

Mahatma Gandhi as a Practicing Global Citizen: A Hero for Our Times* **

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< Abstract >

Mahatma Gandhi's example demonstrates that global citizens can connect to humanity worldwide while retaining their natural roots: national, racial, regional. Such an understanding of global citizenship seems imperative in a world beset with conflicts, hatred, prejudice, and environmental, economic and military issues demanding global solutions. In fact, a sense of global-belonging must precede the notion of global citizenship. After dealing with his sense of global belonging, the author reflects on Gandhi's life and vision as that of a global citizen. The way he worked hard to uplift people from all ways of life, his spirit of embracing the good in every religion, his openness to diverse political views or opinions, and his ability to reach out to his enemies and rivals make him a hero of global citizenship. Though he was rooted in his tradition, culture and religion, he truly belonged to the world. As an inspirational icon for global citizenship, Gandhi's life and message is a call to become aware of the global challenges we face. His ideals and way of life – *ahimsa* and *satyagraha* – tell us that we have the cultural, religious and human resources to deal with the life-threatening crisis facing us.

[Keywords] Mahatma Gandhi, Global Citizen, *Ahimsa*, *Satyagraha*, Gandhi as Hero

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I. Introduction

Martin Luther King Jr.'s insight is worth remembering: "We must learn to live together as brothers or perish together as fools" (Pillow 2012, 135). Faced with the mind-boggling possibilities and dangers of today, contemporary men and women are called upon to collaborate together, deal with our own problems collectively and thus sustain ourselves. This implies that, without losing our individual commitment and citizenship, we must come together and foster a global citizenship, which includes national and local citizenships, for the collective benefit of humanity.

According to a much-reprinted definition of global citizenship by Oxfam, a global organization focused on overcoming poverty and suffering, "Global citizenship goes beyond knowing that we are citizens of the globe, it is a way of thinking and behaving. It is an outlook on life, a belief that we can make a difference and make the world a better place" (Young and Commins 2002; cf. Lagos n.d., Banks 2002). It adds that young people today are experiencing an increasingly global context. They will live, work and study alongside people from all over the world. They have better opportunities at interacting with people of other cultures and identities. Increasing global travel for work or for leisure and the communication and social media make every culture interdependent. Because all cultures and identities are shaped by global influences, the decisions of any com-

munity have far ranging implications and we live in a connected and global society.

Oxfam identifies the following aspects as the constituent features of a global citizen:

She is aware of the wider world and has a sense of their own role as a world citizen;

- She respects and values diversity;
- She has an understanding of how the world works economically, politically, socially, culturally, technologically and environmentally;
- She is outraged by social injustice;
- She participates in and contributes to the community at a range of levels from local to global;
- She is willing to act to make the world a more sustainable place;
- She takes responsibility for their actions (Young and Commins 2002).

Today the global citizenship movement has gained momentum due to growing realization that many pressing problems of our time are global in their nature, scope and possible solution.

Hunger, homelessness, epidemics, war, ethnic cleansing, export of hazardous waste and pesticides to the non-industrialized countries, deforestation, extinction of species, global warming, famine, are among such problems requiring global initiatives or challenges (Farooq 2006).

In fact, global citizenship is an idea that must be rooted in a spirit of global-belonging.

Global citizens can connect to humanity worldwide while retaining their natural roots: national, racial, regional. The idea seems imperative in a world beset with conflicts, hatred and prejudice; it seems a must to combat environmental, economic and military issues demanding global solutions.

In fact, a sense of global-belonging must precede the notion of global citizenship. Hence, global citizenship movement must be anchored to the spirit of global-belonging (Farooq 2006). In this article, we reflect on the protagonist of total non-violence (*ahimsa*), Mahatma Gandhi, as someone belonging to the global community and whose ideas are reinvigorate contemporary dreams on global citizenship (Farooq 2006). After dealing with his sense of global belonging, we reflect on his life and vision as that of a global citizen. Then, inspired by Gandhi's vision, we reflect on practicing such a global citizenship in our contemporary times. We shall see Gandhi as a paradigm case of global citizen and indicate some of its practical implications for today.

II. Gandhi as Inspirational Icon for Our Times

Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi (1869-1948) was a major political, cultural and spiritual leader of India and its Freedom Movement. Considered the "Father of the Nation," he is often affectionately called 'Bapu,' meaning father in Gujarati, his mother tongue. He practiced and perfected the

Satyagraha ("Search for truth," which is active resistance through mass civil disobedience) and *ahimsa* ("non-violence," which was his only method to attain freedom of the country). The most powerful symbol of Indian Freedom Movement, Gandhi has become a global force for civil rights and freedom around the globe¹⁾

Gandhi drew his inspiration from his religion, Hinduism and from the rich Indian cultural and spiritual traditions. In a letter, Gandhi, or popularly known as "The Mahatma" (The Great Soul), articulated: "My religion is Hinduism which, for me, is Religion of humanity... I am being led to my religion through Truth and Non-violence, i.e., love in the broadest sense. I often describe my religion as Religion of Truth... We are all sparks of Truth. I am being led nearer to it by constant prayer... To be true to such religion, one has to lose oneself in continuous and continuing service to all life. Realisation of truth is impossible without a complete merging of oneself in, and identification with, this limitless ocean of life. Hence, for me, there is no escape from social service." (Vroom 1989, 136).

Gandhi's responses show that his understanding of religion varies greatly from the usual of religious practices and precepts. Gandhi's religion was bereft of dogma, rituals, superstition, and bigotry. His was a religion that embraced the whole humanity. This ex-

1) Many world figures including Nelson Mandela, Martin Luther King, Albert Einstein and Barack Obama have been influenced by his vision and philosophy.

plains why there was no temple at his *ashrams* at Sabarmati or Wardha, and yet there was ample evidence of religion and moral values(Pinto 2005).²⁾

Unlike the great Albert Einstein, an avowed anti-nationalist and an admirer of The Mahatma, Gandhi considered nationalism an important aspect of the anti-colonial struggle. However, he did not see any contradiction between his nationalism and humanity-orientation. So he could boldly assert: "I want the freedom of my country so that other countries may learn something from my free country, so that the resources of my country may be utilized for the benefit of mankind"(Desai 1927, 171). In 1931 Gandhi would explain further in *Young India*, the weekly newspaper that he started and published from 1919 to 1932, "Our nationalism can be no peril to other nations in as much as we will exploit none, just as we will allow none to exploit us. Through *Swaraj* we will serve the whole world"(Gandhi 1960).³⁾

Though Gandhi was a nationalist, he was fully open to the whole world. So Gandhi was genuine when he affirmed in 1925: "It is impossible for one to be internationalist without being a nationalist. Internationalism is possible only when nationalism becomes a fact, i.e., when peoples belonging to different countries have organized themselves and are

2) It may be noted that Ashrams are places where the followers of Gandhi lived and practiced their religion. In a very loose sense, Ashram may be translated as monastery.

3) Young India was instrumental in providing the theoretical basis for the freedom movement in India.

able to act as one man. It is not nationalism that is evil, it is the narrowness, selfishness, exclusiveness which is the bane of modern nations which is evil"(Gandhi 1960). In this spirit Gandhi added in a later 1925 article, "I do want to think in terms of the whole world. My patriotism includes the good of mankind in general. Therefore, my service of India includes the service of humanity"(Gandhi 1960).

This vision of being rooted in India and open to the whole world is found many times in his writings. For instance, he was very clear about his vision and mission in an article in *Young India* in 1929. "My mission is not merely brotherhood of Indian humanity. My mission is not merely freedom of India, though today it undoubtedly engrosses practically the whole of my life and the whole of my time. But through realization of freedom of India I hope to realize and carry on the mission of the brotherhood of man. My patriotism is not an exclusive thing. It is all-embracing and I should reject that patriotism which sought to mount upon the distress or the exploitation of other nationalities. The conception of my patriotism is nothing if it is not always, in every case without exception, consistent with the broadest good of humanity at large"(Gandhi 1960).

It is contended that Gandhi was not for total eradication of India's caste system even though he was against its injustices. He reflected: "Mankind is one, seeing that all are equally subject to the moral law. All men are equal in God's eyes. There are, of course, differences of race and status and the like, but the higher the status of a man, the

greater is his responsibility”(Gandhi 1922 and Gandhi [1933] 2015).

In fact, our purpose here is not to scrutinize the life of Gandhi, but to draw inspiration from him for a sense of global belonging. What is to be noted here is that Gandhi’s struggle of the people began with India, and had an underlying orientation towards the whole humanity. He was an all-inclusive nationalist. So he was emphatic: “I call myself a nationalist, but my nationalism is as broad as the universe. It includes in its sweep all the nations of the earth. My nationalism includes the well-being of the whole world”(Jhawar 2004, 116).

III. Gandhi as a Global Citizen

The Mahatma was a *karma yogi* (saint in action), who devoted himself body and soul to socio-political reforms leading to Independence in his native India, then the world’s largest and most populated country, observing different religions and cultures, after acquiring knowledge and experience in London and South Africa. Having visited Mauritius in 1901, he contributed indirectly to the country’s independence, as he did for that of South Africa where he had been self-groomed in legal practice, spirituality, public speaking, journalism, *ahimsa*, *satyagraha* and negotiation with authorities (1893-1914) (Dukhira 2012). In South Africa, he first utilized his days spent in jail and fasting, for public cause. He knew well such

religious works as the Ramayana, the Mahabharata, the Upanishads, the Bible and the Koran. He read and conversed in different languages Hindi, Tamil and Urdu, on top of Gujarati and English. Unlike the ephemeral fame achieved by some leaders based on violence and injustice, Gandhi’s pre-eminence was based essentially on compassion and commitment to human welfare. His impact and fame may be as everlasting as that of Buddha or Ashoka the Great(Pandikattu 2001).

True, Gandhi was also a person of contradictions—a saint and a self-proclaimed sinner, preacher of love and compassion but different in attitude towards his own wife and children, close to both the poor and the rich, understanding and at the same time adamant towards others(Dukhira 2012). To his critics, Gandhi, with his proverbial patience, orally justified his stand on various issues whenever possible, but mostly did so in the press and through personal correspondence. His total writings amount to over 90 volumes, running into about 50,000 pages of which a sizeable portion embodies his letters, usually hand-written and often on plain postcards. Gandhi was severely criticised for helping the Khilafat Movement(1919-1921), a purely Muslim countrywide body promoting exclusive Muslim interests. He explained that it was an opportunity for Hindus and Muslims to be together to confront the British in a just cause (Dukhira 2012).

In spite of these contradictions in his own life, Gandhi deserves to be called the Man of the Second Millennium. Gandhi fasted more

than 20 times during his public life (1913-1948), including twice in South Africa. For him, fasting was a means of self-purification and an opportunity for reflection. However, he undertook it in general interest. From 1908 to 1942, Gandhi was jailed 15 times, including six times in South Africa. For him, imprisonment "was a basic part of his doctrine of non-cooperation" (Fischer [1950] 1989, 260). A spiritual man open to all religions, Gandhi remained a Hindu, although in South Africa his Christian friends tried their best to convert him. But it may be remembered that he hardly knew about Hinduism when he first came to London in 1888. In 1909, his first biographer, the Reverend Joseph J. Doke(1861-1913), a Baptist missionary based in Johannesburg, pointed out that Gandhi's "sympathies are so wide and Catholic that one would imagine he has reached a point where the formulae of sects are meaningless...There was a quiet assured strength about him, a greatness of heart, a transparent sincerity, that attracted me at once to the Indian leader"(Doke 1967, 6-9).

The scholar and aristocrat Jawaharlal Nehru, who became India's first Prime Minister(1947-1964), observed: "I have been attracted by Gandhiji's stress on right means and I think one of the greatest contributions to our public life has been this emphasis. The idea is by no means new, but this application of an ethical doctrine to large-scale public activity was certainly novel. It is full of difficulty, and perhaps ends and means are not really separable but form together one

organic whole"(Nehru 1991, 28).

As early as in 1924, a renowned French scholar and the Nobel Prize winner (Literature) in 1915, Romain Rolland (1866-1944), wrote about the Mahatma, "One thing is certain, either Gandhi's spirit will triumph, or it will manifest again as were manifested centuries before, the Messiah and the Buddha"(Nanda 1985, vii).

The world's most famous physicist, philosopher and humanitarian, Albert Einstein (1879-1955), born a German Jew, later an American citizen, observed about Gandhi on his 75th birthday in 1944: "Generations to come, it may be noted, will scarcely believe that such a one as this ever in flesh and blood walked upon this earth." For him, as he also remarked in a broadcast on 18 June 1950, "Gandhi held the most enlightened views of all the political men in our time" (Anand 2006, x).

Further, B.R. Nanda, the biographer of Mahatma Gandhi, commented thus on the Mahatma: "Gandhi had to contend not only with the guardians of the British Empire. He never lacked opponents in his own country and indeed in his own party. He was the 'bête noire' of orthodox Hindus who were infuriated by his denunciation of caste exclusiveness and untouchability and by his advocacy of secular politics. In the course of his Harijan tour, he narrowly escaped a bomb attack in Poona in 1934; 14 years later he fell a victim of the bullets of a Poona Brahmin who charged him with betrayal of the Hindu cause. Curiously enough, for years Gandhi had been branded as 'the Enemy

Number One of Islam”(Nanda 1985, vii-viii) by proponents of Pakistan.

For his popular Salt March, the decisive start(12 March 1930) of his campaign for the end of British rule in India, Gandhi had copies of the Bible distributed among his followers(Dukhira 2012). Under his leadership, the freedom struggle produced distinguished patriots, men and women, from all the social strata and across India, displaying, as never before, their distinctive gifts and capabilities. Such a patriotic infusion is perhaps unprecedented. No other leader of India had such a huge following of youth who never hesitated to obey his orders. As called by him, thousands of such youngsters courted jail, patriotically undergoing innumerable sacrifices and pains(Dukhira 2012).

In his religious and political views he stood for concrete goals. But his vision was all embracing. He fought against the British, but they were not his enemies. He had many English friends and he never hated the British. He was a committed Hindu, who was inspired by Islam and Christianity. At times he criticized Christianity, but he loved many aspects of Christian religion. In short, he embraced all religions and was firmly rooted in his own. He lived and died for India and was open to all political and national identities. He truly loved the world. So he can be called a “world citizen.”

IV. Gandhi as the Hero for Global Citizenship

Inspired by Gandhi, we can reflect on practicing citizenship in our contemporary situation. A broad outline for it is given by Arthur Clark(2010) in his *The ABCs of Human Survival*. In this insightful and provocative book he looks on global citizenship as the means for the survival of humanity and the whole world. He looks into the need and means for such a practice.

“Today we are beyond the age when less mature forms of citizenship were acceptable. We know too much: we cannot claim ignorance as an excuse for persisting in old patterns of behavior and avoiding the responsibility that our epoch places before us.

Practicing citizenship requires awareness, including self-awareness. Individually and as a global community we must wake up.... Practicing citizenship requires imagination and knowledge. It requires goal-directed and evidence-based new learning. Basic and continuing education is as important to the practice of citizenship as it is to the practice of medicine..... Practicing citizenship requires connections. Not only is responsible citizenship directed toward fostering healthy community; to be successful, it requires community.”

Clark holds that practicing citizenship requires active, creative engagement: problem solving and innovative action advancing the health of the local and global communities. Another goal of that creative engagement is personal growth, empowerment, and well-being.

In practice, these are natural consequences of this creative engagement. We

empower ourselves and promote our own well-being as we work toward empowerment and well-being of others(Clark 2010).

In novels, stories, films, our globalized culture, like every other earlier culture, has been fascinated with the hero or an idol. The meaning and significance of a hero been taken up by many thinkers. As human beings we have been doing this for millennia. In his classic study of myth and hero, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, Joseph Campbell (1949) seeks to understand the essence of the hero as he or she appears in each epoch. Campbell comes to conclusions that differ significantly from the “myth of the hero” as a means of denying death. Instead of denying mortality, the hero must pass through a fully human struggle with limitations and full awareness of approaching death. The end of all that searching brings the hero to a transcendent vision for rebirth of his or her society and culture. And having made the arduous journey, the hero’s second task is to convey that vision to the world. In the concluding section of his book, entitled “The Hero Today,” Clark(2010) notes that Campbell comes very close to describing the work of the global citizen:

The community today is the planet, not the bounded nation; hence the patterns of projected aggression which formerly served to co-ordinate the in-group now can only break it into factions. The national idea, with the flag as totem, is today an aggrandizer of the nursery ego, not the annihilator of an infantile situation.... And the numerous saints of this anti-cult — namely the patriots whose ubiq-

uitous photographs, draped with flags, serve as official icons — are precisely the local threshold guardians ... whom it is the first problem of the hero to surpass(Campbell 1949, 388-389).

Through our own efforts toward self-actualization, each of us can bring a unique gift to the world. The process of discovering and developing the unique potential that is within each of us is essential to the practice of responsible global citizenship. The hero is not someone out there, remote and exalted, but a possibility within ourselves(Clark 2010).

In this sense of Campbell, Mahatma Gandhi could very well be considered as the hero of our times for world citizenship.⁴⁾ As a hero he becomes an idol or ideal towards which the others can look up to. As a hero Gandhi becomes an inspiration, which will guide the lives of contemporary global citizen. As a hero Gandhi may not offer us concrete blue-prints to live as a global citizen, but he opens up horizons from which we can creatively realize our own global citizenship.

V. Conclusion

Though the notion of global citizenship was not prevalent in his times, we can easily claim that Gandhi was truly a global citizen. His vision, commitment and life-style indicate that. The way he worked hard to uplift people from all ways of life, his spirit of embrac-

4) Elsewhere I have tried to show that Gandhi could be considered as myth for the contemporary persons(Pandikattu2001).

ing the good in every religion, his openness to diverse political views or opinions and his ability to reach out to his enemies and rivals make him an idol or hero of global citizenship.

Though he was rooted in his tradition, culture and religion, he truly belong to the world. As an inspirational icon for global citizenship, Gandhi's life and message is a call to become aware of the global challenges we face. His ideals and way of life – *ahimsa* and *satyagraha* – tells us that we have the cultural, religious and human resources to deal with the life-threatening crisis facing us. Can we collectively tap these rich resources so that we can collaborate in building a more humane and collaborative global citizenship?

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