

Gandhi's Continuing Relevance



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This year we are celebrating Mahatma Gandhi's 150th birth anniversary. He had hoped to live up to the age of 125 and thought he could do so because of his disciplined life. We are allowing him an additional period of twenty-five years to form a relatively detached judgement on his life, thought and legacy.

Some of Gandhi's ideas are the product of their age and are now proven to be false; for example his views on human sexuality and his rejection of much of modern science and technology. Some other ideas have value but he exaggerates it; for example, that non-violence never fails and his emphasis on intense self-restraint and self-discipline. Some other ideas are persuasive only if seen from a particular perspective, for example his emphasis on the redemptive power of suffering and his belief that no human being, however evil or degenerate, is beyond persuasion.

While all this is true, Gandhi's other ideas remain relevant and insightful. He is the patron saint of intercivilizational dialogue. He freely borrowed what was valuable in other religions and civilizations, and enriched his own. He refused to see them as self-contained worlds, rejected their exclusivist and absolutist claims, and stressed not only mutual respect but a creative engagement with them and the consequent fusion of ideas. Human beings for Gandhi had their cultural and religious homes, where they were born and raised and which gave them a sense of belonging. The question was how to remain both rooted and open, a point he brilliantly articulated through the metaphor of living in a house with its windows wide open. One had a home of one's own, from within which one confidently responded to fresh and energising currents of thought coming from outside. Gandhi's satyagraha is another of his enduring legacies. One should fight injustices as otherwise one is complicit in their persistence. But equally one should do so in a manner that does not create more injustices and generate a cycle of hatred and violence. Furthermore, one does not fight an obvious injustice alone but also seeks to tackle its roots in the underlying structures of social relations.

Every conflict is thus creatively turned into an opportunity to widen the society's concern for justice, deepen its sense of community, and to make future conflicts less likely and intractable. There are also many other areas where I find Gandhi's thought richly relevant. These involve the unity of means and ends, 'cultivated reason' or one 'ripened' by experience as the basis of life, the belief that the victims of oppression are not wholly innocent, that those who degrade others also in the process degrade themselves, and why a sense of justice remains feeble unless it is grounded in a compassionate concern for others. In the context of India and other subjugated societies, Gandhi was right to insist that no society falls prey to outsiders unless it is itself degenerate, just as only a weak body succumbs to disease, and that its struggle against external oppressors must go hand-in-hand with an even more determined struggle against its own weaknesses. Rather than blame outsiders and naively hope that their departure will put an end to all its troubles, it should take an uncompromisingly critical look at itself, mobilise all its energies against its divisions, injustices and infirmities of character, and become strong and vibrant enough not to tempt exploitative outsiders. This is why Gandhi ran his constructive programme in tandem with the independence struggle.

It is difficult to say whether or not and which of Gandhi's ideas would prove of lasting value. But there is little doubt that his life had a rare depth and grandeur about it. His uncompromising commitment to truth and justice, his courage to write the script of his life himself, his relentless search for coherence and wholeness, his total lack of fear, his constant experiments with the possibilities of human existence, and so on are lasting sources of inspiration. As Gandhi said in 1937, "My writings should be cremated with my body. What I have done will endure, not what I have said or written." His life was a carefully crafted text and remains his greatest legacy. It is important that the 150th anniversary celebrations should not become an exercise in uncritical adulation. Gandhi still remains a presence in India's moral imagination, and it is essential that we critically evaluate his thought and hold on to what is right while rejecting what is dubious or poorly thought-out.

Mahatma Gandhi's life and message



Message by :
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Lord Raj Loomba CBE
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Mahatma Gandhi's life and message are as relevant in the 21st Century as they were in his own time. 2019 is the 150th anniversary of the birth of Mahatma. This year, in India and around the world, people will be celebrating the life and message of Mahatma Gandhi and the contribution he made for the upliftment of humanity and wellbeing of the planet earth. Gandhi was the greatest philanthropist. He gave us freedom – freedom to choose; freedom to think; freedom to work.

India is the first country in the world to make corporate social responsibility (CSR) mandatory. Businesses can invest their profits in areas such as education, poverty, gender equality, and hunger as part of any CSR compliance.

In India there are some 46 million widows – almost 10% of the female population of marital age – and of these, more than 15 million live in abject poverty. If there is an inheritance it is often taken by the husband's relatives. Especially in the rural areas, even child widows – are not permitted to remarry and it is very hard for them to find any form of employment.

The Loomba Foundation, an UN accredited global charity, is committed to educate the children of poor widows and empower their mothers through skills training programmes. Our empowerment Programme invests in skills training and sewing machines to help widows set up in business and become self-reliant, educate their children, support their family and lead a life of dignity.

The Loomba Foundation's Empowerment Programme continues to develop as a core element in the charity's work, with the launch of 5000 sewing machines in Varanasi by the Hon'ble Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi, in partnership with Lions Club International to empower 2600 widows in Vrindavan, often described as the 'City of Widows' and 2000 in Ludhiana in partnership with the state of Punjab. The largest programme to date, launched at the Dorchester Hotel in London on 23 June 2017, the Loomba Foundation in partnership with the Rotary India Literacy Mission plans to deliver training and startup support for 30,000 poor widows in India. This programme not only increases the numbers but also considerably extends the range of skills and trades offered, including Beauty & Wellness, Health & Care, Security, Telecom Services, Tourism & Hospitality, Handicrafts, Food Processing, Textiles & Apparel, Agriculture and Automotive.

On 26 May 2005, the Loomba Foundation launched a flagship new initiative to designate 23 June as International Widows Day – a global day of action to bring the plight of widows to the attention of the world. After a tireless campaign for five years the United Nations adopted 23 June as UN International Widows Day at its 65th UN General Assembly in New York in 2010. It is a very significant day as it was on 23rd June in 1954 that my mother, Shrimati Pushpa Wati Loomba, the inspiration of the Loomba Foundation, became a widow.