Gandhi’s Relevance in the 21st Century

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What would be the response of M K Gandhi to the multiple global problems that confront humanity today? Does Gandhi offer a solution for our contemporary crisis of widespread physical, psychological, economic, political, cultural, religious, technological, and environmental violence that is becoming increasingly unsustainable. The book under review seeks to answer these questions by invoking a Gandhi-informed, selectively formulated approach outlining his contemporary temporal and historical relevance. Gandhi provides us with invaluable insights, values, priorities, and actions, but the author admits that he does not have all of the answers and some of what he proposed needs to be rejected now as ill-informed or as no longer relevant for our contemporary contexts. The author’s central claim is that “Gandhi’s writings, philosophy and practices, when selectively appropriated and creatively reformulated and applied, it can lead to solutions that are non-violent and more sustainable” (p 2).

More than 70 years after his death, Gandhi’s life and ideas continue to inspire and baffle readers. While the writings on Gandhi continue to pile up, they add little value to the existing literature drawing a new perspective in the understanding of a complex personality. At a time when most authors have bordered on hagiography, one of the world’s leading Gandhi scholar and peace activist, Douglas Allen, comes up with a brilliant exposition of a creatively reformulated proposal of Gandhi’s philosophy and practice that has value for the contemporary world. The work is a culmination of his 25 years of teaching, lecturing and writings on the subject. The lectures that Allen delivered in 2015–16 in India allowed him to revise, develop and expand his ideas to come up with a rich collection of nine essays outlining Gandhi’s contemporary relevance. The author moves succinctly through Gandhian philosophy: Gandhi and Vedanta; Gandhi in the age of technology; Gandhi after 9/11 and 26/11; Gandhi’s views on the Bhagavad Gita and Hind Swaraj, on socialism; and re-writing marginality, caste, class, race, and oppressed others.

Each of the chapters is unique in approach and substance, illustrating Gandhi’s continued relevance represented through a complex philosophical hermeneutical inquiry that Allen undertakes with utmost clarity and competence. By way of introduction, Allen considers the numerous challenges that come up in exploring Gandhi’s real legacy, particularly at the appropriation of the Mahatma by the (Hindutva) forces that he was critical of during his lifetime. He laments both the progressive—modern, reactionary and the conservative outlook towards Gandhi and discusses this in length in the book. The book delineates the key ideas of violence and non-violence, absolute truth and relative truth, ethical and spiritual living. He explores the perils of capitalism, and his understanding of the Bhagavad Gita and Hind Swaraj. In the second half of the book, Allen returns to Gandhi’s deeper and broader analysis of violence and terror, including economic violence, and his analysis of means-end relations in terms of a larger framework for getting at root causes and conditions underlying violence and terrorism.

Philosophy as Practice

The strength of this book lies in its systematic presentation of Gandhi’s philosophy as practice. Allen contends that Gandhi is not interested in universal, abstract, essentialised, contextually detached theoretical formulations. Gandhi contextualises his analysis and is always experimenting with an open-ended truth reflecting imperfect understanding. His practice, according to the author, is actually grounded in a “complex, dynamic, open-ended, contextually relevant, moral and ontological theoretical framework” (p 18). This is best expressed through how he lives his life in an ethical manner. Gandhi’s focus is on living philosophy, on how we can live a life of satya (truth) and ahimsa (non-violence), with the focus on practice. According to Allen, this is of great significance to rethink our dominant philosophical approaches and how they are integrally related to a contemporary India and world of so much violence, war, exploitation, oppression, and unsustainable economic and environmental relations.

The integral relations of satya and ahimsa provide the theoretical basis for Gandhi’s philosophy and practice. They reveal the presuppositions, values, and principles informing his approach to swaraj, satyagraha, swadeshi, and other key concepts (pp 21–22). Ahimsa, (love force, truth force, soul force), the author notes, is not only the basis of Gandhi’s moral philosophy and practice, but it is at the same time the unifying moral and spiritual force that brings us together in meaningful, interconnected relations, allowing us to experience greater truth and reality. Ahimsa, by way of contrast, is based on the world view and approach that what unifies us is more fundamental than what divides, expressing our moral and spiritual interconnectedness, a primary realisation of unity with a respect for differences.

Allen develops Gandhi’s invaluable analysis of the distinction and integral relations between relative truth and absolute truth, to show how this informs the approach to truth and non-violence, and how this relates to an ethical and ontological view of interconnectedness of all realities. While Gandhi never abandons his search for absolute truth, he maintains that as particular, relative,
embodied human beings, none of us can fully comprehend the absolute. Gandhi repeatedly confesses that he at most has very imperfect, limited, temporary glimpses of such absolutes. Thus, he insists on the primary importance of relative truth. According to Allen, Gandhi’s philosophy and practice consist in movement from one relative truth to a greater relative truth, closer to but never fully realising the absolute truth (p 51). For Allen, the movement towards greater truth is an action-oriented, tolerant, cooperative, mutually reinforcing effort. This Gandhian approach to truth involves dialogue, recognition of integral self-other relations, and embracing an open-ended process that resists the domination of false attempts at philosophical, religious, cultural, economic, or political closure. Such an attempt could allow us to develop more moral, spiritual, and pragmatic ways for addressing contemporary conflicts and violence that have engulfed us in the contemporary period.

The process of imaginative constitution of absolute ideals is analysed in Gandhi’s interpretation of his favourite text, the Bhagavad Gita. Gandhi agrees that earlier authors, commentators, and devotees of the Gita did not regard it as a gospel of ahimsa. However, Allen, through his study shows how Gandhi, by embracing the profound teachings of the Gita as part of an open-ended process of constituting meaning, reinterprets Gita as expressing the highest ideals of moral and spiritual perfection as a gospel of non-violence. After outlining Gandhi’s much insightful, symbolic, mythic and allegorical formulation of the Gita, which reveals profound truth and realities about our existential mode of being in the world, Allen develops Gandhi’s crucial but complex non-violent reading, interpretation and application of the Bhagavad Gita. The new formulation of the Gita, according to Allen, evolved through “numerous changing contextual variables, experimenting with truth in ways that appreciated much of the traditional world and its Gita, and introducing radically new contextual breakthroughs and new contextual world of meaning” (p 72). Allen underlines the importance of Gandhi’s privileging of karma yoga as an action-oriented, renunciatory approach in which one fulfils one’s ethical duties (dharma) with an attitude of non-attachment to the results of one’s actions. But Allen maintains that the observance of ahimsa is crucial to this. Ahimsa, as interpreted by Gandhi’s re-reading of the Gita, is rooted in the philosophy of yajna (self-purification through sacrifice and self-suffering). Allen illustrates how Gandhi arrives at his conclusion that the Gita is a non-violent text.

In his hermeneutical reflections on the Hind Swaraj, the author contends that the inclusive dialogical methodology of the text makes it the most significant work on Gandhi after 9/11. The work, according to Allen, is of immense value as it offers a radical critique of our dominant modern paradigms and views of technology. He suggests that Gandhi’s absolute assertion about technology must be read and interpreted symbolically, with the recognition of complex, overt and hidden, multidimensional similies, metaphors, allegorical expressions, and mythic narrative structures (p 112). He also submits in terms of his analysis of Hind Swaraj in how Gandhi is being used in very limited and often
non-Gandhian ways as means for achieving non-Gandhian and anti-Gandhian ends. To this effect, a comparison of Gandhi's *Hind Swaraj* with Vinayak Damodar Savarkar's *Hindutva* adds value to the book.

**Terrorism and Rethinking Violence**

We live in a post-9/11 world, which has witnessed an unprecedented rise in the incidents of terror, violence and fundamentalism in recent times. Countering terrorism has become, beyond any doubt, the top national security priority for most nations, including India. When it comes to addressing the question of violence, terror, and terrorism, most critics believe Gandhi has nothing relevant to offer to the contemporary world. Gandhi’s commitment to pacifism and non-violence is seen as an obstacle to deal with post-9/11, 26/11 crises that threaten to destroy us. But Allen's position is that Gandhi’s approach to violence and non-violence can serve as a valuable catalyst, as he gets at the roots of causes and key factors that combine to fuel terrorism and other forms of violence.

For Gandhi, acts of overt physical violence are only a small part of the overall violence. In his attempt to broaden and deepen our sensitivity and awareness of violence, Gandhi claims that most of us who profess to stand for peace and non-violence are actually very violent, either directly or indirectly in our passivity and complicity in perpetuating a world lacking in ahimsa. Thus, Allen points out that in radically transforming our understanding of violence, both quantitatively and qualitatively, Gandhi transforms our approach to those forms of violence classified at terror and terrorism. (p 149)

This is reflected, as Allen argues in Gandhi’s most important contribution towards understanding of terrorism, in his lifelong attempt to redefine, broaden, and deepen our understanding of violence.

According to Allen, Gandhi broadens and deepens our approach to violence, and hence to terror and terrorism, in two significant ways. First, he stresses on diversity, multidimensionality, complexity, and interactional nature of overt and subtle forms of violence: social, economic, psychological, political, etc. Second, he takes into consideration of everyday violence based on the structure of the status quo. Such violence of the status quo is part of our normal everyday life, and it is usually not even recognised as violence (pp 149–50).

If we want to understand and confront contemporary terrorism, Gandhi challenges us to examine economic violence (pp 154–56). The economic violence of the status quo is expressed through the incredible concentration of wealth and power, whether defined by the domination of multinational corporations and the military-industrial complex globally or the domination of the ruling class domestically. The main concern for Gandhi, in all such economic violence, is that it involves humanly caused exploitation, domination, and suffering. As Gandhi learned from the *Gita*, inaction is a kind of action. If one does nothing about economic exploitation and refuse to serve the needs of other suffering human beings, one perpetuates and is responsible for the economic violence of the status quo.

**Preventive Violence**

Allen suggests, the tremendous contribution of Gandhi’s approach to 9/11, terrorism, and violence lies not in any insights about how to respond when the terrorist is about to strike, but rather about what to do beforehand. (p 163)

For Gandhi, at least 90% of violence is humanly caused, contingent, and hence preventable. Gandhi’s major focus is always on preventative measures that we must take in order to transform and remove the violent conditions and causes before they reach the point of exploding into terror and terrorism. The greatest challenge is to identify root causes and basic causal determinants of violence and to propose alternative non-violent determinants. This allows us to break escalating causal cycles of violence and avoid violent effects. Otherwise, we will remain entrapped within and keep reproducing the contemporary cycles of violence that are morally, politically, economically, and environmentally unsustainable and threaten our future existence on planet earth.

The key to this preventative approach is Gandhi’s famous analysis of means and ends. Gandhi rejects utilitarianism and many other contemporary positions, including various justifications of terrorism, which maintain that the ends justify the means. We must emphasise both means and ends and their integral, mutually reinforcing relations. Gandhi places even more emphasis on means, because he tells us that we often have much greater control over our means, whereas noble ends may be unattainable because of unintended consequences or because they express ideals that are beyond our power of realisation. Gandhi, in his means-ends moral philosophy and practice, challenges dominant modern approaches. He repeatedly formulates why untruthful, immoral, violent means cannot lead to truthful, moral, and non-violent ends. For example, we cannot use terrorism today to overcome terrorism and expect to realise a goal of a world free from terror. Gandhi has no doubt, even in his approach to relative truth, that love is better than hate, that peace is better than war, that compassion is better than ego-driven selfishness, that violence cannot lead to non-violence, that terror and terrorism cannot lead to a world free from terror, that ahimsa and satya are the only paths to truth and reality.

This thought-provoking book, full of nuanced understanding of Gandhi’s philosophy and practice, makes an excellent contribution to the relevance of Gandhi for the 21st century. The book succeeds in providing the argument that Gandhi offers to us the most profound and influential theory, philosophy, and engaged practices of ahimsa or non-violence to deal with the contemporary crisis of marginality, as well as other multifarious challenges that confront humanity today. In many ways, regardless of one’s own personal take on the man or the doctrine, this book is a fascinating read because it brings together effectively for the reader how a Gandhi-informed, non-violent response is creative sustainable, and relevant today. Overall, this outstanding collection will be valuable to Gandhian scholars, students, and activists.

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