

Mahatma Gandhi and his non-violent struggle

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Mahatma Gandhi and his non-violent struggle against the British Empire was a result of the political situation in India. Prior to World War II, the world has witnessed the rise of the Soviet Union in terms of political and military power. We also saw the rise of popular national liberation movements across the colonized world. In most colonies, the way of gaining independence from Western colonialism has been through the waging of armed revolutions, such as the struggle of the Chinese and the Malaysians, led by Mao Tsetung and Sukarno, respectively. However, such a type of struggle for Indian independence was essentially difficult in Indian society where a strict and clearly defined caste system was in place.

The caste system hindered the creation of unity of Indians as a united people while transcending class divisions. More so, divisions between the ranks of the Indian people became more pronounced as fighting between rightist Hindu fundamentalists and left-wing communists never stopped, with both espousing violent means of securing Indian independence. All of these confused the majority of a people who continued to wallow in poverty and desolation. In all of these, Mahatma Gandhi emerged to present an alternative viewpoint, a seeming middle-ground between the pro-people radicalism of the left and the religious conservatism of the right.

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It was founded on the principle of non-violent struggle. It dismantled all previous ideas that political power comes from the barrel of a gun. Gandhi turned the idea of revolution on its head and succeeded in doing so. While a major factor for their triumph was the waning power of the British empire

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after World War II, their struggle through non-violent means inspired other civil libertarians the world over to give peace and non-violent struggle a chance prior to the taking of arms.

As can be seen from above, Mahatma Gandhi was clearly faced with almost immense tasks, particularly leading the Indian people in the path to independence, despite the power of the British Empire and the ethnic tensions evident in Indian society. At a time when almost the entire colonial peoples of the world were engaged in armed struggle, Gandhi decisively implemented his idea of non-violent struggle to force the British Empire to recognize their demands for sovereignty and independence. He utilized creative forms of protest, such as the non-payment of taxes, peaceful marches to the sea, even if these actions were met with brutal force by British security forces.

One of the great things about Gandhi was his ability to present his vision of a free and independent India to the masses in very simple terms which could be clearly understood and grasped. More so, he fully understood that Indian culture was still basically rooted in Hinduism. He believed that the application of foreign theories such as Marxism and nationalism might isolate the independence movement from the vast majority of the people. He was also a very simple man, who embraced the entire cross-section of Indian society, even the so-called untouchables, to the extent of earning the ire of the elite Brahmin caste.

As such, his own person was a concrete mobilizing force to move the Indian people into action and determine their destiny. On the other hand, a minor

weakness of his leadership was the seeming personality cult that ensued even years after his death. This is shown by the absence of second-liners to continue his work in building a just and peaceful Indian society. While all the mass actions were joined by Indians from different castes, the focus was always primarily on Gandhi's thoughts and decisions.

Such a personality-based leadership, while effective in inspiring people into action, cannot work in the long-term insofar as empowering the people and sustaining the gains of Indian independence. This is due to the lack of a concrete organizational structure to effectively implement the ideas of Gandhi. Lastly, Mahatma seemed to favor speaking in very mystical and vague language, which tends to confuse his followers as to the exact meaning of what he wants to articulate.

Nonetheless, his leadership style was still very effective in mobilizing almost a billion people to demand their independence from the British Empire. Being a charismatic leader, he used his gift of astute yet mystical articulation to convince all sectors of Indian society about the necessity of seeking independence. The clearness of vision and objectives, and the creativity of his means of action of pursuit of these goals, were also indispensable factors of his success in leadership.

More so, his propensity for personal sacrifice, at the cost of his life and liberty, in pursuit of his goals are very high on the list of his outstanding leadership qualities. Years of imprisonment and the beatings he received from the British security forces did not deter him from continuing his leadership. This is a crucial part of his leadership style, especially when not

many leaders in the world are prepared to do sacrifices like such. Usually, leaders are hidden above their ivory towers and palaces, to the extent of alienating themselves from the people they serve. Gandhi, however, was different, as he was like the common everyman, save that it was his leadership of commitment and sacrifice that helped his people achieve independence.

In terms of my own personal leadership style, I accede to the leadership traits of Gandhi, in terms of his clarity of vision and propensity for sacrifice. In any organization, these are very fundamental because these will determine how the followers will appreciate their role in the organization. If the vision and goals are clear, the followers can quantitatively measure, in a given amount of time, the progress of the organization and their individual development as well, relative to the vision and objectives. It ensures that the organization does not operate in limbo, without any purpose or necessity of existence.

Gandhi's propensity for sacrifice can also be incorporated in my leadership style. It is important for followers to see and realize that the leader himself is willing to lay himself on the line in pursuit of the vision and goals of the organization. Such a leadership trait reassures the followers that the leader is serious about the success and development of the organization and dismantles notions that the leader's only interest is to make his people follow orders and deliver results.

However, my leadership style differs with Gandhi insofar as adopting a pragmatic and realistic view on plans and actions. I would accede more, in

this regard, to the Leninist maxim of “concrete analysis of concrete conditions”, instead of the Gandhian mode of relying heavily on a notion of non-violence in the face of difficult odds, as I still contend that the success of Gandhi and his movement was also based on external factors (e. g. British losses after World War II) than his non-violence alone. I even surmise that without the world wars and the decline of the British Empire, his non-violent movement would never have been successful.

Nonetheless, the above mentioned leadership traits of Gandhi are included in my notion of the ideal leader – clarity of vision and goals, and propensity for sacrifice. In analyzing situations and challenges, and making decisions, it must include the Leninist maxim of “concrete analysis of concrete conditions”, without, of course, prejudicing the principles and objectives inherent in the organization. A leader must always seek to create candor and camaraderie among his followers, to drive home the point that no unseen barrier exists between them.

More importantly, the leader must always seek ways of empowering his people and training new second liners, based on the idea that leaders, no matter how great they are, will always have to step down and be replaced by new blood. If possible, the leader must shun micro-managing the affairs of the organization, especially when competent persons have been assigned to ensure the success of projects and goals. However, while being democratic and consultative as possible, the leader must exercise full control of the more important decisions of the organization, based on the notion that his experience and vision will always be beneficial for the future of the organization.

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