



Concept Note

Gandhi and His Critics: A Contemporary Discourse

The twentieth century has been marked by the fiercest geopolitical competitions and the bloodiest wars in the history of humankind. Amidst the war, destruction, and squabble for materialistic gains, there emerged the most talked about, debated, and also belatedly admired figure of the century called Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi. Gandhi, who is known as an advocate of cosmopolitanism and a crusader for global peace and nonviolence, was a nationalist leader in India who changed the global terms of discourse on nationalism, the identity question, and the war through his philosophy of non-violence and his saintly persona. In a world ravaged by two world wars and the struggle for power among the nation-states, he championed peace, love, and a quest for truth.

Gandhi had a long and eventful career in which he evolved from a barrister in South Africa to the voice of the colonized people and the oppressed masses. The richness of Gandhian thought, his ideas, and his life based on experiential philosophy have of late become the focus of many scholarly explorations and examinations. The social scientists have normally taken two routes to understand Gandhi and his philosophy. They have either analyzed Gandhian thought by looking at his discourse on themes like nationalism, modernity, capitalism, religion, state, and violence. Or else, they have used the lens of his critics, who were mostly his contemporaries and with whom Gandhi had a creative engagement, political-ideological disagreements, and also philosophical dialogue to evaluate him and his thought.

There is no denying the fact that Gandhi is an enigmatic figure in the annals of the Indian national movement. He believed in people's politics and yet he withdrew struggles mid-way against sentiments. His idea of democracy was decentralized and ruled by the common people which he called swaraj or self-rule, yet the economic system he advocated was the trusteeship controlled by few in his utopia called Ramrajya. His religious philosophy, Hindu in orientation, was meant to be all accommodative and based on 'Sarva Dharm Sambhav'(equal respect for all religions); but made Khilafat the central plank of his first mass movement in India, triggering a debate on the secular nature of India's freedom movement which still colors the inter-community relations in India.

Gandhi had devoted disciples, fellow travelers, and friends who closely worked with him. But he also had a large number of political adversaries and ideological opponents. These opponents were political thinkers in their own right who often differed with him on conceptual themes in politics as well as on the life philosophy and worldview. Though there is no dearth of writings on Gandhi's ideological and philosophical dialogue with his political friends, followers, and adversaries but most of these writings present Gandhi's relationship with his contemporaries in adversarial terms. The fact was otherwise as Gandhi always believed in dialogue with everyone to arrive at the truth and his ideological-political opponents were no exception. His political discourse of Satyagraha is the best example of such a quest for the truth, which he believed was not a monopoly of any individual.

Though the Gandhian discourse has become popular all over the world, but his disinterest in penning down his political ideas into a strictly theoretical framework has generated a lot of confusion and misunderstanding. His idiosyncratic views on social and political issues have exposed him to bitter criticisms from his friends, opponents and adversaries alike. On one hand Savarkar and Jinnah had fundamental differences with him on the very nature of Indian nationalism and the role of religion in forging the nationhood. On the other, despite Gandhi's close association with Tagore and Nehru, their vision of modernity and the nature of economic development in free India was markedly different. Nehru in spite of strong reservations on many of Gandhi's beliefs and decisions, remained a respectful apprentice of Gandhi. Their relationship presents a curious case of conflicting world views and new and old- age ideas. But Gandhi's difference of opinion with Subhash Bose snowballed into a historic fall-out going beyond dialogue and reconciliation. Bhagat Singh also disapproved of Gandhi's belief in non-violent struggles and tried to show a different path for the national cause. Gandhi was also bitterly critiqued by the left ideologues, feminist scholars, and even the South African natives for whom he relentlessly fought to liberate them from the scourge of racism. Interestingly, Gandhi's son Harilal also turns into a critic of his father thus providing a nuanced psychological and philosophical layer to the discourse.

The richness of Gandhi's political discourse and his complex and multi-layered relationship with his contemporaries have often befuddled the social scientists who have generally failed to grasp the true nuances of the political engagement he had with his critics. The scholars working on Gandhi and his philosophy towards politics, economic

development, state, religion, and inter-community relations have often drawn one-sided inferences from the dialogues and differences of opinion Gandhi had with his contemporaries without grounding them in the proper historical-philosophical perspective that it deserves. Hence the seminar proposes to organize engaging discussion over two and half days on the nature of Gandhi's relation with his critics, its ideological contours, its political and philosophical dimensions, and its continuing impact on the political ideas and imagination of our time.

This seminar, hopefully, would provide an opportunity to have a dialogue and develop a better understanding of both Gandhi as well his critics in line with the mentioned themes for the technical sessions.

Session Themes:

- 1) Gandhi and Tagore**
- 2) Gandhi and Savarkar**
- 3) Gandhi and Bose**
- 4) Gandhi and Nehru**
- 5) Gandhi and Jinnah**
- 6) Gandhi and Ambedkar**
- 7) Gandhi and his Left Critique**
- 8) Gandhi's South African Critiques on Racism**
- 9) Gandhi's relation with kasturba, Manu Gandhi and the Feminist Critiques**
- 10) Gandhi and his son Harilal**
- 11) Gandhi and the RSS**
- 12) Gandhi and the Christian Missionaries**
- 13) Gandhi and khilafat movement**
- 14) Gandhi and the New Social Movements**

