
Leadership is not a destination but a place to come from Gandhi's contribution to evolutionary excellence

Ramnath Narayanswamy

Economics and Social Science Area,
Indian Institute of Management,
Bannerghatta Road,
Bangalore 560076, India
Email: ram123@iimb.ernet.in

Abstract: In this paper, we make an attempt to advance the ingredients that come together to inform an Indian perspective on leadership derived from indigenous knowledge traditions. In doing so, we draw from the life of Mahatma Gandhi the spiritual principles that he sought to base his political engagement for India's independence from British rule. We are persuaded to the view that the Mahatmas practice was profoundly informed by the spiritual principles he espoused and there is much to be gained on a specifically Indian conception of leadership from understanding that dialectic.

Keywords: leadership; Gandhi; India; spirituality; Sanatana Dharma.

Reference to this paper should be made as follows: Narayanswamy, R. (2016) 'Leadership is not a destination but a place to come from Gandhi's contribution to evolutionary excellence', *Int. J. Complexity in Leadership and Management*, Vol. 3, No. 4, pp.278–283.

Biographical notes: Ramnath Narayanswamy is a Professor in the Economics and Social Sciences Area in the Indian Institute of Management, Bangalore. His areas of interest include business and society, spirituality and self development and leadership development and creativity and innovation. He is completing a volume on *Management Insights from Indian Spirituality: Investigations from the Epics for Managers*.

1 Introduction

"You must be the change you wish to see in the world." Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi

In this paper, we make an attempt to advance the ingredients that come together to inform an Indian perspective on leadership derived from indigenous knowledge traditions. I am not sure there is something called Indian leadership but I believe we can legitimately speak of an 'Indian way of doing things'. Similarly, I am unsure whether there is a body of theory and practice called 'Indian management' than I am about the practice of 'managing in India'. In what follows, we distil some thoughts on the former from the latter.

In doing so, we draw from the life of Mahatma Gandhi the spiritual principles that he sought to base his political engagement for India's independence from British rule. We

are persuaded to the view that the Mahatma's practice was profoundly informed by the spiritual principles he espoused and there is much to be gained on a specifically Indian conception of leadership from understanding that dialectic.

These principles included universal equality, *satyagraha* on holding on to truth, abrogation of violence in any form and embracing respect for life or *ahimsa*, the purpose of life lies in discovering the divinity within, individual freedom coupled with selfless service, the means being more important than ends howsoever noble the latter might be, the desirability of being guided by intuition and that social change can and must be brought about by changing the heart. Before we do that however, it might be useful to point to a few fundamental differences between the western and eastern ways of appropriating reality.

Service to man in the western tradition is viewed as noble by and for itself while in the Indian tradition, service to man becomes service to God only when such service is sanctified by the Grace of a self-realised master and is carried with no reference to either 'I' or 'mine'. For service to be effective and worthy of being offered to the divine, it must be egoless and performed as an offering to the Supreme Being. The distinction is an important one. As Gandhi expressed it: "there comes a time when an individual becomes irresistible and his action becomes all-pervasive in its effect. This comes when he reduces himself to zero" [Easwaran, (1997), p.114].

Among other reasons, this perhaps explains why leadership in the Indian context would be intimately connected with spirituality. Indeed the two are inseparable. This is because the traditions of Sanatana Dharma (incorrectly described as Hinduism) distinguish between an inner world and an outer world. The focus of religion is upon the outer world, while the focus of spirituality is upon the inner world. Leadership ideally consists in engaging the imperfection of the outer world by experiencing the perfection of the inner world (Narayanswamy, 2014) In other words, it is not enough to be merely *religious* (following the rules of engagement on the outside) but it is equally important to become *spiritual* (elevate inner engagement by transcending all religious boundaries and realise transcendental knowledge through experience). The outer must give way to the inner and religion must yield place to spirituality. Otherwise religion has not accomplished its purpose.

In this text, I therefore advance the view that Indian spirituality, philosophy, religion, culture and parenting exercises a profound influence upon Indian leadership behaviour and this in turn has certainly impacted and that these influences considered has significantly shaped the Indian mind and approach to leadership behaviour in various spheres of Indian society including education, family, politics, enterprise and society.

I have chosen to use Gandhi because more than any other personality, he helped to shape leadership thinking in the Indian context both before and after independence. He was profoundly rooted in India's culture and civilisation and his political practice was informed by India's spiritual traditions. Indeed his politics was always informed by his understanding of religion and spirituality. His influence on leadership thinking in the Indian context is therefore considerable and relevant. Before we consider some aspects of that heritage, it is perhaps pertinent to ask: What is religion and how can it be distinguished from spirituality?

It is precisely this distinction that was so well encapsulated by Swami Vivekananda when he said it was a great blessing to be born into a religion, but a great curse to die in one, that is to say, if religion has not taught the seeker to rise above its limitations to embrace spirituality, then that religion has been a waste of time for the seeker¹.

Accordingly, the purpose of life in Indian spirituality is essentially spiritual: to accomplish self-realisation not in the abstract but in the here or now. From an Indian point of view it is essential that outer world engagement is in harmony with conquering the inner world. The outside must be negotiated from the inside. Sanatana Dharma is perhaps the only free market religion known to humankind as it is explicitly located in the belief that each individual has to paraphrase Joseph Campbell, “find his own bliss”. No other religion is able to accommodate such multiple yet seemingly contradictory paths to self-realisation.

It seems to me that a few words of explanation on the concept of the Guru is essential to understand why in India leadership would be primarily viewed and experienced as an inner journey rather than an external one. The Guru stands for the Supreme Being who in reality is formless. He is called by many names but He is in reality the one without the second. He is devoid of name, form and attributes (*nirguna*). He assumes form (*saguna*) usually as an avatar or incarnation out of His infinite compassion and appears to the seeker as a Guru to help the seeker pull his internal Guru to himself [Narayanswamy, (2014), pp.166–168].

The Guru is therefore none other than the Supreme Being who exists in the hearts of all living beings. He resides in every living being. The Guru enters the life of the seeker to help the seeker meet his inner self and understand his real identity: God becomes man in order to make man understand that he is no different from God, a notion that would be received with some degree of suspicion, incredulity and alarm from those belonging to the Abrahamic religions where God is manifestly distinct from His creation. It is this relentless search for the divinity obtaining within that is the ultimate purpose of spiritual practice.

In a similar vein, Sanatana Dharma also distinguishes between two kinds of education. The first is education that is focused upon understanding the outer world that may be described as ‘education for a living,’ and the other called inner education that is focused upon ‘education for life’. The former is the scaffolding, the latter is the foundation. The first is important for eking out a living, while the second is critical to realising the purpose of human life: self-realisation. A life that is not consciously focused upon self-awakening therefore misses the point and fails to grasp the gift of human birth².

These three factors contribute to creating an inner ingredient in addressing the challenge of leadership in the Indian context. Contributing selflessly to promote harmony by adhering to *satyam* or truth and *dharma* or righteousness must go hand in hand with the task of self-revelation. In contrast to the western tradition where external accountability structures (such as peer pressure) seek to promote efficiency and performance, internal accountability mechanisms (such as an innate desire to excel in the journey of leadership development or be in harmony with inherited spiritual beliefs) would play a primary role in the Indian context.

This is well illustrated in the life of Mahatma Gandhi to whom being religious was at once to be spiritual. The Mahatma’s life in its entirety and not just his politics was influenced by two major texts including the Bhagavad Gita and the Sermon on the Mount. This is why he said that those who say religion has nothing to do with politics do not know what religion is. The Bhagavad Gita according to Gandhi was “not about violence but non-violence ... (it) wants us to be incapable of anger...The Gita is the universal mother. She turns nobody away. Her doors are wide open to anybody who knocks ... I find solace in the Bhagavad Gita that I miss even in the Sermon on the Mount” [Gandhi, (1981a), p.274].

“When disappointment states at me in the face and all alone I see not one ray of light, I go back to the Bhagavad Gita. The author of the Mahabharata has not established the necessity of physical warfare; on the contrary, he has proved its futility. He has made the victors shed tears of sorrow and repentance and has left them with nothing but a legacy of miseries.” (Gandhi, 1981b)

“The Sermon on the Mount”, said Gandhi, “went straight into my heart”. To Gandhi, Jesus “was the greatest passive resister the world has seen”. But Gandhi’s inference was however his very own: “spirituality that has no bearing on and produces no effect on everyday life is an airy nothing” [Gandhi, (1948), p.615]. And to Christian missionaries who wanted him to admit that it was the presence of Christ that guided him, he replied:

“If you mean the historical Jesus, then I feel no such presence. But if you mean a Spirit guiding me, nearer than the hands and feet, nearer than the very breath of me, then I do feel such a Presence. Had it not been for this presence, the waters of the Ganges would have long before been my destruction. You may call it Christ or Krishna that does not matter to me.” (Narayanswamy, 2010)

And again

“The Gita has been a mother to me ever since I first became acquainted with it in 1889. I turn to it for guidance in every difficulty, and the desired guidance has always been forthcoming. But you must approach Mother Gita in all reverence, if you would benefit by her ministrations. On who rests his head on her peace-loving lap never experiences disappointment but enjoys bliss in perfection. This spiritual mother gives her devotees fresh knowledge, hope and power every moment of his life.” [Easwaran, (1997), p.106]

Leadership – in the Gandhian scheme of things – is above all about internal transformation accomplished by adhering to truth, non-violence and righteousness. They are its essential weapons. As Gandhi expressed it: “truth resides in every human heart and one has to search for it there and to be guided by truth as one sees it. But no one has a right to coerce others to act according to his own view of truth” [Easwaran, (1997), p.47].

The Mahatma emphasised the cardinal truth that hatred kills but love heals: “Satyagraha is gentle, it never wounds. It must not be the result of anger or malice. It is never fussy, never impatient, never vociferous. It is the direct opposite of compulsion. It was conceived as a complete substitute for violence” [Easwaran, (1997), op.cit., p.54].

Secondly, leadership and spirituality are closely intertwined. In consonance with the Hindu view that the world is an undivided collective family, Gandhi said: “I believe that if one man gains spiritually the whole world gains with him, and if one man falls, the whole world falls to that extent. I do not help opponents without at the same time helping myself and my co-workers” [Easwaran, (1997), op.cit., p.75]. The world is elevated the triumph of truth and righteousness and diminished when they are transgressed.

Thirdly, non-violence assumed the status of an unalterable law: “Have I that nonviolence of the brave in me? My death alone will show that. If someone killed me and I died with prayer for the assassin on my lips and God’s remembrance and consciousness of His living presence in the sanctuary of my heart, then alone would I be said to have the non-violence of the brave” [Easwaran, (1997), p.101]. As it happened, the words proved prophetic. The Mahatma was shot with the name of God on his lips.

And finally, his enduring contribution lay in being “an uncompromising opponent of violent methods even to serve the noblest of causes” [Dalton, (2000), p.91]. He argued that the means are actually ends; it is critical that the graciousness and dignity of the means overshadows the nobility of the ends. This meant – in sharp contrast to

Machiavelli – that the means do not justify the ends and if the means adopted are harmful then they desecrate the nobility of the ends [Dalton, (2000), pp.63–85]. Herein lay his genius³.

The key to Gandhi's understanding of self-transformation lies in the last eighteen verses of the sacred Gita which to him contain the secret of the art of living:

“He lives in wisdom who seeks himself in all and all in him, whose love for the Lord of Love has consumed every selfish desire and sense-craving tormenting the heart. Not agitated by grief, nor hankering after pleasure, he lives free from lust and fear and anger, fettered no more by selfish attachments, he is not elated by good fortune nor depressed by bad...He is forever free who has broken out of the ego-cage of I and mine to be united with the Lord of Love. This is the supreme state. Attain thou this and pass from death to immortality.” [Easwaran, (1997), pp.121–122]

These lines capture the essence of the Mahatma's practice. He believed that the gift of life was granted to human beings to realise themselves and strove relentlessly to translate that principle into reality. According to his own admission, he meditated on the Gita twice a day for over fifty years integrating their lessons into his actions. They contain the fundamental elements of his self-transformation. Its powerful impact on leadership thinking, globally and locally, has been vast and enduring.

India since independence might be said to have undergone four relatively distinct cultural phases. The early twentieth century was dominated by the inauguration of a special non-traditional form of modernity exemplified in the works of Sarat Chandra and Rabindranath Tagore. The advent of Gandhi into the nationalist movement witnessed a shift to a model that might be termed traditional and unmodern. Subscribing to the Hindu view of the world where the secret of happiness lay in limiting desire, Gandhi's economics was focused on limited consumption coupled with simple living and high thinking. The early decades of independence were dominated by the Nehru model which was explicitly non-traditional and modern. Nehru genuinely believed industries to be the temples of modern India but was limited by his Fabian socialist heritage that saw profits as a dirty word. The introduction of industrial liberalisation in the nineties and India's subsequent attempt to integrate her economy into the international mainstream has once again witnessed a shift to a model that is neither strictly traditional nor strictly modern.

But since the liberalisation of the Indian economy since the nineties had witnessed a sharp rise in consumerism and has whetted the appetite of the Indian middle class. Yet modern India continues to negotiate the two poles of tradition and modernity without tilting the stick excessively in either direction. The process is not without its tensions but they are not of an order that threatens the social fabric.

There is today an unexpected resurgence of Gandhian ideas in the recognition that we are living in a world where resources are severely limited and cannot be easily replenished, the spinning of yarn today acquires special significance it is beneficial for the planet, restricting the mindless consumerism of industrial societies has today become an urgent need and more than ever before do the means need to be accorded primacy over ends. The cry for sustainability reverberates the world over as humankind grapples with the fact that we live in a world where resources are not infinite and not all of them are necessarily replenishable.

As two scholars noted:

“And India, under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi, not only recovered hope for herself; she became a source of hope for the rest of the world. After

Mahatma Gandhi, India has once again strayed from the path. It is primarily for India and Indians now to be true to the Mahatma, to recover their faith and return to the path of Sanatana Dharma. By being thus true to herself, India shall also be true to the world and fulfil her destined role. This is the lesson that Mahatma Gandhi has taught India. And, his lesson remains perpetually relevant.” (Bajaj and Srinivas, 2000)

References

- [online] <http://www.goodreads.com/quotes/24499-be-the-change-that-you-wish-to-see-in-the>.
- Bajaj, J.K. and Srinivas, M.D. (2000) *Relevance of Mahatma Gandhi and his Thought in Modern Times*, Center for Policy Research, Chennai.
- Dalton, D. (2000) ‘Gandhi’s originality’, in Parel, A.J. (Ed.): *Gandhi, Freedom and Self Rule*, Vistaar Publications, New Delhi.
- Easwaran, E. (1997) *Gandhi the Man*, Jaico Publishing House, Mumbai.
- Gandhi, M.K. (1948) *The Story of my Experiments with Truth*, Navajivan Publishing house, Ahmedabad.
- Gandhi, M.K. (1981a) ‘Young India: a weekly journal, August 6, 1925’, in *Young India 1919–1931*, Vol. 4, p.274, Navajivan Publishing House, Ahmedabad.
- Gandhi, M.K. (1981b) ‘Young India: a weekly journal, August 6, 1931’, in *Young India 1919–1931*, Vol. 5, Navajivan Publishing House, Ahmedabad.
- Murphett, H. (1978) *Sai Baba Avatar*, Macmillan India Limited, Chennai.
- Narayanswamy, R. (2010) ‘Spiritual capital, Gandhi and interfaith harmony’, in Clammer, J. (Ed.): *Socially Engaged Religions*, pp.174–197, Books for Change, Bangalore.
- Narayanswamy, R. (2012) *Living from the Inside*, Vols. 1, 2 and 3, Aridra Books, Bangalore.
- Narayanswamy, R. (2014) *The Global Mission of Sadguru Sri Sharavana Baba*, Aridra Books, Bangalore.
- Yatiswarananda, S. (2011) *Essentials of Spiritual Life*, Sri Ramakrishna Math, Chennai.

Notes

- 1 The late Sri Sathya Sai Baba expressed a similar sentiment: “it is good to be born into a church, but it is not good to die in it. Grow and rescue yourselves from limits and regulations, the doctrines that fence your freedom of thought, the ceremonials and rites that restrict and direct. Reach the point where churches do not matter, where all roads end, from where all roads run. Pardon the other man’s faults but deal harshly with your own” [Murphett (1978), p.265]. For the reference to Swami’s Vivekananda’s observation, see [Yatiswarananda, (2011), p.62].
- 2 I call myself a Sanatani Hindu, because:
 - a I believe in the Vedas, the Upanishads, the Puranas and all that goes by the name of Hindu scriptures, and therefore in avatars and rebirth
 - b I believe in the varnashrama dharma in a sense in my opinion strictly Vedic but not in its present popular and crude sense
 - c I believe in the protection of the cow in its much larger sense than the popular
 - d I do not disbelieve in idol-worship.
- 3 Gandhi once listed the seven deadly sins to include acquiring wealth without work, partaking of pleasure without conscience, having knowledge without character, engage in commerce without morality, pursuing science without humanity, following religion without sacrifice and indulging in politics without principles.