuss, at least in short, the opinion of the Communists' about Gandhi. Gandhi has opposed the communist way of using state power, because it involves violence to arrive at the state of socialism. The then communists were against Gandhi, because they thought him as a camouflaged representative of the capitalist power-structure, and one who is committed to safe-guarding the interest of the 'bourgeois'. He is from a businessman community and his real interest is to satisfy the people who are exploiting the common people, the 'have not's in the class divided society. Gandhi, on the other hand, was critical of the communists, because they, according to him, propagate "hatred among the masses to achieve their goals."<sup>20</sup> The "End justifies the means" theory, as admitted by the communists, is not admissible to Gandhi. He was very much eager to involve the rich people and the land lords for support of freedom struggle. Gandhi's ideas in socio-political affairs cannot be separated from his actual struggles in South Africa and India. In view of this historical situation, it is now imperative to examine the communists' criticism of Gandhi as the representative of the 'bourgeois' class. Gandhi's chief concern was to oppose the mighty British imperialism. We cannot think of a fruitful non-violent opposition against the British imperialism unless we can involve all sections of people including the so-called 'upper class' people of India. Even to lead that movement properly the donation of money was a necessity. Gandhi preferred to involve all sections of people in his movement against the British and so he wanted to use the national resources irrespective of class-division. To understand Gandhi as a representative of the 'bourgeois' is not right and the communists are historically incorrect in their evaluation of Gandhi. Gandhi's understanding of socialism as a theory simply depends on the principle of 'the end justifies the means' is rather a Machiavellian and it is not the right way to understand socialism as understood in Marxism. To the Marxists, both ends and means are inter-connected. However, as proposed in the abstract, we are not elaborating this issue in this paper as it deserves another full-length paper for discussion.

### 3.1 Further Arguments against the relevance of Gandhi:

Those who oppose Gandhi's Thought argue that no one in India seems to be seriously talking about Gandhi's Ideals today. A distant and indirect voice of love for Gandhi's Ideals may be heard from some ecologists and intellectuals who speak against corporate house where profit making is the chief and the only goal. At the midst of the tide of 'liberalization, privatization and globalization' the significance of Gandhi's Ideal inspires no taker. Gandhi's Swadeshi Model of Socialism based on *Ahimsā* (Non-violence) and Trusteeship has become the source for 'lip

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<sup>20</sup> *Harijan*, March 3, 1946:64



service' to satisfy populism in India's political scenario. Gandhi's vision of an Ideal society is 'too idealistic' and is far from a possible world of praxis.

In spite of apparently incurable skepticism about Gandhi, as stated thus far, there are arguments that Gandhi's thoughts are to be theorized in the light of historical and contextual necessity. The main argument is that in the midst of ever-growing violence and greed, and war, Gandhi's thought is relevant. It has perennial value for establishing a comparatively conflict-free and harmonious society. Now the question before us is precisely this: Is there anything left for reevaluation of Gandhi's thought? Our answer is in the positive. A serious reader can see the presence of dynamism and opposition of rigidity in the gradual development of Gandhi's thought. His shifting from the thesis "God is truth" to "Truth is God" is a vivid example of this attitude. There are many more similar examples. We may refer to *Harijan* of 29.04.1933 as evidence to argue for dynamism and flexibility in Gandhi's thought process to make it contextual. Gandhi is not found to be a defender of reasoning that contradicts experience. He would have liked to say that with hundreds of arguments one cannot be convinced that 'fire is cold' as it is contradicted in our direct experience. So, the question of apparent contradiction and applicability must be understood with reference to the context of use and intentional inner meaning of what is said by Gandhi. In fact, Gandhi modified his ideas and political programmes to conform them to the real situations.

If we look from this perspective, what we see in practice today in many countries seems to be alarming. The privatization of profit-earning public organization has almost become the order of the day in India and it breeds misery for common people of the country because of the unholy nexus between politicians and corporate houses. The gap between the rich and the poor in India is increasing fast. There is no social protection of the poor and the marginalized. Here Gandhi's emphasis on the necessary connection of morality and spirituality to politics becomes relevant. *Ahimsā* in the 'broad sense of love' is the essence of morality, for Gandhi. He considered the 'Law of complete Love' as the very law of his being-hood. For Gandhi, our duties to other beings are the consequences of our love for them. Morals, society and politics— these three are integrally inter-winged in Gandhi's thought. In *Young India*, March 2, 1922 Gandhi wrote, "I claim that human mind or human society is not divided into watertight compartments called social, political and religious. All act and react upon one another".<sup>21</sup> Gandhi was a follower of Vaishnavism but he was equally respectful to all religions. Though he declared himself as a devoted 'Hindu' he spoke against the practice of hereditary priesthood and miracles, and superstitions prevalent in the then Hindu society.

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<sup>21</sup> *Young India*, March 2, 1922; also see, Guha, Biraja Sankar, 1944:24, *Racial Elements of the Population* (Oxford Pamphlets on Indian Affairs No. 22)



#### 4. A fresh Look at Gandhi's view on Morality and Politics:

Now we may have a fresh look at Gandhi's view on the relation between morality and politics. He had strong sense of realism in his political life though it was largely coloured by a kind of moral idealism. Gandhi speaks of an ideal state of administration based on the principle of justice and non-violence. It is, in fact, followed from the principles of *Sarvodaya*. Gandhi was influenced much by Ruskin's "Unto This Last". In Gujrati Gandhi called it *Sarvodaya* which means the welfare of all. It has spiritual and moral roots. For doing 'good' we should be intrinsically good and spiritually we should be so. If we implement the ideal of *Sarvodaya* as the directive principle for good governance, morality and spirituality must be its basis. We are reminded here that in the true sense, politics is the art of good governance which works properly on the basis of doctrines of administration and philosophical theories. In this perspective of good governance, the role of morality and spirituality in politics is significant. The source of corruption, to a large extent, lies in immoral politics.

Today, this is one of the major problems of the South-East Asian countries including India. Gandhi speaks of *Rāmarājya*. What is that? In Gandhi's thought, 'Rāma' stands for 'fearlessness' and 'justice'. He linked his child-hood memory of the 'fear of ghost' and the belief developed through the repeated practice of the name of Rāma to drive away his fear. That was being practiced by him at the advice of Rambhā who was looking after the child Mohan, the name in which Gandhi was called in his child-hood. *Rāmarājya*, to him, is the kingdom of justice and love. By this, Gandhi is not referring to any historical fact. Gandhi said, "My Rama, the Rama of our prayer is *not* the historical Rama, the son of Dasaratha, the king of Ayodhya. He is the eternal, the unborn, the one without a second."<sup>22</sup> Gandhi further elaborates it by saying that Ramarajya "can be *religiously* translated as the kingdom of God on Earth: *politically* translated, it is perfect democracy in which inequalities based on possession and non-possession, colour, race or creed or sex, vanish. In it, land and state belong to the people, justice is prompt, perfect and cheap... all this is because of the reign of the self-imposed law of moral restraint."<sup>23</sup> It is the culmination of the transformation of a state of non-violent society. Unfortunately, even in India we see 'politics where there is almost no place of morality'; and politics has become now the art of 'achieving power by any means'. It is no longer a means of good governance in India today. It is indeed true that we boast of speaking about 'Self-reliant India'. However, Self-reliance cannot come into existence unless we encourage innovation and rely on it instead of imitation, co-operation instead of immoral competition, duties instead of rights, freedom instead of slavery in thought, critical reflection and scientific attitude instead of blind faith in dogmas and orthodoxy, and over

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<sup>22</sup> As quoted by Karunakaran, K. P. 1969:83, *New Perspective on Gandhi*. (Shimla: Indian Institute of Advanced Study).

<sup>23</sup> *Harijan*, 1<sup>st</sup> June 1947:172.



all on moral and spiritual values like love and empathy. Gandhi speaks of moral leadership in politics. It is wrongly understood as the imposition of one's will on other or forceful imposition of the majority belief and passion upon the minority. On the contrary, it is a conscious effort of reforming oneself and also guiding others unconsciously with love and empathy. Gandhi speaks of moral leadership in politics. This is a necessary duty for a ruler in Democracy for good governance.<sup>24</sup>

## 5. Is Gandhi's thought relevant in our times?

Now a pertinent question may arise: Is Gandhi's thought relevant in our times? We witness a predominantly self-centered, egoistic and consumerist attitude around us. This leads modern individuals to open competition and motivational running for power, profit and pleasure as the summum bonum, the ultimate goal of life. Recent polarization of countries on war (i.e., Russia-Ukraine war, Israel-Hamas war etc.) affects each of us either directly or indirectly. In this context we may look afresh to Gandhi's understanding of *ahimsā*. To Gandhi, it is not confined to the absence of violence. It has a strong positive side. He said that *ahimsā* is the 'largest love'. It is also the greatest charity to Gandhi. A close reading of Gandhi may enable us to say that Gandhi was a firm believer of peace. To resolve a conflict, he gave importance to the purity of means (i.e., non-violence). Today we cannot deny that a state of peace is not a product of violence, war and hatred. Buddha also said, "Hatred cannot be stopped by hatred, but by its opposite means" (*Dhammapada*, 5).<sup>25</sup> Gandhi's *ahimsā* as a means is the time-tested means to address not only the problems of violence or war but also as a technique for settling 'disputes and quarrels between people and nations. The method of counter-violence or war 'has failed to bring peace in the world'. But it is also true that we cannot expect peace where the vast majority of people are compelled to live in 'ignorance, poverty, hunger, injustice, and tyranny'. This consideration enables us to understand why Gandhi wanted to connect the issue of peace with human rights and social justice. Gandhi believed that without economic freedom mere political freedom cannot solve our problem. It would remain as a 'mockery' of democracy. Our terrific experience of Hiroshima and Nagasaki showed that the nuclear war is capable of destroying 'mankind altogether'. For a peaceful world, a new world order based on love and fraternity is required. The 'other' is, though different from me, is as good as me. In other words, we are to transcend our individual and national boundary for a peaceful society, for a peaceful country. If we are not

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<sup>24</sup> It is "not the imposition of one's will on others, but the imposition of the reign of reason and love on one's blind and selfish passions. It is a process of reforming and guiding others unconsciously while one is consciously trying to reform oneself."—see, Datta, D.M. 1968:170, *The Philosophy of Mahatma Gandhi*. (Calcutta: University of Calcutta).

<sup>25</sup> Radhakrishnan, S. 1950:60, *The Dhammapada*, (with Eng.tr.) (London: Oxford University press).



‘prepared to live together’ then we must be prepared to ‘die together’. In this context Gandhi’s non-violent way of resolving conflicts may give a new direction to humanity.

## 6. Concluding Remarks:

In view of the above consideration, we may say that unless the state is not led by the persons, who possess the highest integrity, wisdom, morality and excellence, there is little hope for mankind to get rid of sufferings. The role of morality and spirituality as envisaged by Gandhi is important. In spite of material abundance and intellectual power, we are not happy. Our crisis is not just an economic or intellectual one; it is a wider one covering our moral and spiritual domain of existence. There is a common thread of ‘love, truth, and *ahimsā*’ is tied up with *Sarvosevā* which teaches to do one’s own work by oneself. *Sarvodaya* and *Sarvosevā* are integrally connected. Here one can serve people according to his ability. Without economic equality non-violent society of self-dependence is impossible, according to Gandhi. *Swarāj*, for him, does not mean isolated independence. It seems to be a ‘stepping stone’, not a place for ‘final stop’. In spite of many debatable ideas with Gandhi he deserves to be described as a thinker of hope who pinned his faith in the moral sense of human beings and their innate goodness, which perhaps explains why his ideas appear to be unrealistic and Utopian. We may utilize Gandhi’s ideas in a creative way so that it would enable us to dream for peaceful and environment-friendly living. And one way of doing this is to *deviate from the orthodox way* of repeating what he said in ‘literal sense’ but to exercise our *freedom of assimilating* it with the new context just like a flowing river. His thoughts in social, political and environmental philosophy are important. Today’s re-reading of Gandhi demands contextualizing Gandhi. If we fail to do this, we would be compelled to remain as mere members of a class of ritual followers who complete their ‘so-called national duty’ by putting flowers to Gandhi’s statue or photo, whichever is easier for us.

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**\*\*Notes:** *At Santiniketan Gandhi’s first visit was on March 10, 1914. During that visit Mira, a school student, met Gandhi at Santiniketan. When Mira, Dr Dwijendranath Maitra’s eldest daughter, had met Gandhi and requested him to write something in her small Exercise Book, Gandhi gave a condition that she should promise to spin threads in Charkha for six months and at once Mira agreed. Gandhiji then wrote: “Never make a promise in haste. Having once made it, fulfil it at the cost of your life”. After wards Rabindranath was requested to write in that Exercise*



book (i. e. Mira Devi's Dairy for Autograph) and he saw Gandhi's note. He wrote a few lines of a poem in Bengali first and then in English he wrote again "Fling away your promise if it is found to be wrong."

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### Brief bibliographic note about the Guest Author:

Prof. Dilipkumar Mohanta is the senior most Professor of Philosophy at the University of Calcutta. He is a former Vice Chancellor of the University of Kalyani, and also the First Vice Chancellor of the Sanskrit College and University, Kolkata. Professor Mohanta is a former Member, Indian Council of Philosophical Research, New Delhi; and presently Joint Secretary, Indian Philosophical Congress established in 1925, Rabindranath Tagore as its first president and Dr S. Radhakrishnan as its first Secretary.

Professor Mohanta is the recipient of Associate-ship of Inter University Centre of UGC at Indian Institute of Advanced Study, Shimla (2001-2003), US Government State Scholarship (2008, USA) at the University of California, Santa Barbara, Fulbright-Nehru Visiting Lecturer Fellowship at the University of Florida (2011, USA) and William Paton Fellowship at the School of Philosophy, University of Birmingham (2015, UK), Jan Jacobsen Award for his research contribution in Philosophy of Religion (2016), Professor B M Barua Memorial Samman (2016) "Manjusri Samman (2022), Kamaladevi Jain Smriti Samman Award (2022) and Swami Pranabananda Lecture-ship award of Asiatic Society (2022-23). He edited 4 and authored 17 books and 80 research articles, mainly on classical Indian philosophy and Comparative Religion.