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अनन्ता

Life and thought of Gandhi: Book review

Gandhi was a great personality. He was great social and political leader. He was one of the few men in history to fight simultaneously on moral religious, political, social, economic and cultural fronts. He has been mostly reduced to an idol. During his time as a lawyer in South Africa he developed his strategy of non-violence: he made the basis of his successful struggle against British rule in India.

Mahatma Gandhi was born in Porbandar, India on October 2, 1869. He was the youngest of three sons and books were his only companions. His father and grandfather were great men of principle while his mother was very religious.

Which combined Hindu, Muslim religious beliefs, gave equal honour to the sacred books of the Vaishnavites and Koran. The influenced his life immensely and they raised him to put virtue before wealth. At the tender age of thirteen he had an arranged marriage. In 1887 Gandhi left India to go to England to study law. His mother made him promise that he practices abstinence to wine, women and meat before she gave her blessing for him to leave. In England he joined a vegetarian society and was introduced to the Bible there. The sermon on the mount was his favourite reading and he expanded himself to study the principles of world religions. He also read the Gita and Edwin Arnold's Light of Asia, which respectively initiated him into the Hindu and Buddhist Philosophies.

He traveled to South Africa as a barrister in 1893 and signed a one year contract, however he remained there over twenty years. He suffered all kinds of indignities and discriminations, specially in Natal and Transvaal where they were heavily concentrated. During his time there he fought for racial justice and the end of race prejudice. Gandhi lived by his convictions and persuaded others to follow simplicity, harmony, non-violence, and humanitarian efforts. In 1903 he set up office to be an attorney in Johannesburg and wrote his own news paper for the Indian people called, "The Indian opinion", Because of his belief in non-violent civil disobedience to react to an injustice of prejudice he was sent to prison in 1908. Gandhi expressed he much rather be a political prisoner to stop the Anti-Asiatic declaration than to allow it to happen so he used passive resistance as his weapons.

He was conscious that the condition of Indians in these countries was bad in many ways. He was familiar with South Africa but with East Africa. His knowledge was of the other countries. His advice was that they should help themselves first. He pointed out that the Indian settlers had naturally the sympathy and support of their countrymen within the country. Among the Indian settlers, those in South Africa drew his attention most.

This was because Gandhi started his political career in that country by trying to improve the condition of the Indians there and the Indians there were worse off there than elsewhere. The Indian in South Africa suffers from social, commercial and legal disabilities and is treated as an inferior being.

Gandhi returned to India in 1914 a self-confident, proud, deeply religious, and well known political leader. Gandhi thought that the method of Satyagraha that he had developed in South Africa was India's best hope. Gandhi worked out a comprehensive syllabus of national regeneration, which he appropriately called the constructive programme. It included both small and large items, covering different areas of life. For example-Hindu-Muslim unity, the removal of untouchability, a ban on alcohol, the use of Khadi, the development of village industries, equality for women, health education etc. For example he used the doubt about the success of League of Nations.

When a suggestion was made the Khilafat issue could be referred to the league for arbitration, he remarked. In 1931 he again reiterated that the league was not strong enough to deal with the Indian question, as India is a world in itself. It is too big a bite for the league.

Gandhi built his revolutionary path from on two moral principles, one was Swaraj, meaning freedom. The other was Satyagraha on non-violent power.

Here Gandhi diverged from modern sensibilities, for Satyagraha to him was more than passive resistance. For Gandhi the well-planned Satyagrahas and the constructive programme, especially the latter, held the key to India's moral regeneration and political independence. Satyagraha is not only a method based on the moral superiority of self-suffering; but it is a mode of conduct that leads to self-knowledge. Without self-knowledge Satyagraha is not possible; as it is based on the inviolable relationship between means and ends, and its essence is in the purity of means. It is fundamentally an experiment in truth in the sense that it allows those who practice it to know themselves. Satyagraha as a mode of self-recognition is directly linked to Swaraj. Gandhi's idea of true civilization is based on this self-recognition. True civilization must lead to self-knowledge. He says - "civilization is that mode of conduct that points out to man the path of duty. Performance of duty and observance of morality are convertible terms. To observe morality is to attain mastery over our mind and our passions. So doing, we know ourselves."

He started and edited Navajivan, to which he later added Harijan. He needed to awaken and unite his countrymen, and so he initiated a series of well planned Satyagrahas, each appealing to a clearly targeted constituency. He required a powerful political organisation and rebuilt the Indian National Congress from bottom upwards. It entailed active compassion even love, for one's enemies. Although Gandhi later moderated some of his ideas for instance, his wholesale rejection of modern civilization. His radical spiritual stance was the inexhaustible force that powered Indian resistance to British rule. Gandhi's greatest triumph was his march to the sea in 1930 protesting the infamous British salt tax. He did the spectacular Calcutta fast for peace during the 1947 Hindu-Muslim hostilities.

Gandhi favoured an international peace movement. He was convinced that India's struggle for freedom along the non-violent path. He was sure that if herself-consciousness rises to the height necessary to give her a non-violent victory in her fight for freedom, the world values will have changed and most of the paraphernalia of war would be found to be useless. He was sure about the truth of his statement. For the sake of completeness, an account may also be given of his views on the Indian settlers abroad.

The non-violent campaigns he waged to bring about equality between Indians and whites over the next 20 years would lead him - slowly and unsteadily, but inexorably - to advocate equality between Indian and Indian, first across caste and religious lines and then between rich and poor. (His identification with the aspirations of black people would not come until long after he had left South Africa). Africans taught him how to move the masses, not only middle class Hindu and Muslims immigrants but the poorest of the poor as well. He had as he himself said, found his "vocation in life".

Certain subjects, like Gandhi, who is often referred to as Mahatma or great soul, are particularly guarded. He is widely admired not only in India but around the world for his advocacy of non-violent struggle and the austere and celebrated life he led when he was fighting for India's freedom from the British.

He was certainly a political leader a 'social reformer', a deeply religious person. Gandhi's life and thought, outlines both his major philosophical insights and the limitations of his thoughts. The writer looks at Gandhi's cosmo-centric anthropology, his spiritual view of politics, his theories of oppression, non-violent action, and active citizenship. He also considers how the success of Gandhi's principles was limited by his lack of coherent theories of evil and of state and power, and how his hostility to modern civilization impeded his appreciation of its complexity.

He must be an ashramic, a Satyagrahi, and a seeker after Swaraj. He said 'if we can achieve self-realization through fasting and spinning, then self-realization necessarily implies Swaraj. This was the ideal for himself and the ashram.

Gandhi's life and thought has had an enormous impact both within and outside India, and he continues to be widely revered, as one of the greatest moral and political leaders of the twentieth century.

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