

Gandhi's relevance in a populist world

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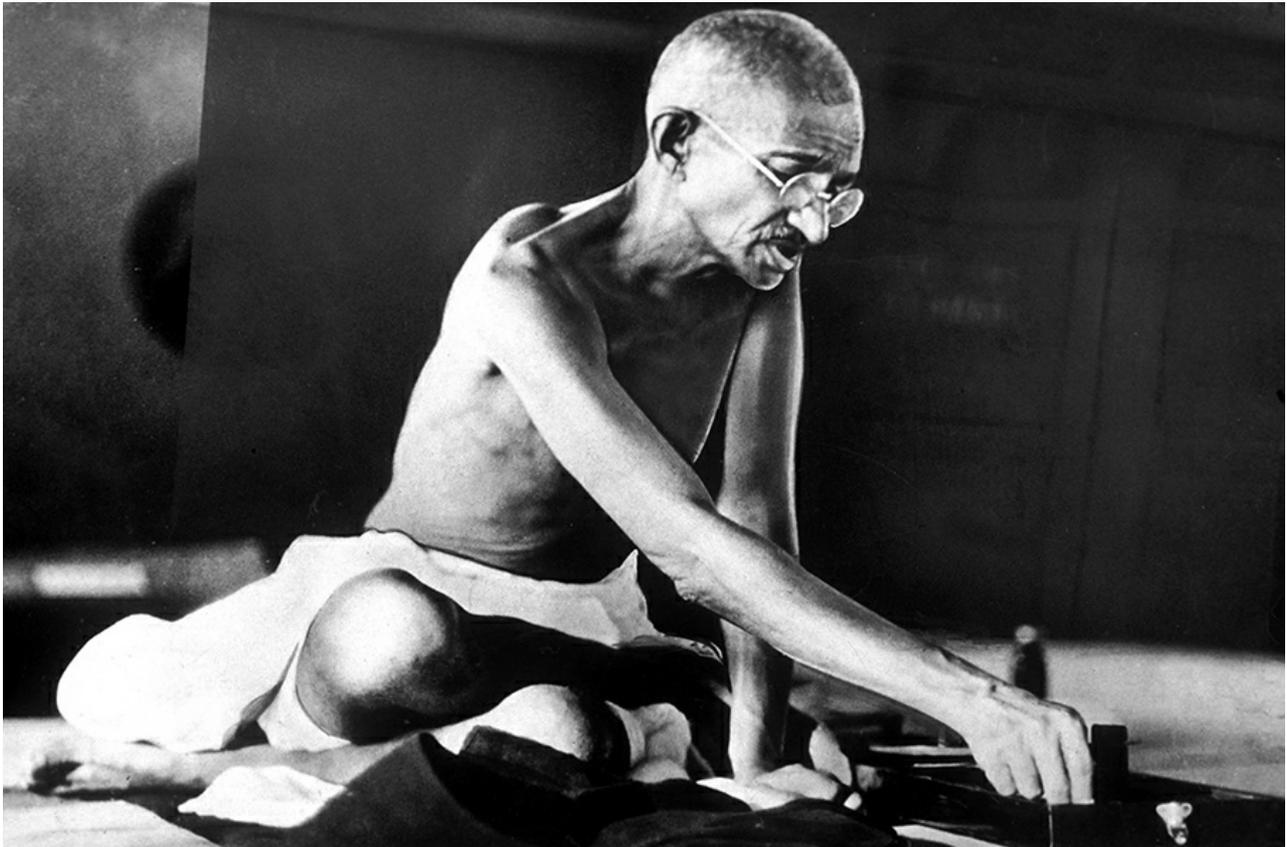


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Gandhi was not a perfect man. Yet, Gandhi is not so much criticised in today's world as he is ignored. His ideas are appropriated by many, but often only symbolically, without a substantive understanding or intention to practice them. He is like the old uncle in the family who has been relegated to the shadows. From time to time, we make sure that he is keeping well, but he is kept out of all serious conversations.

The rise of populism

Why has Gandhi been relegated to the shadows? Is it because his ideas seem no longer relevant to the world we live in? In today's world populist ideas have brought a tectonic shift in how we see the world, not just in India but also in other countries including the US, UK, Turkey, and Brazil. Populist ideas frame political conflict as one between the majority composed of ordinary, good people; and the minority composed of corrupt elites and "outsiders". Globally, three distinct trends of the 21st century in particular fueled the rise of populism: first, the 2008 financial crisis laid bare the growing inequality in our world and challenged an economic narrative that favored free markets,

technocracy and globalization. Worldwide, wealth inequality continues to grow. In 2009 the combined wealth of 380 people equaled the wealth of the bottom half of the world; by 2017, just 42 billionaires had as much as the bottom 50%.

Second, the fear of Islamic terrorism, etched by the horrific terror acts of 9/11 in the United States (in 2001), followed by deadly bombings in the 2000s in Bali (2002), Beslan (2003), Madrid (2004), London (2005), and Mumbai (2006, 2008) became a death blow to the idea of multiculturalism in many liberal democracies. Iraq war, destabilization of the Middle East and the subsequent rise of ISIS in the region in the 2010s made the fear of Islamic terrorism even more intense. In India, the global fear of Islamic terrorism has allowed the fear of the Muslim minority to take root and hastened the rise of the majoritarian populist sentiment.

Third, the advent of social media and the rise of digital platform giants has altered how we consume and share information and has brought a dramatic collapse of the newspaper industry creating a crisis in journalism. While social media has democratized information, and led to a rise of new influencers, it has also blurred the lines between fact, fiction and opinion. In India, platforms like whatsapp have made large scale sharing of fake news and propaganda instantaneous, often with serious consequences. These three factors have collectively led to the break-down of the international liberal world order, and challenged the liberal model of democracy, which held Gandhi as its champion.

Bringing Gandhi out of the shadows

But Gandhi himself lived at a time when the world was not very different from our own. Massive inequality, communal strife and an unfiltered marketplace for ideas were features of his time as well.

Village self-sufficiency

Gandhi was the original proponent of sustainable self-sufficient development that supported and sourced from the local economy; and his movement came to be recognized by the charkha and khadi, symbolizing self-sufficiency. Some viewed his economic ideas as anti-modern and anti-commerce, and many of these criticisms are fair. Trade, commerce and technological adoption have helped, not hurt the economic fortunes of the poor, as the last three decades of economic growth in India and China have shown. Yet, Gandhi did not reject modernity for the sake of it; his core goal was that inclusive growth should not bypass the villages of India. As working class angst culminating in events such as Brexit, and trade wars has shown, globalization should not take place without local economic growth and development, and this was a key

tenet of Gandhi's economic model. We need to strengthen the village and small town economy, even as we reach out to the rest of the world.

Being faithful and tolerant

Gandhi was deeply troubled by the disharmony between different religious communities in India, and the 'communal problem' bothered him till his last days. But he did not believe that he needed to reject his religion in order to appear secular; he was both a devout Hindu and a secular. In 1921, at the height of India's non cooperation movement, a group of Indians inspired by Gandhi, founded the Kashi Vidyapeeth, an educational institution independent from the British influence. The institution's inauguration was marked with both Vedic chants and Quranic hymns. Gandhi considered religion as a dynamic construct, and he encouraged people to interpret the scriptures for themselves. He challenged the entrenched traditions of untouchability in Indian society, like the traditional temple entry restrictions against Dalits, believing them to be incongruent with the ideals of Hinduism. In an age of rising intolerance, Gandhi's ability to balance faith in his religion with respect for other religions is something we should learn from.

Search for truth

While there was no social media in Gandhi's time, truth was not an easy commodity even then. The times that Gandhi lived in was also a time when terrible ideas such as fascism and Stalinism gained prominence around the world, along with racist imperial ideas of the ruling class of India. In such a raucous world of ideas, Gandhi maintained that it was not consistency of opinion but rather a constant search for truth that was important. His way of arriving at truth was through experience, experiment and deep learning. He knew though the challenges involved in this process and recognized that our truth is usually only a subjective truth. Hence, he said, "The seeker after truth should be humbler than the dust. The world crushes the dust under its feet, but the seeker after truth should be so humble himself that even the dust could crush him. Only then, and not till then, will he have a glimpse of truth." It is this humility that we must learn from him and practice in creating and consuming information, rather than the certainty of opinion which is polarizing the world.

Gandhi's ideas and methods were multifaceted and pragmatic. The world was poorer, less free and more fragmented when Gandhi charted a path of India's national resurgence through his ideas of Satyagrah and Swaraj. Gandhian ideas and methods may not be fully applicable in today's world, as the 21st century world indeed has unique problems. But most certainly Gandhi is not a man who should be ignored.

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