



## **GANDHI: A LIFE BEYOND THE ICON AND ICONOGRAPHY**

---

**Phaguni Bist**

Junior Research Fellow, Department of English,

Mehr Chand Mahajan DAV College for Women, Sector 36-A, Chandigarh

---

### **Abstract:**

Gandhi and his persona have continued to be a source of inspiration as well as a challenge in the circles of academia. His ideals are articulated through various icons that he has come to be associated with. These icons, which are an insignia of his fundamental principles and what he has deeply believed in, have been employed by various agencies either for convenience or out of true veneration. However, the symbols that Gandhi has come to stand for necessitate a look beyond the gaze of such icons.

This paper will enquire into those ideas which have been predominantly overshadowed by the few overused icons. This imbalance in the use of icons whether deliberate or inadvertent, has subdued certain concepts related to Gandhian ideology, like his views on educating masses, welfare of women, role of dietetics and propriety for the larger good of society. Thus, while inspecting the icons and iconography of Gandhi, the paper shall probe into his lesser discussed yet potent views. Also it shall bring out the significance of such beliefs in contemporary situation.

**Key Words:** Icon, *Satyagraha*, *Brahmacharya*, *Ahimsa*, Dietetics, Contemporary Relevance

*Today I am a back number. I have been told I have no place in the new order, where we want machines, navy, air force and what not. I can never be party to that. If you can have the courage to say that you will retain freedom with the help of the same force with which you have won it, I am your man.* (Penguin Gandhi Reader, pp 279)

These were the words of Mahatma Gandhi in the year 1947 that expressed his disavowal with the path that the country had embarked upon under its newly independent stance.

Gandhi was a visionary whose vision was deeply rooted in the concept of human ethics and harmonious existence of humankind. Even as a child he was extremely contemplative and observant of the smallest details around him. His actions were always in consonance with his inner being which unfailingly clung upon the inherent truth as the supreme guiding force. But this so called inherent truth did not come to him in quite the manner that has been taught, spoken of and explained to us. The icon of truth that is ossified in the meta-narrative of Gandhi, had rather taken years of experiences for him to understand its importance and to enunciate it.

The significance of Gandhi as an icon has never ceased to entreat the scholars and now that the warp and weft of his principles have succumbed to ambiguity, it has become indispensable to unravel the enigma behind Gandhi's icons and his iconography. The predicament faced by his icons today seems to be a result of their lopsided usage and selective inference. An attempt will be made in this paper to introduce some of his highly celebrated icons along with their corollaries that have been blurred and relegated to the background. Also, the paper shall attempt to bring out their relevance in the present scenario; hence un-freezing the gaze and probing the icons beyond the icons.

Hailed globally, Gandhi is endorsed as the silhouetted lean, humped man, bent on his staff and walking on foot; he is seen wrapped in his half-nakedness and principles and values that seem larger than life, larger indeed, than even the icon himself. Being a true *Satyagrahi*, and an epitome of non-violence, he dauntlessly fought against the wrongs in public sphere and passively resisted the power regime. This very mode of *Satyagraha* as a means to fight passively is the first tenet of Gandhi's notion of *Ahimsa*, for his *Satyagraha* meant "the force which is born of truth and love or non-violence"<sup>1</sup>. The genesis of *Satyagraha* as a movement began with the need to coin a new word denoting this peculiar strife as it was found out that the "English phrase 'passive resistance' was too narrowly construed" and connected too profoundly in most minds as being, "a weapon of the weak, that it could be characterised by hatred, and that it could finally manifest itself as violence", and therefore Gandhi had to "demur all these statements and explain the true nature of the Indian movement"<sup>2</sup>. This need of correct nomenclature was an integral part of his visionary goal to disseminate correct knowledge- an important facet of *Satyagraha*.

The necessity for bringing awareness among the people and their cognizance of the issues around them clearly dawned upon Gandhi at an early point during his rush for reforms and desire to bring a socio-political change in pre-independent India. One of the major pitfalls in this direction was what he called the

---

<sup>1</sup> G, Tendulkar. *Mahatma: Life of Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi*. Bombay, 1951, vol. 8, pp.103.

<sup>2</sup> Gandhi, M.K. *The Story Of My Experiments With Truth*. Translated by Mahadev Desai. Fingerprint Publishing, pp. 287.

‘Himalayan miscalculation’<sup>3</sup>. The premature call for disobedience during the Kheda *Satyagraha* and its ramifications led to the understanding that the *Satyagraha* or any sort of resistance cannot be and should not be undertaken till the time the people involved in it are fully aware of its implications. The first and foremost requirement is that, “only when a person has thus obeyed the laws of society scrupulously that he is in a position to judge as to which particular rules are good and just and which unjust and iniquitous”<sup>4</sup> and therefore “before one can fight for the practice of civil disobedience one must have rendered a willing and respectful obedience to the State Laws”<sup>5</sup>.

This illumination is a particular inference when we look at the state of affairs around us today. The unflinching and ever suggestion-ready mob carrying out protests on the streets, railing under the mask of dissent, leading to a near anarchy situation, is hardly informed about the cause and effect of such agitations. Even after so much has been achieved in the field of media and sovereign journalism, we are still faced with a majority of our population which is unaware of the policies that are made and how they are beneficial for the concerned sections. This ignorance is something that Gandhi wanted to curb under the premise of *Satyagraha* and his imaginative ‘Ideal State’ -which he called an “enlightened anarchy”- also echoed the same when he wrote to Jawaharlal Nehru saying “In this village of my dreams the villager will not be dull- he will be all awareness. He will not live like an animal in filth and darkness.”<sup>6</sup> For this very purpose he thought it to be necessary “to create a band of well-versed, pure-hearted volunteers who thoroughly understood the strict conditions of *Satyagraha*” and therefore who “could explain these to people, and by sleepless vigilance keep them on the right path”<sup>7</sup>. Gandhi’s call for a tenacious attempt for unhindered reach to the masses is very much applicable today when the collaboration of masses with the government can act as a catalyst in creating a harmonious existence. The people are required to be rightly informed about the rights that they extract from the State and about their duties to the State in return- a balance of awareness, obeisance and public opinion, which Gandhi always sought to achieve through his *Satyagraha* discourse.

While the icon of *Satyagraha* aimed at acquainting the masses with the system and its nuances, the icon of *Ahimsa* was ironically a tinderbox, which had unleashed massive nationalistic and highly motivated forces back in time. I call it a tinderbox as the masses convened under its doctrine of sanctified non-violence often succumbed to violence in the end. The iteration of Gandhi’s name by the mob carrying out carnage at Chauri-Chaura, is one of the incidents which exemplified such a misinterpretation. This misgiving on the

---

<sup>3</sup> Term was mentioned in his autobiography. Ch. 33

<sup>4</sup> Gandhi, M.K. *The Story Of My Experiments With Truth*. Translated by Mahadev Desai. Fingerprint Publishing, 2009 Pp.418

<sup>5</sup> Ibid. Pp. 417.

<sup>6</sup> Gandhi, M.K. *The Moral and Political Writings of Mahatma Gandhi*. Edited by Raghavan Narsumhan Iyer. Oxford University Press, 1986. Vol.1. p 286.

<sup>7</sup> Gandhi, M.K. *The Story Of My Experiments With Truth*. Translated by Mahadev Desai. Fingerprint Publishing, 2009.Pp. 418.

part of *Ahimsa's* meaning was always owned by Gandhi and carried on his emaciated shoulders. But it never deterred him from bearing the torch of his beliefs even in the face of storms. "Non-violence", he was to say in his speech at his first trial in 1923, "is the first article of my faith. It is also the last article of my creed"<sup>8</sup>. While the connotations of *Ahimsa* are not only limited to direct extraneous physical aspects; even the intrinsic kernel of truth and strength embedded in it is waiting to be released from its state of inertia. The correct understanding of this icon along with its overdue execution in the current scenario of extreme violence is required when the pogrom on the borders, within the country, on the streets, and within the homes, all scream out for the same panacea- *Ahimsa*. But the Mahatma knew it better than anyone else that it is far easier to discuss about it than to practise it. Therefore, he grappled with various tools to administer this cure in its most effective manner, and the tools that he thus ascribed to were the inexorable icons of *Brahamacharya* and fasting. Therefore, to contemplate *Ahimsa*, we must understand what Gandhi's *Brahamacharya* is and how he situated it in a society dimmed with retrograde customs and sexual prejudices. Also, an exploration of how fasting and dietetics are associated with it is required.

For Gandhi, *Brahamacharya* was "not mere mechanical celibacy", but rather "complete control over the senses and freedom from lust in thought, word and deed"<sup>9</sup>. Gandhi employed this tool initially for personal reasons but later extended its function to emancipate women, address the public and to bring reforms in India's political, social and religious fields.

Beginning with the aim to confront the innuendos of religious texts and later on taking women out of domestic prisons and bringing them to the national forefront, Gandhi employed the *brahmachari's* garb quite eclectically. The icon of *Brahamacharya* highlighted the role of continence in men and eschewed the false manly dominance that only added to the discourse of regressive nationalism- a highly toxic phenomenon that we are facing worldwide today. Gandhi deliberately exposed a man's lack of virtuousness and held men accountable for their own projections of lust onto women. The *Brahamacharya* manifested by Gandhi was contrary to the conventional ascetic who was misogynist and dismissive of women as mere temptresses; rather he claimed man to be the "tempter and aggressor"<sup>10</sup>. So, his *Brahamacharya* denounced the demeaning and unwarranted stereotypes and revamped asceticism to being inclusive and friendly so as to eradicate sex segregation and to expose the virtues of womanhood otherwise tainted by the man's compulsive desires. The latent violence that women were subjected to owed much to the convoluted societal set up. To overcome this Gandhi adopted unorthodox methods for his practice and took a *sanyasi's*

---

<sup>8</sup> Mukherjee, Rudrangshu (ed). *The Great Speeches of Modern India*. Random House India, 2007. Pp. 80-85.

<sup>9</sup> Gandhi, M.K. *CWMG*. Vol.30, pp. 235.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid*. Vol. 63, pp 196.

authoritative liberty to re-interpret religious texts and pejorative customs. Like a psychologist, Gandhi made an analogous remark saying “A man striving for success in *Brahmacharya* suffers pain as a woman does in labour”<sup>11</sup>. This metaphorical statement using female corporeal to contemplate a man’s ordeal during celibacy was made to throw light upon the obscured pains that women go through in their lives. Even though Gandhi faced much insinuation regarding his bizarre practice and ideas relating to *Brahmacharya* but these acts were highly purposive as they elaborated on the misconstrued image of women in and by our society. Steps taken by him under the institution of *Brahmacharya* were pertinent in taking the country out of the dungeon of redundant and obscure traditions. But, irrespective of his efforts, these factors are still alive in our country. The stature given to women is still tainted with the disparagement enshrined in ancient texts like Manu Smriti, and the intellect of a female child still gropes in the dark womb of uncertainty. Hence, the praxis of Gandhi’s *Brahmacharya* obligates an indisputable need to be incorporated in modern India so as to realise the full potential of its modernity.

Extending the premise of *Brahmacharya* to the economy and methods of dietetics and how they are related, we come to the aspect of fasting in the Gandhian iconography. Initially bound by the mother’s vow, Gandhi unfailingly stuck to the strictest definition of vegetarianism throughout his life. The covenant regarding food, its properties and its regulation, gradually metamorphosed into a strong tool of fasting that he used for both- against the foreign rule and for the benefit of his own countrymen. Gandhi discovered that it is indispensable for a person under the vow of celibacy to practice control over one’s palate. The idea permeated within dietetics is to lead to the cleansing of thoughts along with the body. Gandhi gave a special place to fasting as a method to overcome the desire for pleasure and the aim of fasting was to become more satiated than being restrained from fulfilment. But more than anything else it had a pragmatic value that gave Gandhi a vantage point. Fasting along with celibacy had a mass appeal which was ingeniously used by him to reach the vast population irrespective of their caste, class and gender. These two practices became an inherent base to achieve reformation through *Ahimsa*. It also gave Gandhi a sacrosanct authority to challenge people directly and to chide them for their wrong attitudes. This power of Gandhi upon the people made his reforms become a part of the people’s reality in contrast to the legislative reforms brought out by many eminent reformers of the time.

Such empirical groundwork is what accords relevance to these icons beyond their perceptive meaning of mere abstinence from sex which is ‘*Brahmacharya*’, and abstinence from food being ‘Dietetics’. In the present times when we are facing the problem of wastage of resources vis-à-vis plague of malnutrition, the

---

<sup>11</sup> Alter, Joseph S. *Gandhi’s Body: Sex, Diet, and the Politics of Nationalism (Critical Histories)*. University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000. Pp 27

idea of optimum consumption of food while eradicating ailments of mind and body seems like a lock and key solution. The power of fasting is not only limited to manipulating the structural regimes or inciting penance inward or outward; it rather delivers to us the potency of food and its regulation. The latency behind Gandhian dietetic can be utilised to achieve a state of optimal consumption, creating a balance between the natural resources and their usage, and hence reducing the unnecessary wasteful practices.

Apart from the environmental application *Brahmacharya* and dietetics can help in personifying the traits that are a pre-requisite for what Gandhi hailed as *Swaraj* whose literal translation means 'self rule'. In his book *Hind Swaraj*, written by Gandhi in Gujarati and also translated by him, he assertively said that each person should be capable of self rule and that "*Swaraj* has to be experienced by each one for himself".<sup>12</sup> This cry for *Swaraj* was basically an end product of Gandhi's own self realisation and self control that he entreated the masses also to achieve. However, the icon of *Swaraj* was not a simple one. It was densely packed with protocols on part of individuals and hence liable to be misunderstood. Gandhi continually struggled in the face of politicising of the masses against his quest for *Swaraj*. If this may be the only teaching that we could learn from his life, it might lead the modern generations towards the ideal state that remained unfulfilled in the heart of the Mahatma. His experiences were lived and tested by him and he urged everyone to exercise them to enjoy a near utopic state. The tapestry of his *Ahimsa*, *Satyagraha* and *Swaraj* is intricately woven with these threads of internal virtues like *Brahamacharya*, dietetics and sobriety that might not seem big but which together make the icon of Mahatma come alive as we see him. His methods might seem as slow as the act of walking by a bony man with wrinkled face and spidery limbs but in effect they prove to be as fast and feasible as his sagacious mind and nimble steps. To emulate his celebrated icons along with their corollaries is something that the human race still has to master and their utility in contemporary times is crying out for their prudent following.

---

<sup>12</sup> Mukherjee, Rudranshu, ed. *The Penguin Gandhi Reader*. Penguin India, 2010. pp 37-38