Evaluating Mahatma Gandhi

This is not a research/scholarly paper; hence, there are no footnotes, just a very few quotes or citations, embedded in the text itself. It is like an Op Ed, a personal opinion buttressed by considerable evidence.

I’m attaching a short bibliography on Gandhi.

My main points (An overview):

1. Mahatma Gandhi was committed to achieving justice through non-violent mass protests, civil disobedience, and non-cooperation with oppressors. He mostly succeeded in his efforts.

2. Purity of means, primacy of ethics, and transparency of behavior were his life-long pursuits and preoccupations. He called them his “Experiments with Truth.”

3. Gandhi believed in “trusteeship” and stewardship as every individual’s moral responsibility. He said, “I must know that all my wealth does not belong to me. What belongs to me is the right to an honorable livelihood no better than enjoyed by millions of others. The rest of the wealth should be used for the welfare of the community.”

Important dates in Gandhi’s life

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Event</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1869</td>
<td>Was born in today’s state of Gujarat in India</td>
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<tr>
<td>1888-91</td>
<td>Studied in England to become a barrister (similar to an attorney)</td>
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<td>1890s</td>
<td>Suffered racial discrimination just like the other Indians in South Africa</td>
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<td>1907</td>
<td>Organized non-violent protests against the mandatory registration of Asians in South Africa – a palpably discriminatory practice</td>
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<td>1930</td>
<td>Undertook the “Salt March” as a symbolic protest against the British-imposed taxes (Upheld the “American” No-taxation-without-representation principle)</td>
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<tr>
<td>1930s</td>
<td>Continued working toward the removal of untouchability</td>
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<tr>
<td>1942</td>
<td>Began a mass, non-violent civil disobedience movement demanding that the British “Quit India”</td>
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<tr>
<td>1948</td>
<td>Was assassinated in his 78th year in Delhi</td>
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Preamble/Introduction

Mahatma Gandhi, to my knowledge, was the first person in human history to use (consistently) non-violent and non-cooperation mass movement as a form of protest to achieve measurable and specific political (in this case, independence for India) goals. Erikson in Gandhi’s Truth says, “By then {by 1925, when he commenced his Autobiography}, he had, in fact, led the first national civil disobedience in history (p. 58).” Individual protesters abound in history. Some Indian leaders (like Lokmanya Tilak) before Mahatma Gandhi had indeed begun awakening the lower classes of India against the British rule. Gandhi broadened it further. He had encouraged pride and self-esteem among his
compatriots, East Indians of South Africa, during the two decades he lived there. After his arrival in India for good in 1915, he was also the first one to mobilize the masses on such a grand scale (not to mention, India’s women, for the first time in Indian history) against injustice and foreign rule in essentially non-violent protests. He strengthened the newly cultivated confident self-image of even the lowly and the oppressed, of the illiterate and the poor, of India.

Gandhi’s struggles against various kinds of oppression

- **Racism**: In South Africa, where Gandhi’s first experiments in non-violent protests began, he had his initial encounter with racism. He was thrown out of a first-class railroad car by a white man because of his skin color, his brownness. The British attitudes towards Indians were racist. Even though it was in India that the British finally (in 1947) gave up in the face of increasingly large protests against their rule, through ceaseless protests in South Africa, Gandhi had already secured some measure of success in the removal of the discriminatory regulation for Indians to carry special identity cards.

- **Sexism**: Even though Gandhi’s views on women’s education, on what they should be taught, were rather antiquated, women in India (except princesses or monarchs) had rarely any public and political voice before Gandhi. He inspired women’s full and active participation in the mass civil disobedience campaigns he led against the British rule in India. Women courted jail in the thousands during these protests. As Stanley Wolpert, an American scholar of Indian history, has said "He [Gandhi] did more to bring India's second sex to a state approaching freedom and demanding equality with their male lords and masters than any other single Indian in four thousand years of India's history" (Wolpert, p.148. See the Bibliography). The post-independence India, consequently, had a higher presence of women as governors and legislators than the U.S. and many other western countries (that were trumpeting their democracies) had in the 1950’s and the 1960’s. Ordinary non-privileged women thus, for the first time in Indian history, became vocal and recognized.

- **Casteism**: Over several decades, Gandhi and his followers protested against the blight of untouchability among the Hindus. He helped to bring the Harijan or Dalit – untouchability -- issue front and center. Finally, the upper castes had to recognize the right of the untouchables to worship in public temples. Many occupations formerly closed to them opened up. As a result of Gandhi’s (and, even more so, because of Ambedkar’s, a leader of the untouchables or Dalits) influence, the first major social legislative reform of independent India was the outlawing of untouchability and the instituting of reservation of seats (compensatory affirmative action) for the former untouchables in public-sector jobs and in higher education.

- **Principles and Practice of Non-Violent Protest and Civil Disobedience** (Also see Cortright in the Bibliography.)
- **The cause must be just.** Non-violence, as a method of protest, establishes still further the moral superiority of the protesters and the ethical soundness of the issues they advocate.
- **The leader sets a single, identifiable, and specific goal.** After each goal is attained, activists pursue further goals, one at a time, according to the urgency felt by those oppressed or unjustly treated.
- **Total non-cooperation, non-collaboration with the oppressor is essential.** This is the one most important instrument or tactic used in the struggle.
- **Breaking unjust laws openly and non-violently is the process.** Readiness to court arrests, patience to sit indefinitely in jail, and willingness to die (if it comes to that) is the kind of fierce commitment to the cause expected of each protester.
- **Protesters often resort to boycotts of the businesses of the unjust.** This strategy hits the pocketbooks of the oppressors.
- **Non-payment of taxes to illegitimate or imperial authority is a more escalated step used for the success of the movement.**
- **Mass support is crucial for successful non-violent protests.** Large numbers of dedicated followers are essential for success. Lone acts of protest are not effective (like Thoreau’s).
- **The power of the media must also be used to the optimum.** If Gandhi were alive today, he would have used the power of the Internet fully. He certainly used the press optimally. He ran several periodicals for years – like *Young India* and the *Harijan*.
- **Through persistence, patience, and dedication, the protesters wear out the oppressors.** No power can afford to keep hundreds of thousands of protesters in jail for long sentences. Long prison terms handed out to the protesters result in havoc for the economy of the oppressor.
- **The protester (Satyaagrahi) cannot entertain any personal hatred or animosity toward the oppressor.** In other words, the “enemy” is not demonized. A proof of Gandhi’s success in this regard lies in the fact that the British and the Indians have not retained hostility toward each other as people.
- **Ultimately, enemy persuasion, not enemy elimination, is the aim of the protester.** The oppressor’s civilized mind or sense of humanity, which is capable of feeling guilty and embarrassed, needs to be addressed by a non-violent leader. That is why non-violence will not work in every situation.

Under favorable circumstances, however, non-violent protests are a more powerful force than brute strength or sheer military power. In a later decade (in the 1970s) in India, an avowed Gandhian like Jaya Prakash Narayan led a successful non-violent movement against Indira Gandhi’s autocratic rule, which led to her ouster in the general election of 1977. In the following examples, the successes were a result of specific and achievable goals and persistence in attaining them (not one-time attempts), while the failures could be attributed to the absence of such goals and lack of persistence.

- **Modern Applications**
  - **Successful protests:**
    - Solidarity Movement under the leadership of Lech Walesa in Poland
    - Black Africans’ boycotts of white apartheid businesses in South Africa
    - Liberian women’s (both Christian and Muslim) struggle for winning peace in that war-torn country under the leadership of Leymah Gbowee
  - **Unsuccessful protests:**
    - Several scattered anti-WTO (World Trade Organization) protests
- “Occupy Wall Street” protests
- The Tiananmen Square protest in Beijing, China in 1989
- The 1996 “Million Men March” by Louis Farrakhan (an African-American leader)

**Half-successful protests:**
- Japanese protests in Okinawa against the U.S. military bases in Japan
- In Puerto Rico, protests against the U.S. bombing exercises as part of military training

**Potential Applications**
- Demand for the removal of American troops stationed in various parts of the world (if the people from these regions do not want them), for instance, from:
  - The Korean demilitarized zone
  - The Middle-East (Kuwait, for instance)
  - European countries

All the above principles apply precisely in these cases. My purpose in mentioning modern applications as possible or feasible is to insist that **Gandhian principles and methods are as relevant and effective today as they were half or a full century ago.** They could be tested time and again in our world. However, I want to mention one caveat: Just as armed struggles fail some times, so do (and will) non-violent struggles. The latter have a moral upper hand because they avoid bloodshed on both sides as much as possible. Another matter to note is that Gandhi’s methods are for resisting empires, not for founding empires. Gandhi’s philosophy is for defense, not for offense— for ethical conduct, not for aggressive and unethical conduct. Therefore, tyrants, empire builders and oppressors have no use for it.

**Some More Aspects of Gandhi’s Personality**

1. **Gandhi believed in the imperative of total reform or thorough change within one’s own self.** He set an example for others by his own behavior. If you do not change yourself, you cannot hope to (nor do you have a moral right to) change others. This insistence of his led to other movements by his followers that sought total change, inside out, such as voluntarily giving away lands to the landless (bhoo-daan) and committing one’s life to a cause (jeevandaan). It is beside the point whether these movements succeeded or not in achieving their goals. What is crucial is that Gandhi’s example inspired such movements. That he remained a man of zero assets, a man of no property, by choice, is an example of his dictum: Be the change you want to see.

2. **Gandhi exploded the conventional wisdom and ideology about self-interest, foreign relations, and war.** Ever since the days of Chanakya/Kautilya (India’s 4th century BCE ideologue on statecraft), Machiavelli, and our modern-day realpolitik gurus, the unchallenged wisdom has been to regard your enemy’s enemy as your friend, or to maintain that everything is fair in love and war, and to assert that national interest comes before everything else. Of course, the flaw in this kind of thinking is the proponents’ very short-term view of national interest and their ignorance or inability to recognize who one’s real friends are. Gandhi asserted the primacy of ethics over expediency as the foundation for state policy as well as for individual conduct.

Human history has proven repeatedly that, though it might seem a nation’s interest is being served through the pursuit of age-honored, conventional wisdom and strategies, it is just a mirage. Short-sighted policies and actions come to haunt the perpetrator, sooner or later. I may cite a few instances: During the American War of Independence, the French assisted the
colonists in their fight against the British by providing them with weapons, soldiers, and money (which, incidentally, contributed to French bankruptcy). French assistance was triggered by the above quoted dictum that your enemy’s enemy is your friend—the French and the British had been enemies and rivals in empire building for centuries. However, in the aftermath of the war, the newly independent Americans and the British made a truce and became friends (except when they fought the War of 1812). And the French found themselves left in the lurch. Similarly, during Reagan’s presidency, American policy makers thought that the enemies of the Soviet Union, the Mujahaddins, whom Reagan called “freedom fighters,” were the friends of the U.S. The United States, therefore, funneled to them large sums of money and sophisticated weapons through Pakistan’s spy agency. The subsequent history of the new manifestation of the Mujahaddins, the Taliban and Al Qaida, who attacked Americans, proved the fallacy of the wisdom (!) contained in the proverb “your enemy’s enemy is your friend.” To reiterate Gandhi’s ethical stand, he would have disapproved of such expedient but morally dubious (and, in the long run, harmful) policies.

(3) **Gandhi was a practical strategist, a hard-nosed planner, not an “idle” dreamer.** He had a good sense of drama. His protests, whether with political or social goals in mind, were well planned, well advertised, and publicly performed with a good deal of theater. He would make sure that the media were present to watch and report on the whole drama. Even the international press was present as, for instance, during the Salt March at the end of which he picked a pinch of salt off the shore of a small fishing village on the Arabian Sea in the present state of Gujarat in 1930. And, the whole nation of India was energized, as also the whole civilized world that witnessed it.

(4) **Gandhi’s speeches reveal his persuasive power to win the minds and hearts of his audience,** not just of those who were favorably disposed to his cause but also of those who could have had a reason to be hostile toward him. Two examples should suffice: When Mahatma Gandhi was in England for the Round Table Conference in 1931, he addressed the textile mill workers of Lancashire who had lost their jobs because of the boycott of foreign cloths he had called in India. He actually stayed with them during that period, and they were convinced of the justness of his cause. Similarly, when Hindu-Muslim riots broke out in 1947 around the time of the partition of India, Gandhi preached peace and forgiveness to those bent on revenge and on “an eye for an eye”, again living in the midst of raging hatred and carnage in Bengal, “wiping every tear” and pacified the rioters, at least temporarily. No other Indian leader then dared to walk in that inferno.

5. **Gandhi’s insistence on ethics was an all-encompassing preoccupation** and a yardstick he applied to his private as well as his public life. His life was an open book. Another specific aspect associated with this ideology was his insistence on the purity of means. I quote, “Means and ends are convertible terms in my philosophy of life” (Gandhi, *Young India*, December 26, 1924). Gandhi also said, “If one takes care of the means, the end will take care of itself” (quoted in Cortright, 2006). In light of Gandhi’s philosophy, one can safely predict or surmise that he would have strongly condemned various U.S. actions, for instance, from its aggression against Mexico in the 1840s all the way to the snooping and spying by the National Security Agency (NSA).

6. **In evaluating Gandhi’s legacy, one must however note his one conspicuous failure: his inability to achieve Hindu-Muslim amity.** During his lifetime, some of his critics accused him of surrendering to Muslim demands. That was the major grievance of Gandhi’s critics. At the end of the day, he could not move Indians to overcome the 1000-year old animosity between
the adherents of the two religions. Incidentally, many historians and sociologists writing about India have commented on the fact that no two religions are as far apart as Hinduism and Islam. No wonder Gandhi could not succeed, though he tried his best; and he had to see the partition of his beloved country into two entities—India and Pakistan. The enmity between the two nations is palpable even today in their seemingly unending feud. Other critics of Gandhi have noted his coercive tendency exercised through his fasts and his induction of religiosity in politics.

A legitimate question to ask at this point would be this: What other contemporary issues can we address with a Gandhian Approach?

Within the United States, the demands for universal health insurance as a public option and for bringing all American troops home from abroad—for instance, from Iraq and Afghanistan—could similarly succeed through Gandhian methods.

Here are some more possibilities (The issues will, obviously, vary from person to person):

(1) Insisting on the use of tax policies to gain some income equality in this country

(2) Protesting in order to gain a repeal of the Supreme Court's ruling that has allowed an unlimited corporate influence on U.S. politics

(3) Resisting the privatization of functions that have traditionally been in the public/government sector such as defense (contracting out for "mercenary soldiering"), law enforcement (for instance, management of jails and convicts), and education (charter schools and for-profit schools to benefit the wealthy while abandoning those who lack money and mobility)

(4) Promoting a fair and just immigration reform

Conclusion: Gandhi's Legacy

Guha (See the Bibliography below) mentions four aspects of Gandhi's legacy that remain relevant, not just for India, but also for the world:

First, non-violent resistance to unjust laws and/or authoritarian governments.

Second, the promotion of inter-faith understanding and religious tolerance.

Third, an economic model that does not rape or pillage nature.

Fourth, courtesy in public debate and transparency in one's public dealings.

Finally, when estimating Gandhi's heritage, I did not want to nitpick; I did not want to be led astray by the trees, losing sight of the forest. What makes Mahatma Gandhi the greatest person of the last one thousand years, in my eyes, is the fact that he refused to participate in the "game" people had always played throughout human history to achieve political freedom, namely, a violent war, and invented a new game of non-violence and loving kindness. An Indian poet once asked a rhetorical question, "Whoever gained freedom without war?" This
question after 1947 (when India earned its freedom) has been answered resoundingly and decisively—“Every country can”, if it has the will, the commitment, and the stamina.

Note:

I am indebted to various sources – authors of books and articles as well as my relatives and friends – for some of the ideas in this essay. Since some of my sources wish to remain anonymous, I am not mentioning their names. Initially, I wrote this essay several years ago as an introduction to Mahatma Gandhi for my students in a course on India I was teaching for the Honors College of Boise State University. I have been revising it from time to time. It’s like a work in progress.

Mahatma Gandhi: A Bibliography

Compiled by Mohan R. Limaye


6. Guha, Ramachandra. Gandhi before India (Knopf, April 15, 2014). About Gandhi’s years in South Africa


