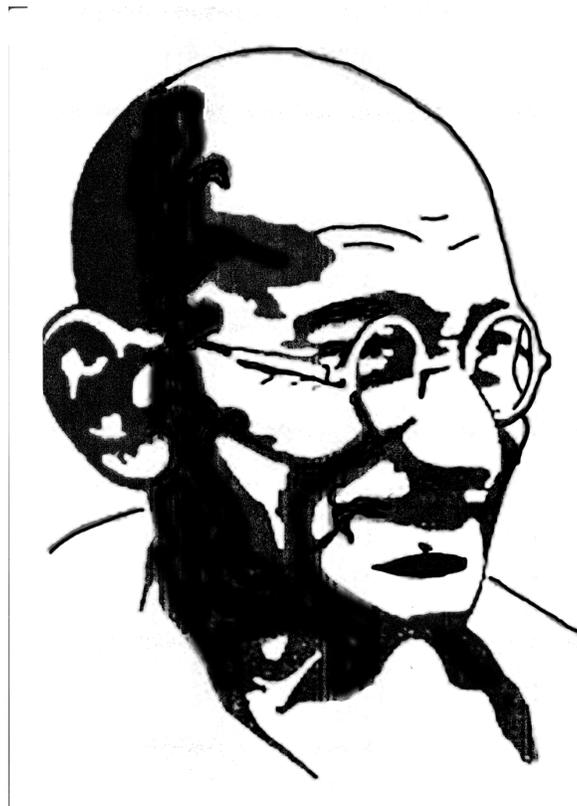


MAHATMA GANDHI

A ROLE MODEL FOR PEACE



THE BACKGROUND

Colonial domination

Over several hundreds of years, the great powers of Europe (Great Britain, Spain, France, the Netherlands, Portugal) took power all over the world. This was the era of colonies. It culminated in the 19th century. By the middle of the 20th century it was over. In one way, the era of colonialism was the first step to globalization. It brought the world together in a new way. But it was aggressive and unfair and brought much humiliation and suffering to peoples in Africa, Asia and America.

A different kind of domination

All through history, strong peoples and nations have attacked and ruled over smaller and weaker peoples. The colonial era, however, was different in one way. The colonial powers never wanted the colonies to become part of their own homeland. They wanted to exploit the resources and the manpower of the colonies. But they didn't want to mix with the culture or with the people. Behind this were several reasons. One, which is important in the context of Gandhi and the Indian struggle for independence, is that the Europeans generally considered themselves superior to the peoples in Asia and Africa. Some even developed intellectual theories which they thought would prove that the different races on earth were more or less advanced, but always inferior to the white race. So, many Europeans believed that they were destined to rule over other peoples. This sometimes expressed itself in segregation, the separation between people of different races on all levels of society. Segregation was very strong in South Africa even until recently. It was also an important feature of life in the southern states of the USA for a long time. Of course, it is important to remember that many Europeans didn't share these beliefs. Also, it didn't go well together with the ethics of Christianity. But both Christians and others in Europe at the time often collaborated with the colonial system for various reasons.

The Indian caste system

Segregation, however, was not a Western invention. In India itself, there was already one very old system of segregation: the caste system. According to this system, each person has his or her predestined place in society, with a particular kind of work and a very exact position on the social scale. Only a minority is destined to rule and wield authority. Through this socio-religious system of classes, the majority of the Indians were kept under oppression and the country could not advance. So, when Gandhi was born, there were two oppressive systems in force in India: the ancient caste system and the more recent colonial system. Both had terrible consequences on the personal, social and economic levels.

Fascination with the strong

At the same time that Indians were economically oppressed by the British and other Europeans, they also received new knowledge from Europe, both technical and scientific and philosophical. There was a general fascination with the strength and power and intelligence that Europeans manifested. Many wanted to become like them in order to partake in this strength. Others tried to reform their ancient heritage. The European powers became increasingly aggressive and eventually made violence also on themselves. This would lead to two enormous world wars with millions of deaths and the end to European dominance. In connection with this, China, Japan, Vietnam, Korea and many countries in Africa such as the Congo, Zimbabwe and Uganda went through horrible wars and sufferings. India could have met a similar fate, if it hadn't been for Mahatma Gandhi.

THE STORY

The beginning

Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi was born in the present-day state of Gujarat in India on October 2, 1869. His parents were well-to-do, upper caste Hindus. During his childhood, he often met with the very pacific followers of the Jain religion. Gandhi was not a very good student and he was quite shy. Eventually he was sent to study law in London, where he felt very lonely and tried hard to learn self-discipline. Like many educated Indians, he dressed and talked like a European. After completing his studies, Gandhi returned to India. In 1891, he attempted to establish a law practice in Bombay, without much success. Two years later he got employed as legal adviser in an Indian company in South Africa. When he arrived in this country, Gandhi was appalled at the widespread denial of civil liberties and political rights to Indian immigrants. The black Africans were even more oppressed. Yet he became a successful lawyer because of his hard work and self-discipline.

Gandhi begins his non-violent movement

In 1896 Gandhi was thrown out of a train because he was an Indian. He spent the night on a cold and empty station. There he decided not to give up and leave, but to fight for the dignity of all, also for the white man who was disfigured by his pride and hate. Gandhi began to teach a policy of passive resistance and non-cooperation. He called this “satyagraha.” Part of the inspiration for this policy came from the Russian writer Leo Tolstoy. Gandhi also acknowledged his debt to the teachings of Jesus Christ and to the American writer Henry David Thoreau. In this teaching, nobody is definitely bad. Nobody is an enemy. All can be transformed. The energy we use on violence and hatred can be used in love and reconciliation. But this demands courage. “Non-violence is the weapon of the strong”, said Gandhi. Indeed, Gandhi was beaten and threatened. He was attacked and imprisoned. But in 1914, after long resistance, the government of the Union of South Africa made important concessions to Gandhi's demands, including recognition of Indian marriages and abolition of special taxes for them. Gandhi then returned to India.

The movement in India

After World War I, Gandhi launched his movement of non-violent resistance to Great Britain. He didn't first think of total independence. But in 1919, Parliament passed the Rowlatt Acts, which gave the Indian colonial authorities emergency powers to deal with "revolutionary activities." A demonstration against the Rowlatt Acts resulted in a massacre of Indians at Amritsar by British soldiers. In 1920, Gandhi proclaimed an organized campaign of non-cooperation. Indians in public office resigned, government agencies such as courts of law were boycotted, and Indian children were withdrawn from government schools. Rabindranath Tagore renounced his knighthood. Throughout India, streets were blocked by squatting Indians who refused to rise even when beaten by police. The hartal was first invented by Gandhi. It was absolutely voluntary and non-violent.

Live what you learn

Gandhi became the international symbol of a free India. He lived a spiritual and ascetic life of prayer, fasting, and meditation. Refusing earthly possessions and Western-style living, he wore a loincloth and a shawl, like the poor Indians. Indians revered him as a saint and began to call him Mahatma (great-soul), a title reserved for the greatest sages. By the Indian practice of nonviolence, Gandhi held, also the British would eventually be transformed and would leave India.

Difficulties of ahimsa

The Indian population, however, could not fully comprehend the hard discipline of ahimsa. A series of armed revolts against the British broke out. They led to such violence that Gandhi confessed the failure of the civil-disobedience campaign and ended it. The British government again seized and imprisoned him in 1922. He was released in 1924.

The salt tax



In 1930, the Mahatma proclaimed a new campaign of civil disobedience, calling upon the Indian population to refuse to pay taxes, particularly the tax on salt. Indians were forbidden to collect salt from the sea. Gandhi's campaign was a march to the sea, in which thousands of Indians followed him from Ahmedabad to the Arabian Sea. There, they made salt by evaporating sea water.

Fasting for justice

In 1932 Gandhi was arrested twice. He fasted for long periods several times. These fasts were effective measures against the British, because revolution might well have broken out in India if he had died. But Gandhi did not struggle only against the British. In September 1932, while in jail, Gandhi undertook a "fast unto death" to improve the status of the Hindu Untouchables. Although he was himself a member of a higher caste, Gandhi led the movement in India dedicated to eradicating the unjust social and economic aspects of the caste system. He started calling the "untouchables" Harijan, "children of God."

Campaign against injustice and greed

In 1934 Gandhi formally resigned from politics, being replaced as leader of the Congress party by Jawaharlal Nehru. Gandhi traveled through India, teaching ahimsa and demanding eradication of untouchability. All through his career, Gandhi also tried to introduce another kind of economics. He was opposed to the unbridled greed of capitalism and the impersonal five-year plans of communism. Instead, he wanted the village to become the essential unit in India. India would become self-sufficient through simplicity of life, hard work and direct democracy. Every day Gandhi himself would work on his spinning wheel to make an example.

World War II

When World War II broke out, the Congress party demanded a declaration of war aims and their application to India. The British did not respond, so the party and Gandhi decided not to support Britain in the war unless the

country was granted complete and immediate independence. The British refused. When Japan entered the war and attacked Burma (which belonged to the British Empire), Gandhi still refused to agree to Indian participation. He was interned in 1942 but was released two years later because of failing health.

Interreligious riots, Partition of India

By 1944 the Indian struggle for independence was in its final stages. The British government had agreed to independence on condition that the two contending nationalist groups, the Muslim League and the Congress party, should resolve their differences. By this time, the Muslim League had declared that it wanted a separate “Homeland” for the Muslims of India. They didn’t trust the Hindu leaders. Gandhi stood steadfastly against the partition of India. He had all his life struggled to heal the rift between Hindus and Muslims. Ultimately, however, he had to agree to partition, in the hope that internal peace would be achieved afterward. India and Pakistan became separate states when the British granted India its independence in 1947. But millions of people moved from one region to another and many violent riots broke out, especially in the West of India.

Fasting for peace, dying for peace

During the terrible riots that followed the partition of India, Gandhi pleaded with Hindus and Muslims to live together peacefully. Riots engulfed Calcutta and the Mahatma fasted until disturbances ceased. On January 13, 1948, he undertook another successful fast in New Delhi to bring about peace. On January 30, 12 days after the termination of that fast, as he was on his way to his evening prayer meeting, he was assassinated by a fanatic Hindu.

Gandhi's death was regarded as an international catastrophe. His place in humanity was measured not in terms of the 20th century, but in terms of history. He himself illustrated what he had said: *“We are constantly being astonished at the amazing discoveries in the field of violence. But I maintain that far more undreamt-of and seemingly impossible discoveries will be made in the field of nonviolence.”*

Peace Role Models: Mahatma Gandhi

These are some of the points that were laid down by Gandhi as a code for volunteers in the 1930 movement.

Harbour no anger but suffer the anger of the opponent. Refuse to return the assault of the opponent.

Do not submit to any order given in anger, even though severe punishment is threatened for disobeying.

Refrain from insults and swearing.

Protect opponents from insult or attack, even at the risk of life.



SOME WORDS OF MAHATMA GANDHI

Always aim at complete harmony of thought and word and deed. Always aim at purifying your thoughts and everything will be well.

*

Strength does not come from physical capacity. It comes from an indomitable will.

*

The weak can never forgive. Forgiveness is the attribute of the strong.

*

Whatever you do will be insignificant, but it is very important that you do it.

*

When I despair, I remember that all through history the ways of truth and love have always won. There have been tyrants, and murderers, and for a time they can seem invincible, but in the end they always fall. Think of it – always.

*

You must be the change you want to see in the world.

*

Action may not always bring happiness; but there is no happiness without action.

*

First they ignore you, then they laugh at you, then they attack you. Then you win.

*



Peace Role Models: Mahatma Gandhi

Civil disobedience is the assertion of a right which law should give but which it denies.

*

Civil disobedience presupposes willing obedience of our self-imposed rules, and without it civil disobedience would be cruel joke.

*

Civil disobedience becomes a sacred duty when the State becomes lawless corrupt.

*

Disobedience to be civil has to be open and nonviolent.

*

An error does not become truth by reason of multiplied propagation, nor does truth become error because nobody sees it.

*

If by strength is meant moral power, then woman is immeasurably man's superior.

*

No charter of freedom will be worth looking at which does not ensure the same measure of freedom for the minorities as for the majority.

*

No society can possibly be built on a denial of individual freedom

*

True nonviolence should mean a complete freedom from ill will and anger and hate and an overflowing love for all.

*



Peace Role Models: Mahatma Gandhi

The more efficient a force is the more silent and the more subtle it is.

*

Love is the subtlest force in the world.



THE VISION OF MAHATMA GANDHI

It is very difficult to capture Gandhi's vision in a short paragraph. Yet it could perhaps be summed up in this way: it was the vision of a spiritual, socio-economical and personal transformation. Gandhi was a Hindu. He never renounced his religion. But religion, for him, was something that should unite human beings in their struggle for justice, peace and respect for all. He demanded of all to find the very best in their own religion and put it to practice for the good of all. In this way, he gathered around himself Muslims, Christians, agnostics, Sikhs, Jains and believers of all kinds.

The human being is a spiritual being. He stressed the importance of meditation, silence and especially fasting. His was a religion of service. This demands a deep, personal transformation. We all have darkness inside of us. We have passions, desires and dreams of power and possession. All these must be transformed into energy for the good. If the human being remains unreformed, undisciplined, the society will never change. Religions will be used to further conflicts and stake demands on territory and power. The human being must change through renunciation and sacrifice. Only so can she become free.

This inevitably leads to social and economic transformation. We live in society – it is the only way we can live. We depend on each other and need each other. But society is often characterized by exploitation, corruption, oppression and greed. It is constantly threatened by violence. Society is the mirror of unreformed people. This is how we are inside of ourselves. Therefore, we need to struggle hard for peaceful reform both inside ourselves, in our minds, and outside of ourselves, in the society. Only through deep compassion and love is this possible. That is the vision of Gandhi and of ahimsa.

THE IMPORTANCE OF MAHATMA GANDHI TODAY

Gandhi died more than sixty years ago. His world was in many ways different from the world we live in today. Is he still important? Is his message still relevant? Gandhi certainly has inspired countless people all over the world. Martin Luther King, Nelson Mandela and other great champions of non-violence have acknowledged their debt to Gandhi. His thoughts and example still inspire many people today. And many of the injustices he tried to address still exist in our society. Are we free from violence? Do we accept everyone as equal? Do we have a fair and just distribution of wealth? Do we listen to and respect those who have a different opinion? Is our society characterized by cooperation and non-violent struggle for justice? If not, we still need to listen to Gandhi.

The essence of Gandhi's teaching

How did he face the challenges of his time? Let's remember that these challenges were enormous. He faced great violence, hatred, rejection and ignorance. He was jailed many times. But he never used violence, hatred or rejection in his struggle. Why? Because his was basically a struggle of non-cooperation. There can be great injustices and great violence in a society. If we participate in this violence and injustice, it will remain and grow. We will become part of it. But if we refuse to cooperate, it will disappear. Don't participate in evil! This is Gandhi's most basic teaching. It is not more complicated than that.

Non-cooperation requires sacrifice

If enough people would follow this in Bangladesh today, corruption, nepotism, political violence and many other terrible social ills would disappear immediately. Gandhi knew, however, that there is a price to pay for this non-cooperation. The power and influence of some people depends on the injustice done to others. They will not accept non-cooperation. Therefore, nothing can be gained without sacrifice. We cannot wait for

others to make the sacrifices, so that we can live well. We can never ask of others that they sacrifice. We must be willing to make the sacrifice ourselves. “He that would have the fruit must climb the tree”, said Gandhi. The Mahatma always marched with his people. He was always to first to take a major risk. He lived, ate and slept like the simple people who followed him. Yet he was a highly educated, upper middle-class man who could have lived comfortably. He risked his own life before asking others to risk theirs. How did he find the courage to do this?

The incredible strength of Truth

He found it in his belief that Truth is the ultimate force – truth is infinitely stronger than all the lies and inventions in the world. To lie, to refuse to accept reality when it goes against our wishes, is to abandon truth. Then we become weak and need the protection of weapons or power. If we participate in truth, however, we become so strong that nobody can vanquish us. Why? Because truth exists also in your enemy. Your enemy is also a human being. You can make him discover truth. Once you both decide to accept truth, solutions to all conflicts become possible. Then it becomes clear that the obstacles to the solutions were not real at all: they were illusions, lies, passions.

“My life is my teaching”

Today, we see terrible political violence between different parties. We see oppression of poor people and of women. We see exploitation and greed. For Gandhi, this was a double tragedy. Those who persecute, oppress and exploit their fellow human beings degrade themselves at the same time that they inflict sufferings on others and destroy the society. How can we appeal to the oppressors? First of all, says Gandhi, by showing how to be different. We must begin by taking the risk ourselves to be fair, just and respectful of our opponents. This is very difficult. It means taking the risk of being humiliated, sometimes even beaten and, in the very worst case, being killed. It is impossible to do this if we only think of our own well-being. The struggle for peace is basically a struggle for the well-being of future generations, our children and their children. If I want to see the results myself, I will not have the courage to do the necessary sacrifices.

Technique and analysis

There is also a certain technique to the non-violent struggle for justice and peace. First of all, we must understand where the root cause of the problem we want to deal with is. It is usually part of something quite complex. There are no easy solutions. Then we must be creative in dealing with it. Gandhi said that he was always ready immediately to join hands with his opponent if he saw the slightest willingness to change. Never try to win and humiliate the loser. In Bangladesh, we are too much marked by a competitive spirit. In justice, there can only be winners, no losers.

Then we need to make sure that what we demand or want is really fair and reasonable and to the benefit of all in the long term. It must not be something that benefits only ourselves. It is better to fight for the rights of others. Then they will stand up for our rights when needed. It cannot be everything at once. In Bangladesh, many programs fail because they demand too many changes at the same time. It is difficult to change people. It is difficult to change oneself. It is difficult to change society. Therefore, we have to take one step at the time and accept even a small progress as a victory for all.

The social sins

Society is marked by several sins, says Gandhi. Let's look at just three of them:

1. *Politics without principle.* This is very common in Bangladesh. Politicians and leaders rarely have any convictions or principles. They look for power and prestige. This is one reason why they often cannot work efficiently for the good of the country. The same is true for small-scale politics in family and offices.

2. *Wealth without work.* This is for example stock market business and living off rent. This was how the zamindars lived. When the connection between work and money is forgotten, corruption and exploitation begins. Money is another form of effort – yours or that of another.

3. *Pleasure without Conscience.* Pleasure always means some kind of responsibility. When there is no conscience connected to pleasure, people begin using each others, only seeking gratification of their own needs for pleasure and divertissement. It destroys the moral fabric of a country. This is now becoming a major problem in Bangladesh, especially among young people.

Commitments for peace

What to do? Gandhi, as always, says: begin with yourself. Make a commitment to non-violence, self-discipline and non-stealing (*asteya*). Non-stealing means not accumulating and keeping things you don't need. Once you have made this commitment, you will immediately face difficulties. The greatest difficulty will always be you yourself. But difficulties will also come from outside, from people who don't want to change, who don't want to be challenged or who don't understand why there is a need for transformation. Therefore, your next step is to find like-minded friends. You can never hope to change anything in this society alone. Very few of us are real heroes. We need to feel that we are supported and appreciated. We need to be listened to and consoled. That is why it is extremely important to create solidarity and trust in the group of friends. Then it becomes possible to do something active against to evil in society.

Spiritual discipline

But you also need a greater source of strength. Whatever religion you belong to, you need to take time to gather spiritual strength through silence, fasting and meditation. This is not easy in the beginning. The mind doesn't like silence. You must use discipline and eventually you will start appreciating it. Only in this way you can become an active peace maker in Bangladesh.

YOU CAN DO IT YOURSELF

What can you do? Perhaps you think: “I can do nothing at all. I have no power, nobody listens to me, I am shy, I have nothing to say, I am afraid.” Please remember that this is how most people feel, perhaps all. Gandhi was a bad student, he was shy, he was clumsy, he was unknown and when he was in Europe and South Africa, he was despised because he was dark-skinned. Other great leaders and spiritual personalities have had similar feelings. What is important is not your feelings or your capacities. The only important thing is your decision. If you decide today: “I will not cooperate with evil” and stay firm in this commitment, you can change the world.

The first steps to action

Not immediately, of course. There are a few steps to take, and many risks. The first step is to understand what is evil. You must have some reference point. The next step is to understand what cooperation with evil is. Only then you can start some action. This must be close to where you are. If you are a student, look around you in your college, in your hostel. What is evil here? What does cooperation with it mean? If you are a housewife, look around you in the neighbourhood. Where is the injustice here? What does it mean to cooperate with it? If you are an office worker, look around in your office. What is wrong here? How can it be corrected? In every situation you will find some injustice that you can do something about. Be realistic, but be bold. Don't be afraid of challenges. Always aim a little higher than you think you can reach.

Look for inspiration: you are not alone

If you look around in Bangladesh, you will discover a great number of people who have picked up very great challenges and transformed negative situations. Learn from them. Learn also from their mistakes. Some are very famous: Professor Yunus, Jharna Dhara Chowdhury, Sufia Kamal and others. But there are many more in the towns and villages who struggle for peace in remarkable ways without yet having received recognition.

Women have a gift for peace

If you are a woman, then remember that Gandhi believed that women had special capacities for sacrifice and for leadership in peace building. He thought that the world had been too long dominated by "masculine" aggressive qualities and that it was time that the "feminine" qualities came to the fore. He wrote: *"Nonviolence is woman's inborn virtue. For ages together, men have been trained in violence. To become nonviolent, they will have to generate womanly qualities in them. Since I have adopted nonviolence, I am myself becoming womanly day by day. Women are accustomed to making sacrifices for the family, they will now have to learn to make an offering for the country. I am inviting all women... to get enlisted in my nonviolent army."* Thousands of Indian women from all walks of life did respond to his call in the 1930s and 1940s to become actively involved in India's struggle for independence. Many left home and many refused marriage in order to dedicate themselves full time to the movement.

All is possible

This may sound impossible to you now, but nothing is impossible. You are basically free. All depends on your decision. Take time, think about it. You can do it.