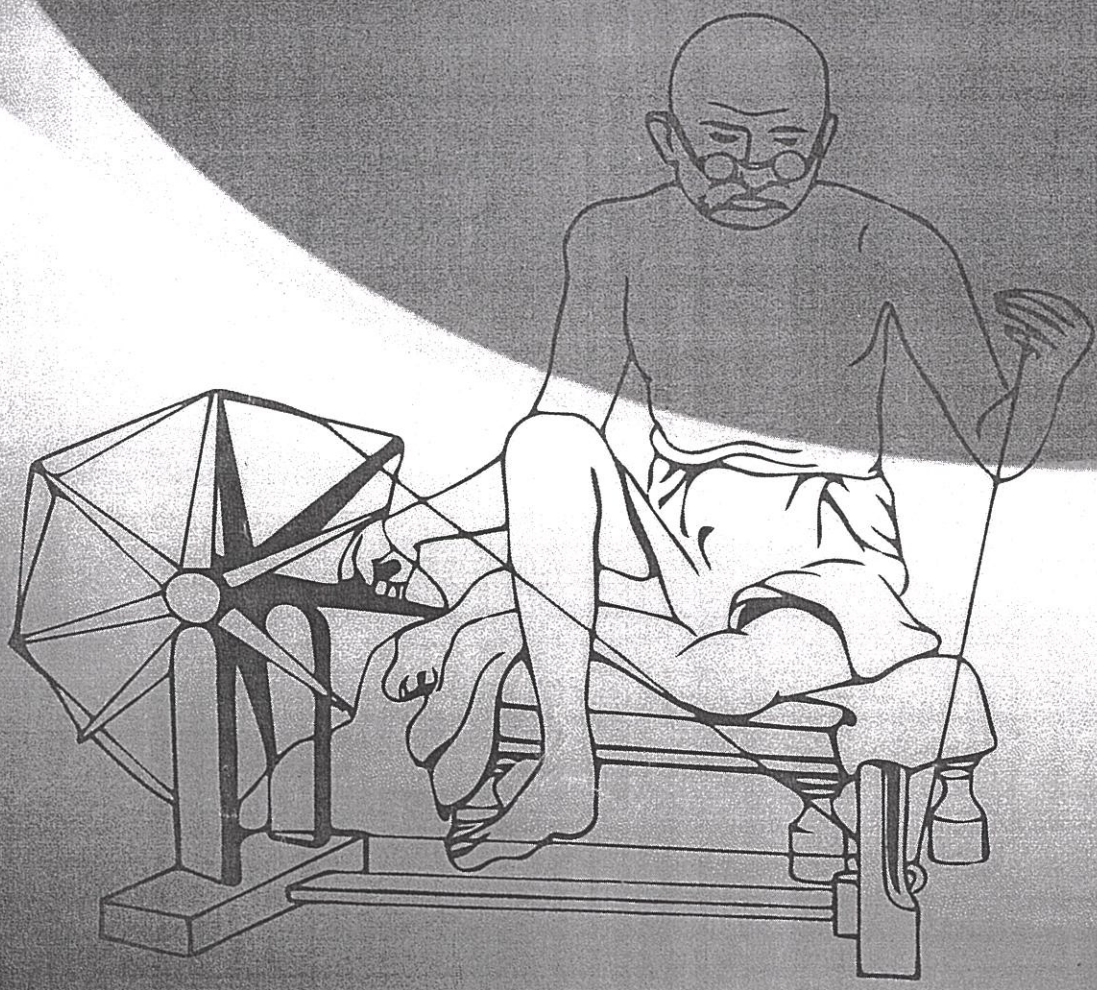


AmH Book Chap 2019-20

# FACETS OF MAHATMA GANDHI

(A collection of essays on Facets of Mahatma Gandhi)



Editors | **Namita Nimbalkar**  
**Jayant Upadhyay** |

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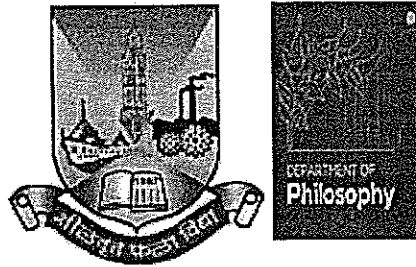


# FACETS OF MAHATMA GANDHI

(An Anthology of Select Scholarly Articles on Facets of  
Mahatma Gandhi)



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Jayant Upadhyay



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Published by  
**Academic Heights Publication**  
C-9Bhagwati Garden Extension  
Near Dwarka Mor Metro Station  
Uttam Nagar, Delhi-110059  
Email: [academicheights.publication@gmail.com](mailto:academicheights.publication@gmail.com)

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## Gandhi—A Postmodern Mystic/Saint?

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“If this work seems so threatening, this is because it isn’t simply eccentric or strange, but competent, rigorously argued, and carrying conviction.”—Jacques Derrida<sup>1</sup>

“I’m no prophet. My job is making windows where there were once walls.”—Michel Foucault<sup>2</sup>

“Strength does not come from physical capacity. It comes from an indomitable will.”—M. K. Gandhi<sup>3</sup>

From the above quotes by Derrida, Foucault and Gandhi (himself), do we witness the spark of postmodernism? No doubt Gandhi satisfies much of the criteria of a mystic/saint as elucidated by R. D. Ranade (namely—the first three basic aspects: intellect, feeling and willing; and other five characteristic features of a mystics/saint’s experience—the experience of mystic/saint has an element of universality, it works on highly intellectual level, the experience is based on emotions, the experience stands on the pillar of morality and has intuitive aspect that is very important according to Gurudev Ranade.) Gandhi almost was in possession of these characteristic features of a mystic/saint. But the question is—can Gandhi be qualified as a postmodern thinker?

So, Gandhi as a postmodern mystic/saint can be proved, debated and reconciled as well. Gandhi, if at all called a postmodernist has an argument backing his philosophy and that is Gandhi remained in tradition challenging tradition. Gandhi challenged tradition being a full-time member of traditional society. Postmodernism and the term deconstruction go hand in hand. The postmodern philosophers have employed the term more in linguistic sense. “....., says Derrida, with the latest developments in linguistics, the human sciences, mathematics, and cybernetics, where the written mark or signifier is purely technical, that is a matter of function rather than meaning.”<sup>4</sup> Indeed Gandhi as “deconstructive” in postmodern sense is quite different from the above mentioned criterion of Postmodernism. In fact Gandhi is more of post-structuralists like Derrida and Foucault. These two postmodernists resorted to the ‘method of critiquing’ and ‘method of deconstruction’. Unfortunately these methods stand on a fragile ground though absolutely bewitching and intriguing. As in these methods, though dynamic, may take recourse to violence (of any kind) and therefore comes with a label ‘fragile—handle with care’. Exactly at this juncture Gandhi too rebelled

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against the traditional mould of Indian society, especially the Hindu society where caste (till date) is a dominating factor. He therefore critiqued the social system prevalent at that time and tried to bring about deconstruction by trying to break the traditional mould. But Gandhi supersedes the postmodern philosophers, as unlike them, Gandhi never ever adopted violent methods for implementing the method of critiquing and deconstruction. Again the greater hallow is added to Gandhi's postmodernism is he resorted to 'heterodox schools of Indian philosophy remaining into the domain of Hindu traditionalism'. Gandhi was a proud Hindu as he says, "I am proud to belong to that Hinduism which is all inclusive and which stands for tolerance."<sup>5</sup> Also that Gandhi did not believe in conversion. But he critiques certain practices of Hindu traditional society; and all the more took help of not the orthodox schools of Indian philosophy but the heterodox schools (non-Vedic) like Jainism and Buddhism. The concept of *ahimsa* (non-violence), the way it is adopted and practiced in Jainism is nowhere adopted and practiced in the world. As noted by R. K. Sinha, "The important elements of Jainism that influenced Gandhiji were *Ahimsa*, self-restraint and austere life. Of course, the Jain attitude was essentially negative, though Gandhiji believed in life affirmation, but there is no doubt that Jainism influenced Gandhiji in this respect as well."<sup>6</sup>

Gandhi was highly influenced also by Buddhism. This again seems to deconstruct from traditional Hindu ideology. Buddhist ethics, a typical heterodox non-Vedic type, was very much upheld by Gandhi. For Gandhi Buddha was 'the greatest teacher'. In fact Gandhi maintained the Buddhist principles of non-violence, compassion, self-purification and truth. In fact both Jainism and Buddhism rigorously sustained the ideology of *Brahmacharya* (celibacy) which Gandhi too ensued. Wasn't this deviation from traditional axiology followed by Hindu society? As noted by Dinesh Narayanan, "It is generally believed that many dislike Gandhi because of his steadfast support to Muslims, which, they believe, somehow led to Partition.....The theoretical origin of the aversion, however, lies much deeper: in their loathing for Gautama Buddha's intervention in history.....Buddhist ideas of truth, non-violence and self-purification formed the core of Gandhian thought. Others considered the very same qualities to have corroded the edifice of the Hindu nation."<sup>7</sup> Indeed the whole quote is as debatable as postmodern philosophy itself. But at least this angle leads one to think in the direction that Gandhi really tends to show the characteristic features of both—postmodernism and mystic/saint.

Postmodernism proposed neither to underestimate history nor tradition as both these play a vital role in an individual's life. In Gandhi's life tradition and history—both play a significant role; but

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simultaneously, like postmodernism, revitalized and revisited both the pivotal spheres of human life. Again, like the postmodernist, Gandhi was quite anti-modernism and was influenced by "the other anti-modern Western thinkers" like Thoreau, Tolstoy and Ruskin. Gandhi couldn't relate and affiliate himself to the Western modernism; especially the dominance of the modern West. Gandhi very explicitly mentions his (so called postmodern) views in *Hind Swaraj* that was published in 1909, his reflection on anti-modernity is articulated in his applied ethics of non-violence and truthfulness (*Satyagraha*). Gandhi says, "Formerly I used to resent the ignorance of my opponents. Today I can love them because I am gifted with the eye to see myself as others see me and vice-versa. My *anekantavada* is the result of the twin doctrine of *satya* and *ahimsa*."<sup>8</sup> Resorting to Jaina theory of *Anekantavada* (pluralism and multiplicity of viewpoints), ethics of *Ahimsa* (Non-violence) and *Satya* (Truth) [the synthesis being *Satyagraha*]; Gandhi set a novel trend in the field of social, political and economic life of India and also in the world. Therefore, development of individual is in correlation to development of society. So for him societal development is possible only if there is individual development.

No doubt for Gandhi the impact of the concept of *Nishkamakarma* was tremendous, followed by Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, especially Christ's teaching of 'forgive and forget' and 'love thy neighbour the way you love yourself.' But Gandhi had a novel approach to tradition and history. As noted earlier he reconciled the Gita philosophy, Christian ethics that which is absolutely theistic with heterodox schools of Indian philosophy those which are atheistic. As noted by Nikita Dhavan, "One such historical experiment with the weapon of criticism was made by the *nastikas*, namely the heterodox schools of classical Indian philosophy. Their theory and practice of *ahimsa* (non-violence) carefully engages with how power is exercised in the practice of critique. Thus they attempt to develop a non-violent ethics of political intervention. (Dhawan 2007: 301-305). One of the most important and well known is interpretations and implementation of the tool of non-violent critique has been by Gandhi in the context of the Indian independence movement, who combined the Marxist of the general strike with heterodox ethics."<sup>9</sup> Thought there are difference of opinion between Akeel Bilgrami, and L. I. Rudolph and S. H. Rudolph's view on Gandhi as a modernist or postmodern thinker! This is very empathetically mentioned in their respective write up, namely *Gandhi, the Philosopher* by Akeel Bilgrami (Pp. 4159-4165) and *Postmodern Gandhi and Other Essays: Gandhi in the World and at Home* by L. I. Rudolph and S. H. Rudolph (Pp. 03-59).

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Bilgrami considers Gandhi as a Modern thinker, the time 'science-proper' began; almost from the time of Newton. Bilgrami notes in his article, "In reading Gandhi recently I have been struck by the integrity of his ideas. I don't mean simply that he was a man of integrity in the sense that he tried to make his actions live up to his ideals, though perhaps in fact he tried more than most to do so. I mean something more abstract: that his thought itself was highly integrated, his ideas about very specific political strategies in specific contexts followed (and in mind necessarily flowed) from ideas that were very remote from politics. They followed from the most abstract epistemological and methodological commitments."<sup>10</sup> Unfortunately, according to Bilgrami, Gandhi is never seen in light of being a modern thinker (philosopher) like scientist of Modernist era. Example: Newton. Gandhi is only seen as a 'man of spirituality'; and social scientist has seen him only as a 'nationalist leader' who has had been active in freedom struggle using the virtue of non-violence methodologically. Gandhi used the method of non-violence non-constitutionally; or rather extra-constitutionally as against violent methods used as an alternative method to achieve the goal of freedom from the imperialist on the basis of sentimentalism. For Gandhi the method of non-violence is metamorphosized into civil-disobedience, that which is non-violent, at the same time 'non-or extra-constitutional (as mentioned earlier).<sup>11</sup> When constitutional demands in liberal democracy—as legally used—did not work, that which imbibed non-violence; Gandhi went non-constitutional by converting non-violence into civil disobedience. It is well known that civil-disobedience is non-constitutional, and it worked. So Gandhi had a specific strategy, a methodology; that which was popular among the Modernists.

Bilgrami was also of the idea that Gandhi was not anti-machinery, that was a specific character of modernism. Gandhi says in *Young India*, "That use of machinery is lawful which sub-serves the interest of all."<sup>12</sup> And in another issue of *Young India*, he replies to the question, "Are you against all machinery?" He answers, "My answer is emphatically, 'No'. But I am against its indiscriminate multiplication. I refuse to be dazzled by the seeming triumph of machinery. I am uncompromisingly against all destructive machinery. But simple tools and instruments and such machinery as saves individual labour and lightens the burden of the millions of cottages, I should welcome."<sup>13</sup>

Unlike Bilgrami, the Rudolph(s) disagree on this point. They agree to the view that Gandhi was a postmodern thinker, as Gandhi critiqued the modern scientific methodology. And Gandhi as postmodern thinker appeals me most. Gandhi indeed was a critique of modernism (modern science in our context). Gandhi is not against grand narratives or meta-narratives as he believes in 'truth as God' and 'God as truth'.

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But according to the Rudolph(s), "Gandhi anticipates a good deal of postmodern thinking by taking the view that, at best, humans can know partial and contingent truths. As a self-declared *karmayogi*, Gandhi's epistemology was rooted in 'truth in action', a concept that locates truth in the facts and circumstance of particular situations."<sup>14</sup>

And further the Rudolph(s) mentions that though Gandhi believed in 'Truth is God' (the grand meta-narrative) and vice-versa; still, "Gandhi compared absolute truth to a diamond which could not be seen whole but many facets or surfaces revealed partial truth....For Gandhi truth had several meanings and forms. It could be situational as in the goal of a *satyagraha*, contextual and contingent as in the experimental truth found in his autobiography, and absolute as in his commitments to 'Truth is God'"<sup>15</sup>.

And to conclude, in Gurudev Ranade's expression of a mystic/saint's character and characteristic features of mystical experience, Gandhi fits into the mould (or if permitted to use the term 'paradigm') perfectly; and with acceptance of diversity, synthesize and fabrication Gandhi seems perfectly befitting in the category of a (so called) 'postmodern mystic/saint'. The whole paper can be summarized in the following quotation, "The global ethical tradition we are studying emerged into two phases. The first phase occurred with Gandhi in South Africa and then in India. The second phase developed primarily in the United States, but had adherents around the globe.....Global ethical movements have no reality, except in some local embodiment. Our postmodern saints, in the tradition of Gandhi and King (Martin Luther King, Jr.), think globally and act locally, questioning all or local moralities in the name of a postmodern ethic that reminds us of our global interdependence."<sup>16</sup>

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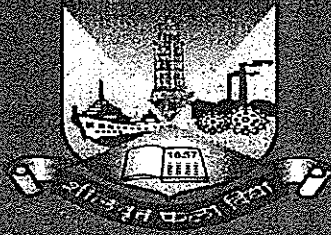


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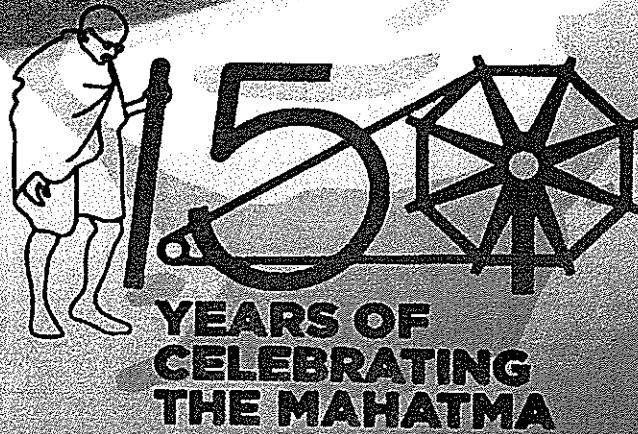
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Published by:

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Near Dwarka Mor Metro Station

Uttam Nagar, Delhi-110059

Email: [academicheights.publication@gmail.com](mailto:academicheights.publication@gmail.com)

January, 2020

ISBN 978-93-85218-98-9



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