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Was Gandhi a True *Mahatma*?

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The Status and Meaning of *Mahatma*

One is reminded of the ending of Bernard Shaw's *St Joan*. If Joan returned to earth today, would she be received in a kindlier manner? Perhaps, not. The simplicity of her goodness and truthfulness might be doubted. (Shaw) So is it with Gandhi.

The debate over the title of *Mahatma* to him refuses to die down. *Mahatma* literally means a great soul [*maha* (great)+*aatman* (soul)]. In religious terms, it refers to a person of superior holiness. Does Gandhi deserve such a reverential status? Critics and admirers have their own arguments as to its justification. His popular image of a *mahatma* and the fact of his murder make it hard to turn this debate for or against him.

The present article encapsulates some of the most typical traits of Gandhi in order to reach an agreeable understanding of his persona.

Thrown Out of the Train

Gandhi's unique personality speaks for itself. He was a man of self-respect. A single incident of being thrown out of the train in South Africa shook him to the bone. The humiliation it caused was too much to put up with. The chilling winds of the place added to his pain. At the cold, deserted station, he sat by himself pondering what he had gone through.

In his own agony, he saw the agonies of thousands of the Indian traders and labourers living in South Africa. The life which these South African Indians were forced to live filled him with compassion. He felt he must find the cure to their suffering.

The Idea of *Satyagraha*

Interestingly, Gandhi dealt with the South African problem in his own style. He called his struggle *satyagraha* (insistence-on-truth), and drew force from it for moral values he cherished most, which were truth, non-violence, tolerance, and love for justice. He firmly believed in these values and stood by them at all events.

At first, it seemed an impractical approach to many. How could one expect to fight the tough British government with mere moral force? They asserted that *satyagraha* could not harm a single British head. They did not see any virtue in quietly tolerating every ill and torture that the British inflicted on their subjects, and wondered how it could reconcile the British to concede to their demands. But nothing could dissuade Gandhi out of his position. His conscience was all that made sense to him. Once he had self-approval, he continued his march. Soon people from all quarters joined his mission turning it into a historic event.

Amidst Insults, Ultimate Victory

What the British government had laughed off as a pipedream was giving them a hard time now. The government was unable to think of the right means to handle this situation. Use of force was a readymade choice for them. But it did not yield much. *Satyagrahis* faced the worst violence and harassment from the government, but they did not leave their ground. Gandhi had instilled into their hearts an unbeatable spirit for freedom and human rights that even the mighty British failed to tame. Thus annoyed, they took harsher measures; which brought them under international criticism. A toothless lion, the government could only roar at its prey. General Smuts, an influential army leader and administrator, admitted: "Mr. Gandhi, you have made a eunuch out of me. Me, General Smuts, the winner of many great wars, I just don't know what weapons to use against you. Any weapon I pick up strikes back at me." (Kishore, 998).

Finally, the government had to give in. Although not all the demands of the *satyagrahis* were granted, yet even their partial achievement was no short of a miracle. The *Satyagraha* Movement and its significant success in South Africa set a real life example of the victory of good over evil. In later years, Gandhi tried his *satyagraha* in Indian freedom struggle. Here, too, its impact was remarkable.

Humane and Benevolent

Gandhi was as humane and benevolent in his professional life as he was in his social and political life. In law courts, he always sided with the fair and just. He was very careful in his choice of legal cases; and once being sure of their genuineness, he devoted himself fully to defending them. His faith in truth and justice gave such force to his arguments that even the

white judges, who always denigrated him as the ‘coolie barrister’, often had to decide the case in his favour.

Of course, his legal knowledge also had a hand in it. But it was just an aid, he was solely driven by his moral vision of life. Further, he was particularly kind towards his poor clients from whom he did not charge any fee. Sometimes, he would dare to sue white landlords and farm owners for unfairly treating their servants. In fact, it all came naturally to him. For him, it was a part of human duties that he must carry out come what may. He had set aside his personal interests and was all set for social service.

Lincoln and Gandhi

Here we are reminded of Abraham Lincoln, the former President of the United States. He had a deep respect for humanity. Interestingly, both the leaders – Gandhi and Lincoln – shared the same profession of law and both worked with the same spirit and purpose. Often Lincoln would settle the cases of his clients outside the courts. In fact, he would himself invite the opponent parties and arrange their meetings with his clients in his own office. The two parties would fix the matter by mutual consent. Though Lincoln earned less this way, at least he was satisfied.

Early Gandhi in India

After his return from South Africa, Gandhi broadened his scope of activities. His love for freedom urged him to support the Indian independence struggle. In South Africa he was an undisputed leader whose words and actions were held in high regard. However, he needed recognition in his own country. The news of his South African campaign had travelled to India and some national leaders were aware of it; yet his role in national affairs was only limited.

Gandhi was patient enough to let things go. Meanwhile, he kept up his efforts at the personal level building links with nationalistic groups particularly the Indian National Congress. The Indian National Congress was most instrumental in advancing the cause of Indians. Gandhi knew well that it could serve as the best medium to convey his ideas to the masses. Hence, he began to develop contact with its leaders. His unbeatable spirit, self-determination, and unflinching devotion to moral values made him a prominent figure in the Indian National Congress.

Swadeshi – A Moral and Political Weapon

In fact, there was an upsurge of excitement about his ideas. A number of factors can explain the reason for the public interest in him. First and foremost, Gandhi was a mass leader in the real sense of the word. People could closely associate themselves with him. The poor and downtrodden looked upon him as a messiah. Secondly, in mind and appearance, Gandhi represented the true Indian culture, which had an easy appeal to the entire nation. He channeled this public energy to support the Swadeshi (self-sufficiency) Movement.

The movement was launched to promote the use of domestic products. Its purpose was to gain self-reliance and weaken the power by boycotting their goods. Gandhi projected home spun

khadi as a symbol of self-dignity and economic independence. His call for burning foreign clothes was well received and followed. It was purely his charisma that could arouse nationalistic fervour out of ordinary *khadi*. Above all, his unfailing adherence to Truth and non-violence compelled the British authorities to consider his demands seriously. These factors added fruitlessly to free India.

Campaign Against Untouchability – A Moral and Social Weapon

On the social front, Gandhi's views had a seminal effect. His campaign against untouchability was a major step towards securing social justice for lower castes. Untouchability was an inhuman practice that treated the underprivileged too hateful to even to touch. They were outcasts in their own community. This tendency was rooted in rigid tenacious beliefs nursed through ages. Gandhi was dead against it. It sickened his heart to see how a people had been reduced to a loathsome lot. He firmly believed that every individual had equal worth that should be respected. To restore the honour of *shudras*, he called them *harijans* (children of God). Though these measures could not uproot untouchability, they set off concrete reforms that bore fruit in time.

A Lesson on Non-violence

Gandhi's achievements are truly extraordinary as well as exemplary. He had a noble vision of life and he sincerely lived up to it. He not only liberated millions from slavery, but bequeathed a unique lesson of non-violence to the world. It fairly justifies the widespread veneration accorded to him.

Ruined Family, Failure in Personal Family Roles

However, the debate is not over. Some other aspects of Gandhi's life are pointed out questioning the stamp of *Mahatma*. His family life was one such aspect.

No matter what Gandhi was to the world, to his wife Kasturba he was an uncaring and irresponsible husband. The couple lived together very little because of Gandhi's political life. After the marriage, Gandhi went to London to study law. After his return from there, he got a one-year contract from Dada Abdullah & Co. based in South Africa. So he set off for South Africa. While working there, he got to know about the plight of the Indians living there. He felt he must do something for them. It prolonged his stay in South Africa. He got back home only after three years.

Here, too, he remained an outsider; his mind was fully occupied with the thought of the South African Indians. In order to voice their concerns to the Indian public, he toured Bombay, Pune, Madras, and Calcutta and met the top brass of Indian leadership. During his Calcutta visit, he got a telegram from South Africa. He was urgently required there. He left for it at once along with his wife and kids. Having settled the matters there, he was back to Rajkot, his hometown. Now he looked serious about his family and career. He started his practice at Rajkot itself. But again

his mood changed, and he planned to shift to Bombay for better prospects. But even Bombay was unable to keep him tied for long. After a short innings as a barrister, he again got a call from South Africa. And once more, he sailed to the old place. This time he had left his family behind. It was uncertain how long he would have to stay there. So he sent for the family. Even after his final return from South Africa, he was constantly on the move. He was too engaged in national affairs to be free to look after home and family.

Burden on *Mahatma's* Wife

Kasturba had to take the brunt of it. Gandhi's capricious change of places got on her nerves, let alone the pain of loneliness. She felt Gandhi cared least for her feelings. Once when he told her about his trip to Bombay, she blurted out, "Do as you please. Home or abroad – for me it's all the same." (Kishore, 439). What hurt her more was that she had to depend on Gandhi's elder brother Laxmidas for her family needs. She held, not unfairly, Mohandas responsible for all these troubles.

At times, Gandhi was very uncompromising, especially about the questions of self-identity. He did not even mind risking his children's future for its sake. For instance, he was against English education. During his long stay in South Africa, he could not find a proper Hindi/Gujrati school for his children; and since he considered English schools unfit for them, he did not put them in school at all. He thought he could better train them at home. But his busy routine hardly spared any time for it. The children waited on their *Bapu* for his classes, but *Bapu* did not turn up. Kasturba was agitated at this state of affairs. Her pleadings, requests, complaints went to the bin. Mohandas would not budge.

Further, Gandhi's autobiography *My Experiments with Truth* reveals how deeply he was engaged in observing *brahmacharya* (celibacy). For him, *brahmacharya* was an essential aid in discovering TRUTH. He believed that sex was for procreation not pleasure. He practiced hard self-control and tried to keep off carnal joys. Kasturba was expected to be a natural part of this experimentation as if her personal choice did not matter. Gandhi took and broke the vow of *brahmacharya* and Kasturba had to please his whims.

Touchy Moral Issues

How touchy Gandhi could be about moral issues was brought out by an incident that occurred in the Tolstoy Farm. The Farm was a place built to shelter the families of those *satyagrahis* who were in jail as a part of *satyagraha* scheme of courting arrests. All these families lived together. Gandhi saw to it that the girls and boys of the Farm played together there. He wanted to keep their minds free from any complexes about each other.

One day, a boy touched the hair of two girls to tease them. The matter was reported to Gandhi. It gave him a heavy jolt. He considered the fault too big to be forgiven. He asked the boy to leave the Farm. As if this was not enough, he thought that the girls' hair should be cut off to wash the sin off them because he believed that the girls had been defiled by the sin. In fact, he himself performed the purging ceremony of cutting their hair. Kallenbach, one of his white friends and

associates, felt so bitter that he said, “Gandhibhai, I didn’t know you could be so hard-hearted when you wanted to be.”(Kishore, 879).

Opposition from Indian Intelligentsia

Further, the intellectual class of India was quite critical of certain policies of Gandhi. Rabindranath Tagore, an eminent scholar and thinker of the time, had serious differences of opinions with Gandhi on several matters. For example, Tagore felt that the burning of foreign clothes in a country suffering from destitute was not a sensible act.

Likewise, he did not see any good in Gandhi’s opposition to English education. In fact, Tagore felt that India could profit by western scientific knowledge. Moreover, he did not appreciate Gandhi’s stress on manual labour as against the use of machines. He “feared that Gandhi’s non-cooperation movement was directed not only against the British Raj, but against Western civilization itself.” (Ghose, 156-7).

How Do We Evaluate Such Characteristics and Instances?

Several such instances from Gandhi’s private and social lives can be found in Gandhian literature. They give the impression that he was not above common follies and weaknesses. On occasions, he was as unforgiving and dominant as any ordinary human being. Add to these his political errors that his critics charge him with: he was responsible for the partition, his soft policies prolonged the British Raj, he overlooked the value of the revolutionary groups, he did not favour the Hindu interests, so on and so forth. Does a man with so many grave faults qualify to be a *Mahatma*?

In fact, these faults and weaknesses, as they appear to be, were not inherent in his personality; they grew out of his personal dilemma relating to his duties. He was a husband, a brother, a father, a public leader, and a seeker of Truth. It was hard for him to decide which role was his priority. Often he had to act several roles at the same time, which totally perplexed him. He had to grapple with double choices.

But his inner voice always cleared his vision and led him further. His dilemma was not a flaw in his character, but a sign of the process of inner evolution. His thirst for freedom, justice and equality absorbed his entire being. He tended to rely on his impulse and would take any course they indicated. Moreover, the search for the ultimate truth was always there guiding him to his destination; it also impelled him to free himself from the bonds of attachment. Jesus has said: “He who loves father or mother more than me (Truth) is not worthy of me (Truth); and he who does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me (Truth).” (Mathew 10.37-38).

An Epitome of Simple Living and High Thinking

Altogether, Gandhi was an epitome of simple living and high thinking. His unflagging enthusiasm to follow the moral values raised him to sainthood. Charmed with personality,

Tagore called him a *mahatma*: “Great soul in beggar’s garb.” (Byrne, 56). Though, as mentioned above, Tagore differed from him at times; he always regarded him “the greatest of living men.” (Ghose, 158).

The admiration and honour accorded to Gandhi is a tribute to the passion to follow the urge of the spirit which is governed by the great creative force LOVE that is not bound by any caste, colour, creed, and that is why, he will be called *Mahatma* for ages to come.

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