

INDAS Working Papers No. 9
February 2013

The Global Gandhian Moment

Ramin JAHANBEGLOO

人間文化研究機構地域研究推進事業「現代インド地域研究」
NIHU Program Contemporary India Area Studies (INDAS)

ISBN: 978-4-905150-03-9

The Global Gandhian Moment*

Ramin JAHANBEGLOO**

The fall of the Berlin Wall and the democratic change in the South Africa triggered an excessive view of the “end of history” as Francis Fukuyama famously theorized, but it certainly sparked a more pragmatic sense of nonviolence in international relations. The developments that followed begged the interrogation of the relevance of the Gandhian philosophy of nonviolence and the question of whether the transition from an unjust political situation to a more democratic one could occur peacefully and without violence. There was the division in many minds between the modern concept of sovereignty founded on the Hobbesian-Schmittian idea of absolute power and the state of exception and the idea of shared sovereignty as an alternative view of power. Indeed the nonviolent experiences of Gandhi, Martin Luther King and Dalai Lama, but also that of less well known figures like Abdul Ghaffar Khan and Maulana Azad directly challenged a conventional motto that “might is right”.

In investigating “the Gandhian moment” of politics, I suggest not a philosophical roadmap for turning the principle of enmity into amity in contemporary politics, but it also challenges the prevalent myth of the absence and impossibility of nonviolent action in the Muslim public sphere. To theorize about the Gandhian moment in politics is, therefore, to advance understanding of one of the most puzzling challenges of modern statecraft: how to preserve the passion of politics while deepening and enlarging the responsibility for the political? As such, we have to address two interrogations:

1. What is the Gandhian moment of politics through which an act of dissent and resistance to a sovereign becomes an idea of shared sovereignty?
2. What conditions and principles enable this Gandhian moment of politics to emerge and endure at the global level?

The core of Gandhi’s theory of politics is to show that the true subject of the political is the citizen and not the state. In other words, in Gandhi’s mind the citizen always stands higher than the state. This is why the question of “duty” is of much importance to Gandhi. Duty is the instant of moral decision where the political subject frees itself from any normative ties to the sovereign. Moving beyond fear allows the politics of Gandhi to move beyond the sovereign law that creates authority. That is why for Gandhi, it is not the subject that is the consequence of sovereignty, but it is the sovereignty which is subordinated to the political action of the subject.

* The original version of this paper was read at the workshop titled “The Global Gandhian Moment”, held on the 25th January, 2012 at Tokyo University of Foreign Studies.

** Associate Professor, York-Noor Visiting Chair in Islamic Studies.

Gandhi describes the condition of possibility for legality and legitimacy as the political act of the citizens would not be realized by the rule of the rule itself, namely the state. The problem for him is not just who rules, but the whole structure of the sovereign rule. As a result, the Gandhian moment of politics is an effort to de-theologize and de-secularize the secularized theological concept of modern politics as it is presented by the omnipotent sovereign of Thomas Hobbes.

As you know, along with a substantial number of other powers, Hobbes ascribes to the totalitarian sovereign “the Right of making Warre (sic), and Peace with other Nations”. This power gives the sovereign unlimited domain over the life and death of his subjects. Hobbes's initial assertion in *The Leviathan* is that without a sovereign ruler, all people are in a constant state of war with their neighbours. So people must eventually cede their absolute right to a sovereign, and the only inducement for the people to accept this contract is for the prevention of civil war. Hobbes then argues that once a sovereign is appointed, he is an agent of the nation and therefore speaks for each individual member of the nation.

The ethicalization of politics takes Gandhi to a critique of Hobbesian political authority and to disobey the state and its laws beyond the principle of fear. Gandhi's political practice is based on the taming of this fear. In his famous book *Hind Swaraj*, Gandhi writes, “Passive resistance cannot proceed a step without fearlessness.” Gandhi presents the idea of shared sovereignty as a regulatory principle and, at the same time, a guarantee that there is a limit to the abusive use of political power.

The major shift in focus that appears in the Gandhian debate is from the everlasting idea of deriving political decision from the primacy of the political to an idea of the primacy of the ethical. Therefore, the pursuit of moral life in politics takes Gandhi to an argument in favour of the responsibility of citizens. The Gandhian principle of non-violence is presented, therefore, as a challenge to the violence that is always necessarily implicated with the foundation of a sovereign order. Gandhi's critique of modern politics leads him to a concept of the political which finds its expression neither in the “secularization of politics” nor in the “politicization of religion”, but in the question of “ethics of togetherness” which is framed in terms of a triangulation of ethics, politics and religion.

Gandhi succeeds in turning the Hindu and Jain concept of “ahimsa” into a civic temperament and a democratic allure. That is why politics has to be understood in conjunction with another idea that Gandhi uses often in his work – that of civilization as a moral progress of humanity. Gandhi develops the idea of “civilization” as a quest for the ultimate meaning of human existence and opposed to modern civilization as a newly acquired mastery over nature through modern science and over humans through modern politics. Gandhi considers civilization as a dialogical process where East and West meet and transform each other. As such, the Gandhian approach to the idea of a dialogical community is based on his theoretical and practical efforts to find a balance between epistemic humility (as an

antipode to religious dogmatism and fanaticism) and a need for transparent political action.

We can, therefore, elaborate on the legacy of Gandhian politics and the exploration of the Gandhian moment as a road map to help civic movements to form a politics of dissent and resistance. Despite the geographic and temporal diversity of the cases, the nonviolent movements around the world exhibit a remarkable similarity as to the experience and deployment of the Gandhian moment for checking power and opposing violence. This means that we can put into practice the Gandhian moment of politics as a global strategy of building peace and guiding democracies toward more democratic values. As a matter of fact, as the recent uprisings in the Middle East and the Maghreb show us, the Gandhian moment emerges as a viable and sustainable mode of challenging absolute sovereignty and domination in all times, places and for all peoples.

Nonviolence has evolved from a simple tactic of resistance to a cosmopolitical aim based on international application of the principles of democracy. Over the past three decades, global terrorism, human rights violations and environmental degradation have caused repercussions highlighting the necessity for global politics of nonviolence. Such problems can best be dealt with at the global level. Global politics of nonviolence, thus, is the task not only of governments but also of civil society, and inter-governmental, non-governmental and transnational organizations.

As Karl Jaspers once affirmed, "In morality moral conviction is decisive, in politics it is success." That is to say, political events bring moral responsibilities, and in turn ethical views place their imprint on political decisions. Politics without ethics is pure exercise of power. It is only in relation with ethics that politics can be elevated as a public virtue. Spiritualizing politics, as Gandhi understood, is not about moralizing it, but is an effort to redefine it in terms of civic responsibility in an explicit public sphere. Politics is the morally conscientious and socially responsible exercise of civic roles.

More than sixty years after Gandhi's death, we face a choice: either forging a peaceful human community in a plural world by speaking and acting toward the increase of human solidarity, or preserving and enlarging the divide between communities and cultures by promoting religious and cultural prejudices and creating conflict and violence. Gandhi's search for human solidarity and intercultural dialogue was an effort to narrow the gap between the logic of "we" and "they". He was actually seeking, revealing and displaying many voices in Indian society and around the world that expressed this common aspiration for solidarity and mutuality in all its facets: ethical, spiritual, social, economic and political.

Gandhi refused to consider the spiritual and secular ideals as opposite poles. That is why he was different from most of the spiritual giants of India such as Sri Ramakrishna, Swami Vivekananda and Sri Aurobindo. Mahatma Gandhi put nonviolence as an absolute factor, an absolute imperative; but this was not always the case with other spiritual leaders. Sri Aurobindo, for example, used passive resistance as a means in the struggle for independence, but he was not an ardent champion of the

doctrine of nonviolence. Gandhi was in this respect one of the few spiritual thinkers of his generation to be also a political leader. He once said that meditation and worship were not exclusive things to be kept locked up in a strong box. They must be seen in every act of ours. Accordingly, Gandhi's project of spiritualizing politics through nonviolent action has the twin objectives of bringing about a truly democratic transformation of the society and thereby securing an ethical social order. Politics, for Gandhi, was the search for the ethical.

Gandhi saw a true civilization as one that could attain the universal principles of morality. If a society was not built on the foundations of ethics or morality, there would be no sustainability. Gandhi was deeply concerned with the moral and spiritual alienation of mankind and his critique of modernity and his new approach to the problem of politics as greater human solidarity has to be seen in the context of this fundamental question.

However, two questions remained for Gandhi: first, how does one go about emancipating civilization from the maladies it produces? And second, how is the civilization based on ethics and morality built? The answers to these questions can be found in Gandhi's major work entitled *Hind Swaraj*, in which he attempted to reconcile the question of Indian nationalism with his theoretical vision of civilization. It was through the usage of his conceptual trinity of *swaraj*, *satyagraha* and *swadeshi* that Gandhi sought to reconcile both practically and theoretically the ailment of modern civilization with a more sustainable and truer form of civilization.

The first of the trinity was *swaraj*, or self-rule. Gandhi believed in a political community that included self-institution and self-rule as its foundational elements, which would lead to the growth of a truer moral civilization and a common understanding of mutuality. In Gandhi's mind, *swaraj* had to bring about a social transformation through small-scale, decentralized, self-organized and self-directed participatory structures of governance. The second part, *Satyagraha*, or truth-force, involved voluntary suffering in the process of resisting evil. *Satyagraha* became something more than a method of resistance to particular legal norms; it became an instrument of struggle for positive objectives and for fundamental change. The third concept of the trinity, *swadeshi*, or self-sufficiency, was considered by Gandhi as a way to improve economic conditions in India through the revival of domestic-made products and production techniques. As *swaraj* laid stress on self-governance through individuals and community building, *swadeshi* underlined the spirit of neighborliness. As for *satyagraha*, it emphasized the principle that the whole purpose of the encounter with the unjust was not to be the winner in a confrontation, but to win over the heart and mind of the "enemy."

Gandhi, therefore, believed that no true self-government could be achieved if there was no reform of the individual. Gandhi believed that the centre of gravity of modern politics needed to be shifted back from the idea of material power and wealth to righteousness and truthfulness. In his critique of modernity, Gandhi saw modern civilization as promoting ideals of power and wealth that were based

on individual self-centeredness and the loss of bonds of community that were contrary to moral and spiritual common good (*dharma*). Therefore, as in the Hindu concept of *purusharthas*, meaning objectives of a human being, Gandhi advocated a life of balance, achievement and fulfilment. Ultimately in Gandhi's political philosophy the two concepts of self-government and self-sufficiency are tied into his political ideal of *Rama Rajya*, the sovereignty of people based on pure moral authority. For Gandhi, therefore, politics is a constant self-realization, self-reflection and self-reform within the individual. It is a process of self-rule through which citizens are able to contribute to the betterment of the community. Thus it goes without saying that Gandhi's nonviolence presupposes a spiritual solidarity.

Contrary to those who claim that Gandhi was a traditionalist, it should be noted that his critique of modern civilization did not mean a return to the past. It was actually a move forward in history and in human moral progress. Clearly Gandhi not only saw the need for fundamental change in the modern world but even recognized its inevitability. That is why his ideas have inspired people around the world, among them Nelson Mandela, Martin Luther King Jr. and His Holiness the Dalai Lama. This is where the true essence of the Gandhian Moment resides. As we can see from the experience of nonviolence around the world in the past sixty years, the Gandhian moment only achieves its full existence when it is made flesh in exemplary human actions like those of King, Mandela, Dalai Lama, Aung San Su Ki, and Desmond Tutu. The Gandhian moment has a political power because it is not just a dream, but an ethical vision. Ethical vision can be used to evaluate, to critique, to guide, and to transform the global citizenship to a civic moment of duty and responsibility.

The Gandhian moment of politics is innovative and transformative, and not simply a calculation of static interest or balance of power. What the Gandhian moment has shown us in the past sixty years through different experiments with nonviolence around the world is that we are not condemned to thinking about politics in purely strategic terms or as a mere mechanism to guarantee rights. As such, the Gandhian moment of politics supports the civic capacity of citizens to redefine politics in relation with its explicit commonality, its feature of mutuality and a long-term guiding feature of a just society. Furthermore, the Gandhian moment of politics is about not only the value of an engaged public life, but also an ethos of a common world.

Gandhi's concern with the concept of "duty" rather than simply "right" was closely related to his dialogical approach to the question of politics as a capability to organize society. Therefore, politics was supposed to be used as a means for improving socio-economic conditions and removing inequalities and injustice and thus facilitating the ethical and spiritual development of individuals in a society. In other words, Gandhi considered politics as the expression of an ethical duty of the person on the way to his or her autonomy. It was defined as an increase in the concept of ethics and a decrease in the structure of power. Gandhi wrote: "To me political power is not an end but one of the means of enabling people to better their condition in every department of life." As we can see,

Gandhi's vision of democratic order is assured by the direct intervention of people in the public sphere. In other words, for him the guarantee of democracy is democratic participation. It is here that the Gandhian moment of nonviolence, not only as a civic resistance but also as a political invention, finds its full meaning. Gandhi asserted the inseparability of nonviolence as a political resistance and nonviolence as a democratic construction.

As such, one of Gandhi's primary concerns was to explain how an individual self as a moral agent in a political realm always stands in relation to an experience of truth which makes him responsible to other human beings. Gandhi, therefore, realized that to be involved in politics was to be involved in a life that was also ethical and spiritual in character. Gandhi's advocacy for spirituality in politics needs to be seen in the context of his view on religious pluralism. Gandhi had pluralism in his bones and he never made the mistake of rejecting or underestimating other traditions of thought in his approach to truth and in his stress on nonviolence.

Although his thought had a strong Hindu core and contained elements that sat ill at ease with other cultures and religious traditions, he insisted that everybody had a right to interpret and revise his tradition of thought and that the spiritual quest of each individual went beyond a simple sense of belonging to a community. That is why Gandhi affirmed that "There is in Hinduism room enough for Jesus as there is for Mohammed, Zoroaster and Moses." "For me", said Gandhi, "the different religions are beautiful flowers from the same garden, or they are branches of the same majestic tree." That is what made Gandhi's approach unique. He was not always successful, but his dialogical engagement proceeded from a ruthless internal interrogation of his own tradition of thought. In other words, he was always free from the deadly vices of fundamentalism, dogmatism and self-righteousness.

1. Gandhi rejected the idea that there was one privileged path to God.
2. He believed that all religious traditions were an unstable mixture of truth and error.
3. He encouraged inter-religious dialogue, so that individuals could see their faith in the critical reflections of another.

For him a culture or a religious tradition that denied individual freedom in the name of unity or purity was coercive and unacceptable. When some women were stoned to death in Afghanistan for allegedly committing adultery, Gandhi criticized it, saying that "this particular form of penalty cannot be defended on the ground of its mere mention in the Koran," and he added, "every formula of every religion has in this age of reason to submit to the acid test of reason and universal justice if it is to ask for universal assent." What Gandhi calls "the acid test of reason" is actually experimentation which according to him is a far better approach to cultural and religious traditions than empty reverence.

Gandhi was in favour of submitting all cultures to experiment, to see how they are able to enter into

dialogue with others. This brings out another feature of Gandhi's understanding of cultural plurality. Unlike his predecessors, Gandhi's explanation and critique of colonial rule was essentially cultural because unlike his predecessors, Gandhi insisted that the colonial encounter was not between Indian and European but ancient and modern civilizations.

Gandhi believed in the toleration of other cultures because he believed that they are crucial aids to understanding and evaluating one's own. Gandhi always saw other cultures as equal conversational partners and his plea of equality of cultures was based on the paradigm of inter-cultural spirit which was rooted in a creative interplay of concepts and values. His greatest ideas, like *satyagraha*, were neither purely Eastern nor purely Western, but came from a process of living in between cultures. His ability to find a paradigmatic role as a path maker and a change facilitator in India was indicative of the cultural journey he had travelled. Gandhi was at the same time the "other Indian" and the "other Westerner." He was an outsider in both cultural horizons.

As a matter of fact, he brought his intercultural interactions to his own sensibilities about where the cultural boundaries were and how "Indian" or "Western" cultural patterns ought to guide his behaviours. Gandhi expected communities to be molded on the ability to see ourselves in others and others in ourselves. Tolerance of difference was vital to Gandhi's theory of nonviolence because tolerance for him meant before anything else an awareness of others, an attitude of open-mindedness, and an effort to know, understand and learn from others. As such, Gandhi was constantly experimenting with modes of cross-frontier cultural constellations.

His understanding of religious plurality and cultural diversity went hand in hand with his reaction to a cultural conformity. As he once said, "I do not want my house to be walled in on sides and my windows to be stuffed. I want the cultures of all the lands to be blown about my house as freely as possible. But I refuse to be blown off my feet by any." Gandhi's "house" can be understood as a metaphor for an independent and democratic self-organized system within a locally controlled, decentralized community of "houses," where communication between equally respected and equally valid cultures can take place.

Here, Gandhi's cultural pluralism is opposed to relativism, since it is based on a belief in a basic universal human nature beneath the widely diverse forms that human life and belief take across cultures. It also involves a belief in the fact that the understanding of moral views is possible among all people of all cultures because they all participate in the same quest for Truth. This is why Gandhi affirmed, "Temples or mosques or churches.... I make no distinction between these different abodes of God. They are what faith has made them. They are an answer to man's craving somehow to reach the Unseen." Far from being a monolithic doctrine, the Gandhian perspective of nonviolence can be recognized as a dialogical and inclusive approach to the problem of politics.

Clearly, the Gandhian concept of “common good” is formulated in the idea of self-realization and self-regulation of nonviolent citizenship. Actually, the Gandhian language of “ethical citizenship” as a mode of being a nonviolent member of a community denotes an ontological effort to capture the idea of political agency beyond a national state. As such, thinking practices of nonviolent citizenship goes hand in hand with reflecting critically on the moral legitimacy crisis of the modern liberal-constitutional state as a clear failure of the connection of the ethical and the political.

The resonances of Gandhi’s anti-fundamentalist thinking, as we have already mentioned, lead in many directions. What Gandhi tried to show, in a very genuine and practical fashion, was that the ethics of empathy and reciprocity was far more vital for a genuinely shared sovereignty than fundamentalism as a militant principle in opposition to secular state. For him, religion was a work of the ethical, rather than the theological. He did not differentiate between ethics and politics as he did not distinguish between politics and religion. As such, he was far from being a secular fundamentalist or a religious revivalist. Secularism for him, therefore, did not mean exclusion of the spiritual from the public sphere, but respect for all men and their spiritual views.

Secularism for Gandhi was not the process of banning religious individuals from the public sphere, but on the contrary, a public realm for individuals to be free to have the possibility of choice and dialogue with respect to religious creeds. Paradoxically, what Gandhi considered was a whole idea of rectification of religious prejudices through a hermeneutic approach to religious scriptures and a public policy of mutual recognition and bestowal of an honourable status on religious doctrines to help individuals liberate themselves from authoritarian forms of religious expression.

And here Gandhi becomes an inevitable figure of reference because he puts an end to the dilemma of “fundamentalism or secularism.” He suggests an alternative reading to the political as a relational and dialogical element of the spiritual and sheds a new light on the spiritual as a constitutive factor of the political. Tolerance, cultural broad-mindedness, mutual understanding are the hallmarks of Gandhian view of religion and politics. The dialogical nature of Gandhian tolerance was expressed in the idea of a ‘self-respecting’ community who strives to remove its own imperfections instead of judging others. Therefore, for Gandhi the acceptance of one’s own imperfections was a call not only to cultivate epistemic humility, but also to foster pluralism. The reference here seems to be to the ethical content about which Gandhi believed there was substantial consensus in all cultural and religious traditions.

Our world is today endangered by three ideologies which lack epistemic humility and do not foster pluralism in the long run. Gandhi belongs to none of the three ideological options which are available for us today. One option is the return to a “religious dogmatism”. The second option is “relativism” which is exemplified by the postmodernist movement that believes that the objective truth should be replaced by hermeneutic truth. The third option is the “rationalist fundamentalism” which believes in the total power of reason and desacralizes and disenchant everything substantive. I think Gandhi

belongs to none of these three main visions influential at present. He is not a religious fundamentalist. He is not a cultural revivalist, and he is not committed to the idea of absolute reason. What strikes me as interesting in Gandhi is how he kept a space in his mind open for doubt and for skeptical irony (and even self irony).

In this sense the moral and political principles of Mahatma Gandhi do not constitute a sort of real gearbox that drives our thought and action in one direction, and is powered by a spiritual engine with only a monolithic ideology as the fuel source. Gandhi had the courage to stand and talk back to the authority of the tradition, by being consistent with his beliefs, but at the same time by remaining free enough to change his mind, discover new things and rediscover what he had once put aside. As a matter of fact, one of the tasks of the Gandhian non-violence is the effort to breakdown the stereotypes and reductive categories that are limiting human communication. In this respect, the contribution of Mahatma Gandhi in the creation and cultivation of a public culture of citizenship guarantees to everyone the right to opinion and action, as an alternative to system of representation based on bureaucratic parties and state structures.

Gandhi was very conscious about the fact that the cultivation of an “enlarged pluralism” requires the creation of institutions and practices, where the voice and perspective of everyone can be articulated, tested and transformed. Gandhi’s vision of modernity provides us with a number of fruitful insights that may help us to confront the dilemmas of the modern age. In this respect, Gandhi is one of the main intellectual figures today who has the disturbing capacity to unsettle our fixed categories, to shake our inherited conceptual habit, and to let us see world in a new light.

The nonviolent campaigns erupting across the Muslim world today, largely based among the middle class, clearly indicate the practical success of an ethical commitment to norms of transparency, negotiation, compromise and mutual respect. Their links to the networks of global civil society, tied together by information technologies from Facebook to YouTube, reinforce a universal ethic, as Gandhi preached, which transcends religious and cultural particularities even as it is channeled through local grassroots movements.

Far from being utopian, the Gandhian emphasis on an ethical politics based on nonviolence and mutual respect may be the most practical path to achieve democracy in a region exhausted from the seemingly endless repression and bloodshed that has resulted from the belief that violence is the real source of power. "Even the most despotic government cannot stand except for the consent of the governed, which consent is often forcibly procured by the despot," Gandhi wrote. "When the subject ceases to fear the despotic force, the power is immediately gone." What we have seen in Tunisia, and what we are seeing on the streets of Cairo today, suggests that Gandhi understood power better than the autocrats and ayatollahs who are now trying to hang on. The time may be right for the emergence of the Gandhian Moment in the 21st century.