

## Learning from Mohandas

By Harsh Mander

This world today has much to learn from Mohandas Gandhi.

Many young people, born in free India, are indeed rediscovering Mohandas. He towered over the twentieth century, for his epic leadership to the non-violent struggle against colonial subjugation, but even more for the intensely moral foundations of his politics. The world in the twenty-first century is vastly different from the one which preceded it. It witnesses the global triumph of market economics, the retreat of the state, and the generation of unprecedented wealth. It also sees a planet torn apart by staggering inequalities, and by simmering conflict-centred often round religious identity - within and between nations. Gandhi's relevance is perhaps even greater to this century than to the ones in which he lived.

There are many things that Mohandas lived for. But what he died for was the secular democratic idea of India. The struggle for India's freedom was not just a battle against imperialism. It was also a bitter contestation about the kind of nation India would be when it was reborn into freedom. Central to Mohandas's imagination of India was of a nation of unparalleled diversity in which it would not matter which god you worshipped - or if you chose to worship no god; it would not matter if you were a man or woman, of this caste or that, rich or destitute, whether you spoke this language or lived in that region. You would be a fully equal human being and citizen, assured equal rights and protection to pursue your beliefs and chosen way of life. What is important is not just that Mohandas had this dream for India, but that the majority of Indians - Hindu, Muslim and of other faiths - rallied behind this ideal.

Mohandas was a deeply devout Hindu, and simultaneously was profoundly respectful of other faiths. His secularism never entailed a denial of faith. Instead it demanded equal respect for every faith (including indeed the absence of faith). Today in France and many parts of Europe, the ideals of secularism are currently being invoked to ban women from wearing veils in schools and public places. Elsewhere Sikhs are barred from wearing turbans. But the secularism that we learnt from Mohandas required the opposite: to defend the right of each person to follow their religious and cultural persuasions. I may oppose the veil, but must fight for your right to choose (and my right to oppose). This 'Indian' ideal of secularism is at variance even

with hard atheism, which is intolerant of the faith of others. I may personally choose to reject faith, but equally I must respect the faith of others.

This ideal was one for which Mohandas was ultimately killed. But free India has repeatedly failed him in so many ways. The blood of innocents is spilled relentlessly because of their religious or caste identity; governments have been voted to power because they pulled down a place of worship; dalit children in between a third and half our rural schools are still seated separately; temples are still barred to dalits; and millions of women still carry human excreta on their heads.

To battle for their vision for a more just world, many dispossessed and idealistic men and women today continue to pick up the gun. But Mohandas reminded us that it is impossible to build a just and humane society by means which are unjust and inhuman. He taught us ways to resolutely fight injustice without hate or bloodshed, but instead with timeless instruments of truth, love, self-restraint, voluntary self-suffering, courage, peaceful mass mobilisation, and indeed on occasion recourse to law and the courts. These instruments of struggle need to be reclaimed and refurbished to be compatible with the challenges and possibilities of our times.

Mohandas taught us also the futility of revenge and anger, with his famous adage of an eye for an eye ultimately making the world blind. There is so little forgiveness in our public life today. Fasting for communal peace during the Partition riots in Calcutta, Gandhi is said to have been confronted by a Hindu man nearly crazed by grief and hate, because a Muslim mob had killed his young son. Mohandas gently counselled him that if he really wished to overcome his suffering, he should find a Muslim boy, the age of his son, whose parents were killed by Hindu mobs. And he should bring the boy up like his own son, but in the faith of his parents.

It is a hundred years since Mohandas wrote in 'Hind Swaraj' his stirring critique of modernity, and those who return to it and his other writings discover many ideas to craft new solutions to many of our contemporary world's crises. His economics did not aspire to growth and accumulation, but instead to people's 'swaraj' or control over their own destinies. He opposed the deployment of machines if people were out of work. He did not believe in unlimited wants, but instead reminded us that the world produces enough for the needs but not the greed of every human being. His economics was not founded on assumptions of self-seeking

accumulation being central to human nature; instead he was convinced that human beings were essentially altruistic. The world would be a fairer, kinder and happier place if it adopted many of Mohandas's principles of an alternate 'economics as if people matter'.

Contemporary notions of 'good governance' envisage an ideal state to be one which best facilitates markets. Mohandas instead offered us a 'talisman' to be summoned in times of doubt and confusion. He counselled us to recall the face of the most disadvantaged person we know, and reflect on the implications of our decisions for this person's life, well-being and 'swaraj'. Applied to State policy, this would mean that the quality of governance should be measured by what the State achieves for its most disadvantaged people. By this measure, if a State facilitates rapid economic growth but dispossesses our poorest people of their livelihoods, lands and forests, government has abjectly failed its people.

Mohandas also gave many lessons about how to lead a good life. He taught us to strive always to live and practice our beliefs, to 'be the change we wish to see in the world'. If we believe in equality, can we try to be egalitarian in the ways we relate with people around us? If we believe in love, can we fight impulses of hate and revenge? He taught us never to lose touch with our immediate humanity even while fighting lofty battles. In negotiations for India's freedom, he would take time off to tend to a goat-kid's broken leg. He was not coldly rigid in his convictions. Although passionately vegetarian, when Badshah Khan's children visited, he offered to arrange for them meat dishes. And he never lost his playful sense of mischief. When asked why he went to see the King of England in only a loin cloth and shawl, he famously responded that the monarch was wearing enough for both of them.

Mohandas by no means held a perfect vision or led a perfect life. Indeed he was the first to acknowledge his faults, and was preoccupied lifelong to fight these. Most flawed for me was his condoning of caste, even while he passionately opposed untouchability. His notions of trusteeship of big industry clouded ideas of class oppression and class struggle. And in his personal life, he failed as a father, leaving his son tormented and broken. His beliefs in women's equality were imperfectly reflected in his relationship with his wife Kasturba.

We learn from Mohandas's triumphs, but also from his failures. We go back to him not because he was perfect. We go back to Gandhi because, in his own words, he obeyed only one dictator. This was the voice of his conscience.