

COVID-19

A GGA RESPONSE

MAY 2020



GANDHI NOW, COVID-19

AND THE NEED FOR SOLIDARITY ECONOMICS

Blessed are the peacemakers and sustainers of life

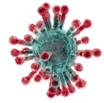


Reflections from GGA's Programme on Ethics,
Culture and Spirituality

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LOCAL GOVERNANCE | NATURAL RESOURCES | NATIONAL SECURITY | CHILD DEVELOPMENT AND YOUTH FORMATION
ETHICAL VALUES AND SPIRITUALITY





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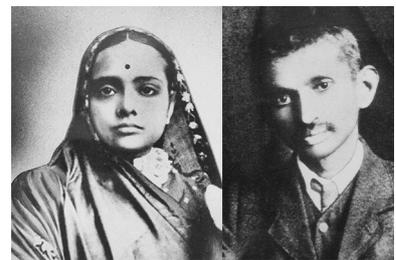
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INTRODUCTION

When we set out on our journey to celebrate the 150th anniversary of the birth of Kasturba and Mohandas Gandhi in October 2019, the world was a very different place. The ashram in Phoenix, Durban, where the Gandhi family lived, was surrounded by the hustle and bustle of colourful daily life emanating from the informal settlement now surrounding it.

My guess is that Ba and Bapu would be pleased to know that their legacy continues to provide for this local community in terms of care, schooling, computer literacy and social outreach. True to the title Mahatma (Sanskrit for great soul), first ascribed to Gandhiji by the poet Rabindranath Tagore, the Gandhis as prototypical *satyagrahis* or soldiers of peace would surely take delight in knowing that their animus continues to permeate the air of those people living most on the margins of society, the so-called “untouchables”. But this begs the question, who are the untouchables today?



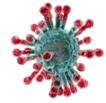
The outbreak of the Coronavirus disease in Wuhan, China, in late 2019, has changed everything. In some sense, we are all untouchable now. I’m writing this from lockdown, in isolation, along with 55 million other South Africans and hundreds of millions others confined around the world. We are masked and gloved, and exceptionally hesitant to share contact with anyone, especially with family and friends. Taken at face value, this seems to be the wrong way around, counterintuitive and highly abnormal, but this avoidance is undertaken mainly to protect our loved ones from the unknown: whether we have the virus or not and to stop transmission to them.

COVID-19 AND GANDHIAN PRINCIPLES NOW

The COVID-19 global pandemic has made a few things clear. The first is precisely how interdependent we are on each other. What should have remained obvious as a self-evident fact has, sadly, become obscured by the predominant socio-economic, political and moral value systems that have been steering us towards the abyss. Nietzsche cautions us to be prepared; if we look at it for long enough, the abyss will look back.¹ And finally, it seems that it has. With climate change reaching critical and irreversible levels, wholesale continued natural resource plunder and degradation of entire ecosystems, planet earth seems to be in a bad place. However, over the past few months, the law of unintended consequences has applied; pollution levels have decreased and environments are being restored with flora and fauna, as long as humans are unable to interfere.

The first aspect of the Gandhian legacy that applies to our current situation is stewardship or sarvodaya, the care or wellbeing of all. Influenced by the 19th century social thinker John Ruskin, as

1 Friedrich Nietzsche. Beyond Good and Evil. Aphorism 146.



we have heard, this world view was an epiphany that transformed Gandhiji's life; hence it is a logical starting point from which we can set sail. The opening authors of GGA's forthcoming anthology, Aditya Patnaik and Mala Pandurang, have written about Gandhi and world peace, and the manifestation of Gandhian values in everyday living respectively, but now our challenge is how to apply this knowledge to daily life, set in the context of our times. A mere half a year ago, when we held the conference to commemorate the 150th anniversary, we had no idea of the significance that local life would come to assume. In the absence of travel and with borders closed, we have had to reinsert our individual, atomised selves into a broader sense of community. Of course, this need for interpersonal relationships has always existed, albeit perhaps obscured and suppressed by contemporary 21st century life, but the pandemic has served to reveal it strongly. It is within these rhythms of everyday life that *swadeshi* or local livelihood arises as our second Gandhian touchpoint.



As American academic Mark Wilson noted in his contribution to the volume, "The principle of *swadeshi* suggests as a law of nature that the proximate matters...Gandhi reminds us that understanding and commitment to the local is the only way to understand the universal." It is, therefore, notable that the current crisis has seen us zoom in our focus on local life; local food production, home-based industry and manufacture, neighbourly care.

At a very localised level, perhaps unprecedented in recent history, we are embracing community, and in very different ways. These range from conventional interactions, such as bartering a hand-sewn protective face mask for homemade cookies up the road or conversational contact in traditional ways from one balcony to another, to the radical improvisation that sees community initiatives being formed using the latest technology, whether to coordinate the delivery of supplies or medical goods or in virtual community chatrooms that bring together family and friends, otherwise physically separated around the globe. The South African saying "local is lekker" (lekker is Afrikaans for nice or good) takes on a whole new significance.

With the closure of all businesses, sectors and industries, there has been an emphasis on increased self-sufficiency, as people have come to rely on themselves with minimal exposure to others. Individuals, who have not previously done so extensively, have needed to cook, clean and maintain other daily household chores. Parents have taken to overseeing home schooling and workers to being industrious at home. After the ease of the initial panic, when shelves were shopped bare, people have shown themselves to purchase more frugally according to what they need in the shorter term rather than to hoard or mass consume.

This, too, is a refreshing move in the direction of asceticism and, even if not to the monastic-like degree practised by the Gandhis, it reflects a shift on the dial in relation to perhaps more "human" than "consumer" behaviour. In our Gandhi 150th anniversary legacy volume, Amit Gupta has written,

broadly, on Gandhian economic development, while Asha Ramgobin has more specifically shown what a difference an ethical approach to financial-flow regulation might make.

Together with an emphasis on self-sufficiency comes the notion of *swaraj* or rule over oneself. The Mahatma learnt this, often painfully, during his own journey, at times thanks to the inputs of the long-suffering Kasturba, his wife, who was his primary maker, guide and final guru, as Anu Shankar so eloquently points out in our volume, calling for a sharper research focus on her.

The “Gandhi must come down” chapter, concerning the removal of his statue in Accra, Ghana, speaks to those protesters who, trapped in time, wish to focus on the early Gandhi for politically expedient wins. As Kojo Aidoo and Lang Nubour point out in their piece, this is to deny “the non-racist, universalist Gandhi had become in his later years”.

A fortiori, as Kwasi Amakye-Boateng suggests, why would some of Africa’s most significant liberation leaders, such as Kwame Nkrumah, have adopted a Gandhian approach to independence, had they not recognised his marked value to humanity? Clearly, with reference to African icons of humanism and peace such as Albert Luthuli and Nelson Mandela, Gandhi has proven pivotal to the world.

Moreover, much as *swaraj* is often associated with the call for “home rule” in India (from Hind *swaraj*), it applies to individual self-rule, down to the most intimate and personal terms. Gandhi bears living testimony to this proposition, growing during what we might call a life-long transformational journey. He undertook a metamorphosis, as my colleague Sue Russell suggests. Indeed, an article by George Orwell, titled ‘Reflections on Gandhi’, speaks precisely to the challenges that Gandhi lived, as he himself outlined in his autobiography. Orwell writes:

“He makes full confession of the misdeeds of his youth, but in fact there is not much to confess. As a frontispiece to the book there is a photograph of Gandhi’s possessions at the time of his death. The whole outfit could be purchased for about £5, and Gandhi’s sins, at least his fleshly sins, would make the same sort of appearance if placed all in one heap. A few cigarettes, a few mouthfuls of meat, a few annas pilfered in childhood from the maidservant, two visits to a brothel (on each occasion he got away without ‘doing anything’), one narrowly escaped lapse with his landlady in Plymouth, one outburst of temper — that is about the whole collection. Almost from childhood onwards he had a deep earnestness, an attitude ethical rather than religious, but, until he was about thirty, no very definite sense of direction.”²

Herein lies the rub. Gandhi who once, with every youthful worldly ambition qualified as a barrister in London, aspired to adopt the English gentility of the time, came to the end of his frugal life with almost no physical possessions and seemingly few transgressions, as the esteemed critic points out.

While Orwell points out “a sort of aesthetic distaste” for Gandhi, rejecting claims of sainthood or even this ideal, he concludes that “simply as a politician, and compared with other leading political figures of our time, how clean a smell he has managed to leave behind?” The clue to this, on my reading, lies in the final line of the above quote, pertaining to a “sense of direction”.

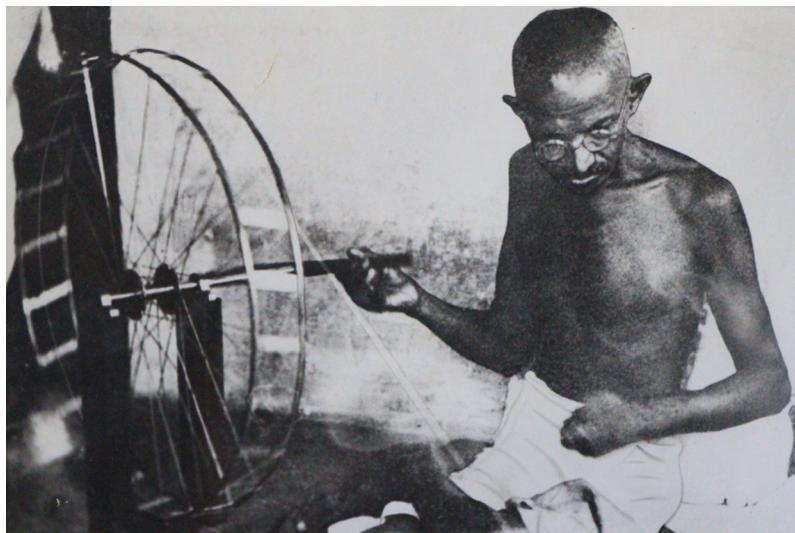
2 *Partisan Review*, January 1949.



FINDING MORAL DIRECTION AND DAILY PURPOSE IN CHALLENGING, UNCERTAIN TIMES

Once he arrived on the shores of South Africa, Gandhi certainly transformed and found his direction, initially reactively and then proactively in ever-increasing ways, relative to the situation that confronted him. However, this was by no means a solipsistic exercise. From the parasol-waving Mrs Sarah Jane Alexander and the back-up provided by her police commissioner husband, Richard Charles, in providing protection when Gandhi was mobbed at the Durban docks, to the solace provided by his family in the aftermath of his fatal shooting, his journey was profoundly interpersonal. Although the utterance of his last words “Hey Ram” (Ramachandran, a major Hindu deity) may remain disputed, this figure in some sense represents an allegory of the Gandhis’ life work, since the chronicle of Ram and Sita charts their exile, struggles with moral dilemmas and what we might term social justice and a life of living *dharma* or right.

For many who have been directionless at sea, listless, or perhaps following unhealthy or inappropriate paths relative to each of our own life trajectories, the COVID-19 pandemic forces us to pause, take stock and reboot. Where, previously, we may have relied on an external locus of control, and factors beyond ourselves to steer our fate, the current and incumbent reality means that we need to rely on ourselves to muster the courage from within. The situation requires us to exercise increasing control or rule over the self, albeit not in atomised isolation but rather in community, as suggested above.



Boateng, recalling that Gandhi’s politics arose in daily life and resulted in taking action, cites the biographer Bal Ram Nanda who recognised that, “Gandhi was no theorist; his principles evolved in response to his own needs, and the environment in which he found himself”. Herein lies an interesting overlap with the notion of *contemplari et contemplata aliis tradere*, borrowed from the Dominican tradition. In the words of St Thomas Aquinas, “Better to illuminate than merely to shine, to deliver to others contemplated truths than merely to contemplate.”³ It is probably not an understatement to claim that Gandhi was, in recent history, the most adept at sharing the fruits of contemplation by translating

3 Summa Theologiae. II-II. 188.6.

these, through non-violent mass action, into social change.

Contrary to the social Darwinists, who believe in survival of the fittest, therefore, Gandhi espoused care for the weakest. Pheroze Nowrojee unpacks this in his article for the anthology, writing that Gandhi would have recited the opening line of one of his favourite devotional songs daily, *Vaishnava Jana To*, namely, “A true Vaishnava is one who feels another’s pain.”

This is synonymous with *ubuntu*, suggests Nowrojee, the traditional sub-Saharan African philosophy of relational being, which turns on compassion, empathy and solidarity. He proposes, “That happens when we become each other”, quoting Archbishop Desmond Tutu, that proponents of *ubuntu* “were compassionate and gentle, they used their strength on behalf of the weak, and they did not take advantage of others”.

Anil Nauriya, another contributor, in noting Gandhi’s self-description as a “practical idealist” or a “doer”, suggests that for him, everything turns around the heart. This was made explicit in a “fundamental conclusion” that Gandhiji shared with the Quakers: “if you want something really important to be done, you must not merely satisfy the reason, you must move the heart also. The appeal of reason is more to the head, but the penetration of the heart comes from suffering. It opens up the inner understanding in man. Suffering is the badge of the human race, not the sword.”

In keeping with the Psalmist’s notion that, “By suffering the soul is purified”, we can detect how important the coincidence of heart and mind are for human change. As Gandhi recognises, movement arises from the emotions; hence the significance of a “change of heart”, perhaps equivalent with the Greek theological term *metanoia*, literally a “turning around”, one such Damascene moment that shifts us closer towards the good.

So it was that the Mahatma promoted an inclusive humanism above religious nationalism, in the building of the secular state of India. As Nauriya observes, “the manner in which Indian nationalists popularised the message of the Sermon on the Mount [The Beatitudes] has never happened in any country that is not predominantly Christian”.

Thus it was that Gandhi’s plea for the Indian Congress was such: “we must cease to be exclusive Hindus or Mussalmans or Sikhs, Parsis, Christians, Jews. Whilst we may staunchly adhere to our respective faiths, we must be in the Congress be Indians first and Indians last.”

Perhaps now, 90 years after that utterance, another world war, numerous inter- and intra- state conflicts, apartheid, genocides, a global financial crisis and the current pandemic, we may be able to extend that thinking even more.

Instead of trending dictums such as “America first”, Brexit now, Chinese expansion or Modi’s nationalism, what if we were to suggest, “we must be humans first and humans last”? Or somewhat more controversially, if appropriately, in an age of climate change and impending ecological disaster, “we must be beings first and beings last”?



TURNING AROUND: ON SOLIDARITY, ECONOMICS AND BEING FULLY HUMAN

This segues us into a discussion about solidarity. As Ela Gandhi points out, there are intensive overlaps between her grandparents' embodied life philosophy and current trends for applied social action. She refers to one such intersection, namely with "The Economy of Solidarity" championed by Pope Francis. Inserted within the broader tradition of the solidarity economy which, although recent, stems from late 19th century social movements and catholic social teaching,⁴ influenced heavily by the term *solidarismus*, introduced by the German Jesuit Heinrich Pesch.

Pesch, who wrote extensively on the need for economics orientated towards benefiting the common good, was opposed to those promoting an individual *homo economicus*, regarded as egocentric disciples of the gospel of self-interest. His teachings influenced Pope Leo XIII's 1891 encyclical *Rerum Novarum* (On New Things), the first social encyclical in the church, which in turn triggered subsequent proclamations running through to Pope Francis's latest 2015 encyclical, *Laudato Si* (On Care for our Common Home).⁵ Since the Second Vatican Council, a much-needed revamp of the catholic church, and one which ought to be ongoing, subsequent teachings have been interpreted in the light of the document *Gaudium et Spes* (1965) on the church in the world, where the church is defined as "the people of God".

The touch points of this teaching of care, with its twin pillars of subsidiarity and solidarity, are perhaps akin to *swadeshi* and *sarvodaya*, framed by *swaraj*. An example of this can be drawn from *Laudato Si*:

"In the present condition of global society, where injustices abound and growing numbers of people are deprived of basic human rights and considered expendable, the principle of the common good immediately becomes...a summons to solidarity and a preferential option for the poorest of our brothers and sisters. This option entails recognising the implications of the universal destination of the world's goods, but...it demands before all else an appreciation of the immense dignity of the poor in the light of our deepest convictions as believers. We need only look around us to see that, today, this option is in fact an ethical imperative essential for effectively attaining the common good."⁶

In his earlier *Evangelii Gaudium*, Francis admits that the concept of solidarity is "a little worn and at times poorly understood", and employed piecemeal. Rather, it should connote "the creation of a new mindset which thinks of community and the priority of the life of all over the appropriation of goods by a few".⁷ Accordingly, private property ownership is justified in the service of the common good and solidarity which "must be lived as the decision to restore to the poor what belongs to them". When practised, solidarity opens the way to other structural transformations and enables them.⁸

4 For a comprehensive discussion of this, see Alain Tschudin. 2007. Being in communion and becoming reconciled: social evolution, interpersonal ontology and the ethics of relationality. PhD dissertation. University of Cambridge.

5 These include *Quadragesimo Anno* (1931), *Mater et Magistra* (1961), *Pacem in Terris* (1963), *Populorum Progressio* (1967), *Laborem Exercens* (1981), *Centesimus Annus* (1991), *Evangelium Vitae* (1995), *Caritas in Veritate* (2009).

6 Sect. 158.

7 Sect. 188.

8 Sect. 189.

In terms of promoting autonomy and control over the self, the pope elaborates that “We need to grow in a solidarity which “would allow all peoples to become the artisans of their destiny”, since “every person is called to self-fulfilment”.⁹ If the above gloss is what defines solidarity, then the need for a different approach to the economy becomes manifestly obvious. Having identified the need to resolve the structural causes of poverty and asserting that “Inequality is the root of social ills”,¹⁰ Francis addresses the economy and distribution of income: “The dignity of each human person and the pursuit of the common good are concerns which ought to shape all economic policies. At times, however, they seem to be a mere addendum imported from without in order to fill out a political discourse lacking in perspectives or plans for true and integral development”.

He is not opposed to business, on the contrary. Francis refers to it as a “noble vocation”, “provided that those engaged in it see themselves challenged by a greater meaning in life; this will enable them truly to serve the common good by striving to increase the goods of this world and to make them more accessible to all.”¹¹ As he points out, far from suggesting an “irresponsible populism”, the promotion of social justice presupposes economic growth, necessitating “decisions, programmes, mechanisms and processes specifically geared to a better distribution of income, the creation of sources of employment and an integral promotion of the poor, which goes beyond a simple welfare mentality”.¹²

LEADERSHIP, GOVERNANCE AND STEWARDSHIP

From a leadership and a governance perspective, the pope proposes that “It is vital that government leaders and financial leaders take heed and broaden their horizons, working to ensure that all citizens have dignified work, education and healthcare.” And as if to echo Gandhi, “I am firmly convinced that openness to the transcendent can bring about a new political and economic mindset which would help to break down the wall of separation between the economy and the common good of society.”¹³

Finally, it is worth noting the culmination of Francis’s reflections on the “economy”, which, as he observes, “should be the art of achieving a fitting management of our common home, which is the world as a whole.” He concludes that:

“Each meaningful economic decision made in one part of the world has repercussions everywhere else; consequently, no government can act without regard for shared responsibility. Indeed, it is becoming increasingly difficult to find local solutions for enormous global problems, which overwhelm local politics with difficulties to resolve. If we really want to achieve a healthy world economy, what is needed at this juncture of history is a more efficient way of interacting which, with due regard for the sovereignty of each nation, ensures the economic wellbeing of all countries, not just of a few.”¹⁴

9 Sect. 190.

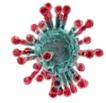
10 Sect. 202.

11 Sect. 203.

12 Sect. 204.

13 Sect. 205.

14 Sect. 206.



Accordingly, in early February 2020, the Vatican hosted a conference to discuss the advancement of the solidarity economy, with the pope calling for “new forms of solidarity” to tackle an obsolete financial structure that is “endangering our planet and dividing our societies”. Notable economists and intellectuals such as International Monetary Fund head Kristalina Georgieva, Prof. Jeffrey Sachs and Nobel laureate Joseph Stiglitz were present. Stiglitz themed his keynote address, “Global Economic Transformation: Power, People and Values”.

Pointing to the crisis in capitalism, he diagnosed the problem to the Pontifical Academy of Social Sciences as comprising inequality, climate change and morals. He holds “the belief in unfettered markets” and “new liberalism” culpable. Instead of austerity measures, he proposes that domestic and international market reform, which, along with taxation expenditure and debt crisis alleviation, can arise through a “broader ecology of institutional arrangements”.

Stiglitz recognises the value of NGOs and cooperatives with regard to “trying to introduce more solidarity, bring about more equality”, noting that, “there are policies that could create more social justice and more environmental justice.” Vis-à-vis the restoration of economic growth, he advises:

“There is no silver bullet: we have to rewrite the rules of national economy, of global economy to reduce corporate power, to reduce tax evasion and avoidance, to create more progressive taxation, to give workers more bargaining power, encourage collective bargaining, strengthening unions, make sure that corporations don’t just pay attention to their shareholders but to all the stakeholders, including their customers, their workers, the communities in which they work and the planet on which we live; and we have to rethink our international agreements, not in the way that President Trump is talking about: “America First” or any other body first; it’s the planet first and people first is what it’s about.”¹⁵

Also, at the above, which served as the prelude to the planned “Economy of Francesco” (St Francis of Assisi, his patron) meeting, Pope Francis noted the ever-increasing wealth gap between rich and poor, asserting that, “The 50 richest people in the world have an equity equivalent to 2.2 trillion dollars. Those 50 people alone could finance the medical care and education of every poor child in the world, whether through taxes, philanthropic initiatives or both. Those 50 people could save millions of lives.”

Denouncing the industrial-military complex for their vast expenditure on violence and war, Pope Francis cited the disturbing figures surrounding hundreds of millions of people living in poverty without basic human needs, sharing that five million children under the age of five will die from poverty and 260 million more will not receive an education, stating that, “These realities should not be cause for despair...but for action.”

A NEW ETHIC IN ACTION FOR THE 21ST CENTURY

Indeed, this call for solidaristic action and economic struggle for change to wipe out poverty and recognise universal human dignity has demonstrable synchronicity with a Gandhian approach. Nauriya cites Rahul Sankrityayan, who called upon Gandhi to address economic class struggle,

15 <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/vatican-city/news/2020-02/vatican-conference-economy-stiglitz.html>

saying it “would take Gandhi even beyond the achievements of Buddha himself”. So, in bringing the discussion on touch points between Gandhian principles and the economy of solidarity full circle, consider Pope Francis’s signalling the need for a new wave of morality:

“A new ethic means being aware of the need for everyone to commit to work together to close the fiscal lairs, avoid evasions and money laundering that steal from society, as well as tell the nations the importance of defending justice and the common good over the interests of the most powerful companies and multinationals - which end up suffocating and preventing local production.”

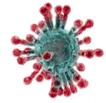


It is key that life at the local level is given its due, perhaps more than ever now that we see the pitfalls associated with living in a “global village”. For one, COVID-19 has made the scourge of inequality nakedly obvious, especially in countries such as South Africa, the most unequal in the world. As the former deputy vice-chancellor of the University of Cape Town, Crain Soudien, suggests in our anthology, while the Mahatma was neither a fan of the captains nor the cogs of industry, which he believed served to exploit the poor, he also recognised that automation and technological advances had their benefit. We might surmise that he would have supported the recent and ongoing helpful use of technology to enable the delivery of food and medical supplies, to sustain relationships and create local, albeit “virtual”, communities.

At a time in history when multiple threats to human security abound - and albeit we have discussed *sarvodaya* as care for all and *swadeshi* as emphasising local life, subsumed within control over the self as *swaraj* - we continue to remain confronted by a world of violence, suffering, abuse and neglect.

The director of the International Centre of Nonviolence at the Durban University of Technology, Crispin Hemson, thus advocates the pressing need to speak out and share the narrative, or else subscribe to a conspiracy of silence that serves only to perpetuate the *status quo ante*.

Framed as such, and having discussed the above, we now turn to engage *satyagraha* or the methodology of non-violent “truth-force” that Kasturba and the Mahatma effused.



As Soudien observes, Gandhi held control over self, via the senses, to be the primary goal of education, for which he invoked *satya* and *ahimsa*, and which “permeated his thinking”. He cites Gandhi’s own self-assertion that, despite his actions resembling those of a statesman, he had no policy or private ambitions other than “the truth and *ahimsa*”.

As such, Gandhiji would say, “Non-violence is the first article of my faith. It is also the last article of my creed”. Given the central tenet of non-violence to Gandhian being, it is worth unpacking in greater detail.

VALUE-BASED EDUCATION FOR PRACTICAL TRANSFORMATION AND SUSTAINABLE PEACE

Soudien suggests that the Gandhian dialectical methodology of truth-force and not doing harm still needs to be translated into “pedagogical practice”, which necessitates reflecting on the concepts of *satya* and *ahimsa* in our contemporary context. He shares the case of the pseudonymised Xola, who wilfully learns to transform away from toxic masculinity to a more adaptive, reflective and peaceful life. Unlike instrumental learning, which is standard across conventional educational curricula as preparation for “human capital” and inadequate for rounded development, he proposes a focus on intentionality and, with effort and work, a lifelong striving towards truth.

This echoes the thorough contribution of the dean of studies and research at the Institute of Gandhian Studies in Wardha, India, Siby Joseph, regarding Gandhi’s lifelong experiments with education, a process stretching from the cradle to the grave as he saw it. According to *Nai Talim*, “Basic education must become literally education for life”. Education that leads to true freedom cannot be gained from book pages, but only from the book of life, to paraphrase Gandhiji.

Within a Gandhian dialectic, therefore, as Soudien argues, the spotlight is on “the making of consciousness” (and we might add conscientisation or the awakening of conscience) and active personal transformation. Although beyond the scope of this document, this educational and formational philosophy dovetails with the pedagogical practices of Maria Montessori and Lev Vygotsky, who also viewed learning as directed activity.

COVID-19, DISRUPTION AND GANDHIAN VALUES AS SEEDS FOR A MORE SOULFUL WORLD

And then COVID-19 struck. Our daily and mundane world changed with terrific reverberations that are still being felt and will continue. Amidst this uncertainty, literary critic Betty Govinden in her contribution to the Gandhi anthology shares the question posed by Vandana Shiva, namely, how do we sow the seeds of a possible world? The answer, that “every person should recognise that working with their hands, and their hearts and their minds – and being interconnected – is the highest evolution of our species. Working with our hands is not a degradation, it’s our humanity. This is the ‘radical equality’ that Gandhi aimed for.”

In terms of “radical equality”, as University of KwaZulu-Natal researcher and academic

Busangokwakhe Dlamini suggests in his piece, the hallmark of *satyagraha* “is solidarity with the poor masses. This is the change of thinking Gandhi sought to infuse in others: advocating the equality of all, getting to know and understand the peasant masses and their needs”. What makes it unique, he asserts, is its capacity to effectively mass mobilise very diverse stakeholders, thereby “cultivating a healthy ‘ecology of change’ in which groups with diverse theories and practices for changing their society could each expand the capabilities of the movement as a whole.”

On this reading, the process is driven by the expectation of *darshan*, or the blissful happiness that arises out of relating self to other in the hope of future perfection and the unity of all. While this notion of contentment with perfect unity and the good of all may come across as romantic and idealised, if anything, the lifelong struggles of Kasturba and Mohandas Gandhi suggest otherwise. As Rajni Sarin writes of Gandhi in her contribution, and the same holds for his wife, “His outer life and actions were just the reflection of his inner struggle to hold fast to truth, to truthful living, and to achieve good ends only through good, virtuous, non-violent means.” Kasturba and Mohandas Gandhi demonstrated through their own lives and in their living thereof that change can be realised, albeit at a price. We would be naïve to assume otherwise. As the keynote speaker at our event last year, American civil rights activist Dr Bernard LaFayette reminded us, each movement needs a power base, which is key to effecting change. Besides self-scrutinising to identify our own role in violence, whether direct or otherwise (cultural or structural), we need to radiate outwards to build a critical mass with others who share a common purpose.

Unwittingly, the latest Coronavirus may have helped us to shift in that direction which, at its most pronounced, involves what might be termed “radical solidarity”. We have, perhaps, seen the nascent beginnings of this in capital foregoing profits as a result of the pandemic, whether it be supermarket chains cutting certain supplies to enable local shopkeepers to stay afloat, banks restructuring debt finance, retailers mass discounting supplies or service providers making certain products available *gratis* (think here of the internet and the range of free, albeit time-limited, subscriptions now offered). This is solidarity in a more authentic use of the word, which connotes accepting the punitive consequences involved in settling the debt of others. Conjointly, the economy of solidarity kicks in, but whether it catches fire remains to be seen.



A homeless man wearing a facemask sits beside a portrait of Mahatma Gandhi at a shelter camp set up by Telangana State government during a 21-day government-imposed nationwide lockdown as a preventive measure against the COVID-19 coronavirus, in Hyderabad on April 7, 2020. PHOTO: NOAH SEELAM/AFP



HUMANITY 2.0: SELF IN RELATION TO OTHER - WHICH WAY WILL YOU GO?

COVID-19 provides us, as humanity, with a timely opportunity to sit and reflect, and through introspection - and once we are able, or even in the interim - to turn out of ourselves towards others and a world that is in need of care. Perhaps we shall have learnt a valuable lesson in the key significance of curbing climate change and fostering a greater respect for life, in other beings as much as our own. The original signs indicate that while we have seen an immense outpouring of “the good”, selfishness and self-over-other attitudes and behaviours still remain. Anyone who thinks that a magic wand will alleviate this problem is mistaken.

The socio-economic effects that we are witnessing in terms of a severe downturn and global recession will hurt many individuals and homes. Again, there exists an opportunity for a non-violent Gandhian life philosophy to thrive. We are able to turn to home industry and craft, and in some instances revert to local community barter instead of hard monetary exchange. This speaks to the value of setting *swadeshi* in the present-day context of 2020 and beyond. The state, private sector and civil society appear to be working together in what might be termed a “whole of society” response, that prioritises those most in need. Within a scheme that aspires to provide care for the wellbeing of all, conceived as *sarvodaya*, this again is sensible.

Next, the very attitude of our being towards oneself. In certain respects we have had to engage the self front-on as a result of the global health crisis, with multitudes in self-isolation and socially distant from those we cherish and love. Even labour occurs from home now and anything other than local travel has ceased. No ocean voyages, aeroplane travels or great train rides for the privileged few. Rules for the protection of public health have been put in place, in many countries, very stringently. In South Africa, for example, concerning the mandatory wearing of masks in public places, some citizens seem hell-bent on disregarding this, thereby placing their own myopic egos ahead of the long-sighted wellbeing of their compatriots who may already be at risk. Again, our current situation provides us with the possibility of controlling the self and by ruling over ourselves more ethically, as *swaraj* implies, to promote the good of all.

Finally, in terms of *satyagraha*, or the power of non-violent truth or soul force, the current crisis also holds much possibility for transformational change from fleeting violence to sustainable peace. This requires a change of heart, and a sustained movement from thought to deed, in living daily life. It seems fitting therefore, in rounding off this reflection on COVID-19, that we may together, in being present, move forward in pursuing the Gandhian legacy of peace and care for all. Perhaps with a little more recognition of the divine in all of us, a lot more compassion and gratitude might come to prevail.

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