

## GANDHI – A MANAGERIAL INTERPRETATION

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*This article attempts a fresh interpretation of Gandhi as a great manager and establishes that he was a thorough professional in all respects. He relied on information and worked hard to gather it most diligently and to analyze it thoroughly before arriving at his stand. As a leader and as a manager he did not use authority, force or manipulation in the way they are generally used. People worked with him without fear of punishment or for lack of reward. He was a great leader, a great motivator who understood that real communication is emotional communication.*

For understanding leadership and decision making Gandhi is a very powerful case study. It has been used in the classrooms in India as well as abroad. The best way to start course is to study his autobiography: *The Story of My Experiments With Truth* (Navjeevan, 1927). This is a unique book in which a great leader very honestly tries to narrate what he was, what he became through his personal efforts for self-development. It shows right from childhood how a personality takes shape and develops itself to fit into the role it has decided to play. The process is somewhat interactive. A personality evolves the role also keeps changing and the two keep influencing each other in turn. What comes out very prominently in this autobiography is that he wanted to be himself. Free from all restraints of conventionality and the life around him, he wanted to act on his own will, so that he could be true to himself, his inner voice, his consciousness, and answerable only to his God. He was deeply influenced by Ruskin, Tolstoy, the Gita and the Sermon on the Mount. This is what Stanislavyski meant when he wrote: 'actor's work on himself',

and, actor's work on his role'. He was an eager reader of books and also a keen correspondent with great thinkers and writers of his times.

The way he saw himself or his own self and the world around him was somewhat quixotic. That determined how he related himself to nature, to technology, to others, to society and to the humanity at large. And, this in turn gave content to his dreams, his vision, his goals, and most importantly to the non-violent means with which he was determined to achieve his goals. Was he a rebel, a revolutionary, a reformer, a saint, a martyr, a transactional leader, a transformational leader, a manager, a political leader? Perhaps he was all these bundled into one. The other significant issue is: was Gandhi a success or a failure? Was his leadership largely situational? Was he a man of the times, relevant only to the period and the country in which he lived?

His is certainly a rare example of a man in human history who dreamed so big and so high and realized his dreams so miraculously

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through a technique and strategy which in itself was more of a dream than reality. Did he rely entirely on higher values of life, spirituality and ethics? What was the inspiration of his dreams? How he shaped them gradually into a vision to be worked for. Apparently, he was deep in the game of politics. How far did he rely on opportunism and compromise and pragmatism? Was he pursuing the art of the possible, or was his mission a leap forward into what others considered impossible. Can Gandhi be repeated? What have been the aftereffects of his action on the next generation?

He was certainly committed to the concept of ideals. He could successfully idealize mundane goals into ideals, which could inspire him and his followers and thus actualize them with the vigour, energy and passion of an uncommon man. Success demanded a price, and he paid it. He neglected his family, his personal interests and his life itself. He had his illusions. His success was mixed with failure. Yet his significance in the history of the twentieth century lies in his extraordinary ability to idealize his goals and his capacity to actualize them. His approach was not amateurish. He was a thorough professional in all respects. He relied on information and worked hard to gather it most diligently and to analyze it thoroughly before arriving at his stand. It is interesting to find that when he took up the cause of the peasantry in Champaran he went into the field, conducted a thorough investigation before fighting for their case with the government. All this has been documented and published now as a volume running into more than 1000 pages by the Government of Bihar.

It should therefore not surprise how he could manage such a gigantic task over such a

vast geographic area and over such a long period of time. He proved to be a great manager to manage his mega-project. He set his goals, planned, communicated and organized and implemented his operation Gandhi on a truly massive scale. Isn't it unique that he practised dispersion of leadership, succession planning and built up an organizational structure and his team right from the grassroot level of the villages to the top at the national level, tempering his passion with a high degree of restraint and compassion? He aimed at the impossible, motivate the masses and surprised his opponents by his moves. He could identify himself with his role and also with the people who worked with him for his and what was converted into their mission. When he entered the Indian scene there was a high sense of helplessness all over the country. His biggest contribution was that he created in its place a high sense of hope and thus provided meaning to work and convert it successfully into a movement.

As a leader and as a manager he did not use authority, force or manipulation in the way as they are generally used. He can be understood in terms of multiple images: a hero, a saint, an exemplar, a knight and also as a martyr. People worked for him without fear of punishment or for lack of reward. They worked for something that was meaningfully related to chosen set of beliefs and values which had been made parts of their lives. This approach can be called management of meaning through management of feelings. Therein lies its novelty and strength. The movement was based on bonds of cultural togetherness generated by a higher set of shared beliefs, attitudes and norms. He also used vows, oaths and thereby created an unbelievable social reality by building up what Carl Jung

called 'participation mystique' based on 'collective consciousness'. He created many images and symbols to communicate meaning. He became his own image immortalized in a simple cartoon that every child could draw. He created symbols like the flag with the spinning wheel in its center.

It is really remarkable how lying in a small cottage in an isolated village in India, he could communicate silently with millions of people all over India and all over the world simply by (refusing to eat food or) resorting to fast. It has been reported that on such occasions ordinary people in London walking in the morning from the railway station to their offices would generally talk about 'Mr. Gandhi's body temperature today'. This is perhaps a very good example of creating that social reality which gave him immense power. But his power was fully humanized. Further, it needs also to be realised that Gandhi fought against an ideal opponent. It was early twentieth century and the British had their own beliefs and values, which by themselves represented the highest in that era.

For studying Gandhi the Oscar winning film of Richard Attenborough: *Gandhi* is also very useful. The published book by John Briley: *Gandhi - A Screenplay* (Grove Press, 1982) is available. Some comments by Alyque Padamsee who played the role of Jinnah in the film are also available in his book: *A Double Life* (Penguin, 1999).

The film starts with the scene in which Gandhi as a young barrister practising law in South Africa is thrown out of the train with his baggage out of a compartment in which only the whites travelled. Attenborough shows him lying on the railway platform on his knees and elbows like a quadruped

looking at the train as it moves out of the platform leaving him behind. This is perhaps the first step in the making of the Gandhi starting from his dream of 'anti-apartheid movement in South Africa'. As the movie moves Gandhi finally reaches the dream of 'Quit India movement in India' gradually in stages as shown in the film.

There is another interesting portrayal in the film. Right in the beginning Gandhi is shown as a western educated barrister in proper Saville suit. In contrast in the end he is shown in bare loin cloth. Infact the film shows how gradually Gandhi manages to change his dress and with it his image gradually in stages. Perhaps it would not be fair to say that he does it unconsciously. He was a shrewd manager of human affairs and deserves credit for projecting his image so meticulously to suit the changing situation. There are many such examples in the film, which deserve careful interpretation, and for which Richard Attenborough also deserves full credit for his contribution as a great director. He succeeds because he is able to convincingly show how Gandhi worked on himself, changed his personality, his vision of the world around him and as he dreamt it to be, how he kept evolving his strategies for action and how he mobilized not only human energy but also world opinion in his favour.

The film proved to be a roaring success all over the world. Mentioning the case of his own daughter in India Alyque Padamsee writes that when he suggested getting passes for her and her friends in Mumbai, she remarked: "We learnt about Gandhi in college and it was very boring". After seeing the movie her reaction was: "Gandhiji is a hero for me. For the first time in my life I am proud to be an Indian. This was a man

- who really meant something.”

That is the impact artful communication makes. Alyque Padamsee's comment, who himself has been successful man in the theatre and in the advertising world is: "It will seem like heresy if I say that Mahatma Gandhi was the greatest communications *guru* who ever lived, but it is true." He adds that from Gandhi he learnt the lesson that even if the media is not on your side, you can use word of mouth to swing public opinion in your favour. In the days when Gandhi was active the press, radio and newsreels were all controlled by the British. There was no television and of course no internet. Nothing about Gandhi would get easily published unless of course it was against him.

Another great contribution was in staging events and through them to dramatise situations. He was one of the greatest event marketing man the world has ever seen and personally a great actor in a dramatic sense. And all this was preplanned and carried out meticulously. The greatest event staged by him and so powerfully portrayed by Richard Attenborough was his salt march to Dandi. He made use of an imaginatively selected symbol 'salt' which even the poorest and uneducated Indian, not only knew but also understood its significance in his life. "It is really this great event which really galvanized India into believing that the British were cruel task-masters and they had imposed a draconian tax called salt tax." As for the film it is this portrayal of what really happened which made foreign viewers sit up and wonder: Could it really happen? Did it really happen?

Gandhi's decision to defy this tax proved to be a masterly move in the game of politics

which he was playing in his own style. He did not do it instantly. He let it all build up like Hitchcockian suspense. Slowly he sent out a word that on a certain day he would be picking up a handful of salt on the deserted beach at Dandi. And he let the message percolate all over India.

In addition to the technique of staging events, he proved to be a brilliant innovator of interactivity. As Alyque Padamsee writes: "he could easily have taken a train to Dandi, walked a few furlongs and got to the beach." Instead, he announced that he would start from Sabarmati Ashram on foot. He wanted to dramatise the event and interact with people on the way. It took him several days to reach Dandi, and as he walked from village to village, the word spread that Gandhiji was approaching. As he walked through each village, most of the villagers joined him in his march. Not only this as the days passed more and more representatives from all over India and media persons from all over the world also joined him in his march and successfully built up the climax. The whole process was one of transformation of an act of defiance by an individual to a participatory movement of the people. It is really interesting to view carefully how the press got involved. How reporters and photographers from all over India and abroad came to see and report how a single frail individual man was going to defy the might of the British Empire. The whole message spread like wildfire and the entire country started talking about him and a new idea of *padayatra* was also made popular. As the march continued for days the suspense kept on building up. Would Gandhi reach Dandi? Or would the government prevent him from reaching the beach? He proved successful and did reach. As one tries to interpret this great event one

has to bear in mind that it was after all a confrontation between the best of the British culture and the Indian culture. The event did not get on to the extreme on either side.

Another interesting comment from Alyque Padamsee is that Gandhi was a master of the art of talking in aphorisms or one-line homilies. For example: 'An eye for an eye only succeeds in making the whole world blind'. This not only summarizes his whole concept of non-violence but also proves to be an effective instrument of communication. According to Alyque Padamsee: 'One of the greatest slogans ever coined in our country is 'Quit India'. In just two words, it gave all Indians a nationalistic rallying point. A good slogan emotionalises the message. It acts as a guiding star.

His contributions to imaging were also extraordinary. He showed how if a leader wants to empathize with people, he must live like them, dress like them, be like them. When he returned to India from South Africa he decided to switch to the traditional Indian clothes on the bat itself with a *Gujarati pagdi* on his head and, of course, which looked quite unnatural. Later he took to the traditional dhoti and then to his famous loincloth. Finally he was full at ease with this somewhat ascetic makeup. He was also a master at handling human sentiments. When he did his *Bharat Darshan*, as advised by Gopal Krishna Gokhale, he travelled all over India by train, in ordinary coach and with common people halting at all stations. He had a conviction that it was poverty and the lifestyle of the common man which would make the masses empathise with him. When Rabindranath Tagore bestowed

on him the title Mahatma, he was not comfortable with it. But later he learned to live with it because it helped him in the development of his charisma tremendously. So much so that when anyone talks about the Mahatma everyone knows who is being talked about. There has been in history only one Mahatma.

Art, culture and spirituality are far more emotional than rational. In the oriental tradition they have also been more interlinked. All this is very well covered by D.T. Suzuki in *Zen and Japanese Culture* (Princeton, 1959). He states that all arts in Japan and also in other far eastern countries have not been traditionally intended for utilitarian purposes only or for purely aesthetic enjoyments, but have also been meant for spiritual purposes, to attune the mind to the Unconscious. This applies to all art forms: ink painting, poetry, tea ceremony, dance, flower arrangement, and so on. Even in archery and swordsmanship the Japanese do not understand them as sport but as a religious ritual. Rituals have always played important role in art, culture and spirituality.

Gandhi's one more major contribution was ritualisation of political activity based on the tradition of art-culture-spirituality trinity through his activities such as morning walks, processions, indoor meetings sitting on the floor, evening prayers, and so on. Rituals are important in organisational activity. They serve useful purpose if they have cultural-spiritual roots. In the clash between civilisation and culture, Gandhi favoured the latter.