

Book Review

GANDHI: AN IMPOSSIBLE POSSIBILITY

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Zeba*

Gandhi: An impossible possibility elucidates on the last days of Gandhi's journey into the mortal world and the struggles that he encountered during these days. It explicates on Gandhi's philosophical inclinations and how that inspired him in shaping the India of his dreams and underwent a gradual change when his end was approaching. It seeks to understand the dilemmas that Gandhi was caught in during his last days, his sorrows, both at a personal level and national level which brought a marked change in his state of mind and his desire to not live any longer.

However, the death of his mortal being did not mean the departure of Gandhi from the mortal world, as he himself remarks, "Old as I am in age, I have no feeling that I have seized to grow inwardly or that my growth will stop at the dissolution of the flesh"¹. Therefore, it can be inferred here, that Gandhi though could not survive to see the India as it took shape in the post independence phase, however, this does not imply that Gandhi as an idea died with this mortal departure. Gandhi and his ideas still remain relevant and their relevance has grown over time, the dynamism of his thoughts can be seen even today. Therefore, while taking the end of Gandhi and expressing his predicament during his departure, the author seeks to raise questions as to whether Gandhi can be visualised today. Trying to seek answers to this, the author also seeks to decipher the possibilities of non violent struggles today and how far they can be considered as a potent weapon of seeking justice.

The book also locates Gandhian philosophy from the vantage point of the contemporary world and the dilemmas facing it today. The style of writing the book interests the reader with the personalised approach adopted by the author in

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¹ Harijan, *Collected works of Mahatma Gandhi*, 29 April 1993, vol. 55, p.61 available at <https://www.gandhiheritageportal.org/the-collected-works-of-mahatma-gandhi> (last accessed on 15 May 2016 as cited in Sudhir Chandra, *Gandhi: An Impossible Possibility*, New York, 2017, pp.4

explicating Gandhi's ideas and its juxtapositions with the ideology of the other leaders of the national movement.

The book is divided into five sections which reflects on the various tenets of Gandhi's philosophy and how they were perceived and visualised by him in the context of his times. While enquiring into the struggles undertaken by Gandhi and his approach in dealing with the nationalist question in India, the author undertakes an enquiry into one's own self as well. By doing so, he tries to bring the gap between the self and the other, the 'I' and 'we' and in doing so, it seeks to build the collective self while urging others also to move in that direction. While enquiring into Gandhi's ideas and the challenges that it confronted during his last days, the author also seeks to look into the possibility of how Gandhi can be envisioned in the contemporary world and how relevant his ideas are in dealing with the predicaments of the modern world. In a way, he tries to build on Gandhi's ideas and urge the collective people of today to visualise the contemporary dilemmas of the modern world by associating them with Gandhi's imagination of an ideal society.

The author begins by demonstrating the salience that Gandhi carries even in the contemporary world, with the growing engagement with his ideas and philosophy despite the varied diversity of perspectives in locating Gandhi and his ideas. The approach taken by the author in his thrust of looking at Gandhi which sets his work distinct from the varied engagements with Gandhi's ideas is that while trying to decipher Gandhi and his last years and his idea of ahimsa, the insistence is on the idea of self enquiry i.e. while locating Gandhi and trying to comprehend him, the author seeks to reflect on one's own self as well. therefore, the quest for self enquiry is also well manifested in his way of approaching Gandhi. The book seeks to examine the individual self at two levels, firstly, at the level of the individual, i.e. 'I' and the other is at the level of the collective reflecting the association of the 'I' with the 'we'. The book seeks to look into the convergences and the associations that can be drawn between the individual and the collective self by looking into the Gandhian philosophy and its underpinnings.

Apart from drawing this association, the author also leaves many questions unanswered for the reader to articulate at their own individual level. The most salient question being, "Where can Gandhi be today? Not just in India but anywhere."² This question confronts us with the idea of how relevant Gandhi and

² Sudhir Chandra, *Gandhi: An Impossible Possibility*, Routledge, New York, 2017, pp.2.

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his teachings are today while exploring possibilities of finding space for gandhian way of looking at the contemporary world realities. The emergence of the modern nation states and with it the growing insecurities of human life demonstrated in the enormous hard power of various states of the world is a reflection of how naturally Gandhi becomes germane for us today. However, the urge that the author makes is not just restricted to the need of Gandhi felt by the modern world, but also to look into the ways Gandhi can be found in the contemporary world, in terms of the spaces that can be created for his ideas to take shape in the world today. This is explicated by the book in terms of reflecting on one's own thoughts and move beyond our assumptions and narrow way of thinking by widening our horizons and moving beyond the practical possibilities of what seems possibility and workable according to the contemporary realities.

This world of possibilities is explicated by the author through Gandhi's satyagraha by underlying the disbelief that different nationalists shared in Gandhi's ideas of satyagraha until Gandhi showed the possibility of launching a nationwide satyagraha in the form of the non cooperation movement transforming the general perception of the possibilities of workable in practical life. The author also shows the contrast the same perception had during the last days of Gandhi where the possibility of ahimsa and its workability underwent a tremendous change both in terms of Gandhi's perception of it and the perception of the Indian society.

While explicating Gandhi's helplessness in making the people of India understand his message when India was on the verge of attaining political swaraj, and expressing his failure in this regard, the author's interprets the same not just in Gandhi's inability to persuade the Indians but also the inability of the people who stood by him and upheld his ideals. He states that whenever Gandhi succeeded in his endeavour of mass satyagraha, it was also credited to the people who stood by him, similarly, when Gandhian instruments failed to produce the desired results with the changing circumstances, it was also considerably because the masses turned a blind eye to his thinking. The underlying point that the author seeks to highlight here is that we need to look inward as we look at Gandhi simultaneously. Therefore, the responsibility of keeping him alive or not is largely dependent on our own individual selves and how we create scope for his ideas and their realisation in the present world realities.

Moreover, another significant insight about Gandhi's philosophy that we get through this text is the inherent dynamism of his thoughts which further adds pertinence to

the values upheld by him. As Gandhi stresses that ideas are not entities which are to be kept frozen, but evolve over a period of time, similarly, his adherence to certain core ideas also carry dynamism within itself. Therefore, he emphasises on continuous re vision of his ideas. Following this argument, the author very aptly puts across the correlation of the individual and the collective as well referring to Gandhi's letter which states, "The world, after all is made up of individuals. Without the drop there can be no ocean"³. This reiterates the association of the individual to the larger society and how efforts on part of each individual would further make the whole of the society according to Gandhi's philosophy.

The book also explicates the dilemmas and the despondence that Gandhi was encountering during his last years with the eroding faith in his philosophy by his fellow brethren who once upheld the values and the morals espoused by Gandhi. It is explicated in the rejection of the model of development as was suggested by Gandhi for independent India. The author explicates Gandhi's sorrow by stating, "I have endeavoured to show a way out that is peaceful, humane and, therefore, noble. It may be rejected[;] if it is, the alternative is a tug of war, in which each will try to pull down the other"⁴. Here it can be inferred as to how Gandhi could rightly anticipate the era that India as well as the world was entering into. Here, Gandhi also expresses his thoughts with regard to the model of development as was adopted by the nationalists in the post independence India which embraced modernity as the harbinger of ensuring progress in society and the western intellectual values as the only mode of knowledge. He was extremely critical of this discourse and apprehensive as to the consideration of the western modernity to be the ultimate value to be cherished by all societies. Therefore, here, the salience of Gandhi's thought can be further realised as we today grow in a system of capitalism world across which is itself a product of this thinking which considers modernity and western values to be defining criterion for all kinds of societies. However, the inadequacies that this system of capitalism and unequal growth has created could be well anticipated by Gandhi during his times and is equally felt by the present world today with lack of inclusive spaces and perpetuation of differences and inequalities as a product of being a part of a capitalist society. In fact, this was the kind of system and mode of living that Gandhi was targeting even in his work *Hind*

³ Sudhir Chandra, *Gandhi An Impossible Possibility*, New York, 2017, pp.13.

⁴ *Young India*, 5 November 1925, CWMG, vol. 28, p. 428 as cited in Sudhir Chandra, *Gandhi An Impossible Possibility*, New York, 2017, pp.22.

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The book culminates Gandhi's thoughts stating that how in the contemporary world we are moving away from Gandhi which is manifested in the ethnic, religious tensions between communities, growing insecurities among nations owing to lack of trust among one another, the proliferation of arms, rise of capitalist society, consumerism, the disbelief in the workability of non violent resistance, the growing gap between the rich and the poor, Gandhi still comes to our thoughts and is remembered. However, his ideas fail to enthuse people in ushering in big transformations in the society which is the concern that the author demonstrates. Therefore, the author reflecting on Gandhi's dilemmas during his last days, culminates the book on an optimistic note urging the readers to look into their own individual selves and seek change in society by initiating the change from within. The book while elucidating Gandhi's thoughts and how salient they have become today in interpreting world realities, does not propose a defined panacea for all ills, it leaves the reader with the autonomy to articulate Gandhi's ideas in the contemporary world and how at an individual level they can seek transformation.

It can be said that the book very aptly draws our attention to not just Gandhi's philosophy and his idea of an ideal world and how society ought to be structured; it also associates his ideas with the contemporary world realities and decipher solutions to the various contradictions and problems confronted by the present world today. Therefore, it enriches our understanding of Gandhi by locating him not just in his times but also trying to make sense of his ideas and articulate them in the present world making it thought provoking and an interesting read.