

# **SOCIAL ACTION**

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### **THE RELEVANCE OF MAHATMA GANDHI**

The Relevance of Mahatma Gandhi <i>Denzil Fernandes</i>	iii
Passivism to Pacifism to Pragmaticism : Gandhi and James <i>Terry Beitzel</i>	301
Gandhi's Philosophy of Social Action: Universal Love, Responsibility, Detachment <i>Prem Anand Mishra</i>	325
Gandhi and Village Development: Retrospect and Prospects <i>Jitendra G. Wasnik</i>	337
Community, Violence and Peace: A Gandhian Perspective <i>Binish Maryam</i>	349
Relevance of Gram Swaraj, Panchayati Raj Institutions and Trusteeship in Rural Context <i>Mehul Chauhan</i>	361
Gandhi and Truth <i>Rosmy Kattoor</i>	373
Footmarks of Mahatma Gandhi: Ultimate Way to Reverse Climate Change <i>Kirti K Kalinga</i>	379
Gandhi and The Indigo Workers <i>Susan Visvanathan</i>	387
Mahatma Gandhi's Message for us in The 21 <sup>st</sup> Century <i>Christian Bartolf &amp; Dominique Miething</i>	398
<i>Book Reviews</i>	406

### **THE RELEVANCE OF MAHATMA GANDHI**

Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, fondly known as Mahatma Gandhi, was born on 2nd October, 1869, in Porbandar, a coastal town of Gujarat. His life has been an inspiration for millions of people in India and the world for over a century. Every year on 2nd October, his birth anniversary is celebrated in India with great fervour as Gandhi Jayanti as he is revered as the 'Father of the Nation'. On 15 July 2007, the United Nations General Assembly passed a resolution to designate 2nd October every year as the International Day of Non-Violence as Mahatma Gandhi is regarded as the greatest icon of non-violence in the world. The resolution reaffirmed the universal relevance of the principle of non-violence for promoting a culture of peace, tolerance, understanding and non-violence. His principle of non-violence has inspired great leaders like Martin Luther King, who led the civil rights movement in the United States of America, and Nelson Mandela, who led the struggle against apartheid in South Africa. Therefore, on the occasion of the 150th birth anniversary of Mahatma Gandhi, it is appropriate to reflect on the significance and relevance of his life for the world today. In a world that has become more violent with wars, conflicts and various form of violence against women and other marginalised groups, Gandhi's teaching on non-violence is more relevant than ever before. He himself practiced non-violence and presented his life as an example for others to emulate. Gandhi was deeply influenced by the principle of non-violence (ahimsa) in Jainism. He considered non-violence as the highest ethical value to be observed by all living beings at all times. For him, non-violent resistance demanded courage of a high order, the courage to resist injustice without rancour, to invite suffering but not to inflict it, to die but not to kill. Mahatma Gandhi went on to adopt this non-violent principle to provide moral leadership to India's freedom struggle, which posed a challenge to the might of the British Empire and resulted in the end of the colonial rule in 1947. It is ironic that this champion of 'non-violence' met with a violent death on 30 January, 1948, and those who inspired the assassination of Mahatma Gandhi have become the ruling elite in India today. Another aspect that characterised the life of Mahatma Gandhi was his pursuit of 'Truth'. His autobiography was titled "My Experiments with Truth". Initially, he believed that "God is Truth", but later he realised that "Truth is God". He believed that the most important battles in life is confronting one's own fears and insecurities. He called his political struggle '*Satyagraha*', which means "reliance on the Truth". Today, *satyagraha* continues to be the weapon of the weak to challenge the might of the powerful and speak truth to power. One of the first writings of Mahatma

Gandhi was “Hind *Swaraj*”, written in 1909, which tried to articulate his views on various issues of the time. One of his important ideas was his view on ‘*swaraj*’, which meant ‘self-rule’ that encompasses all spheres of life. It was a spiritual concept of liberation of self from all inordinate attachments that prevents self realisation and the achievement of one’s purpose in life. This involved dispassionate self-assessment, ceaseless self-purification and self-reliance. He put these principles into practice by spinning cotton on the ‘*Charka*’, wearing khadi clothes, and inspiring the swadeshi movement. Politically, *swaraj* meant self-government or sovereignty of the people based on pure moral authority and the continuous effort to be independent of government control. Economically, *swaraj* meant full economic freedom and a decentralised system of self-reliant village republics. The ‘Panchayati Raj’ system of local governance was inspired by Gandhi’s vision. One of the most inspiring principles of governance has been Gandhi’s talisman: “Recall the face of the poorest and the weakest man you may have seen, and ask yourself, if the step you contemplate is going to be of any use to him.” In the modern globalised world, some of the practices adopted by Gandhi may need to be adapted to the times, but his spiritual vision of self conduct, political struggle, economic self-reliance and governance continues to be relevant in a world that is yearning for social harmony and sustainable development.

This issue of *Social Action* celebrates the life and thought of Mahatma Gandhi as a fitting tribute to him on the occasion of his 150th birth anniversary. The articles deal with various aspects of his life and philosophical outlook. The article “Passivism to Pacifism to Pragmatism: Gandhi and James” by Terry Beitzel is a comparative analysis of Gandhian thought on non-violence and American pragmatism of William James, who dwelt on the moral equivalent to war. Beitzel argues that non-violent active resistance is the best, pragmatic response to oppression. Prem Anand Mishra dwells on the primacy of action in Gandhi’s worldview in his article “Gandhi’s Philosophy of Social Action: Universal Love, Responsibility and Detachment”. In the next article titled “Gandhi and Village Development: Retrospects and Prospects”, Jitendra Wasnik argues that Gandhi’s views on village development are an integral part of his thought on truth, non-violence, human dignity and faith in human goodness. Wasnik points out that Gandhi believed in ‘village swaraj’ or self-sufficient villages, a goal which the country has yet to deliver over seven decades after independence. However, Gandhi’s espousal of ecologically sustainable and employment-oriented development paradigm continues to be relevant today. Binish Maryam explores the Gandhian vision of community in

the article “Community, Violence and Peace: A Gandhian Perspective”. According to Maryam, Gandhi believed that solutions to conflicts within a community lies within a community and therefore efforts must be made to build peaceful inter community alliances, where there is trust instead of suspicion, love instead of fear, shared spaces instead of social alienation and acknowledgement of grievances instead of silence and neglect. The article “Relevance of Gram Swaraj, Panchayati Raj Institutions and Trusteeship in Rural Context” by Mehul Chauhan attempts to assess rural governance in contemporary India seven decades after independence in the light of the Gandhian principle of ‘Gram Swaraj’. Chauhan argues that the Gandhian ideal of Gram Swaraj in Indian villages continues to be relevant today as the inability to apply it for the last seven decades has resulted in inequitable development and an unsustainable way of living in the rural context. Rosmy Kattoor’s article, “Gandhi and Truth” is based on Gandhi’s autobiography ‘My Experiments with Truth’. Kattoor points out that Gandhi’s relentless quest for truth revealed with courage, simplicity and frankness continues to be relevant in the search for Truth in the contemporary context. The article titled “Footmarks of Mahatma Gandhi: Ultimate Way to Reverse Climate Change” by Kirti Kalinga argues that Gandhian development paradigm and his methods of ‘*aparigraha*’, ‘*ahimsa*’ and ‘*satyagraha*’ can be used to reverse climate change, which is caused by the current unbridled neo-liberal capitalist development paradigm. Susan Visvanathan’s article “Gandhi and the Indigo Workers” uses several historical texts to explore how Gandhi used the cultivation of the cash crop ‘indigo’ as one of his potent symbols in the struggle for freedom. Visvanathan points out that the cultivation of indigo forced the peasantry into extreme poverty as they were forced to shift from growing subsistence crops to the indigo crop which led to their enslavement under British hegemony. Finally, the article “Mahatma Gandhi’s Message for us in the 21st Century” by Christian Bartolf and Dominique Miething is a summary of four essays in the book on Gandhi’s non-violent resistance in South Africa titled ‘Origin of Satyagraha: Emancipation from Slavery and War’.

All these articles, written by authors from different parts of the world, dwell on different aspects of Gandhian thought and their relevance in our contemporary world. It is hoped that these articles will inspire readers to dwell deeper into Gandhian thought in our quest for a better economic, social and political order that promotes sustainable development, social harmony, justice, equity and peace so that we are able to address the challenges of the world today. □

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