

If Gandhi were alive today

Considering his view of politics, he would have privileged civic virtue in elections



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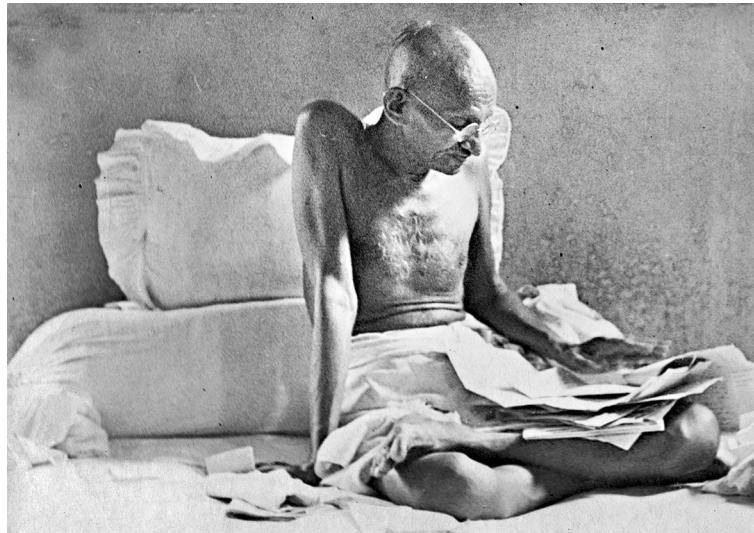
With the election season getting all the attention, I wonder whether Mahatma Gandhi would have participated in the election had he been alive. One thing is evident today: while Gandhi is hailed as the founding father of the Indian republic and one of the architects of democratic politics in modern India, it is not recognised equally well today that we can draw valuable lessons of political action and democracy from him. However, it goes without saying that Gandhi is perhaps more relevant now than ever before for our understanding of elections, at a time when India finds itself at a crossroads between a hope for civic republicanism and a practice of demagogic populism.

The need for moral leaders

It is no secret to anyone who lives in India and shares time and passion with Indians from different walks of life that the small cast of politicians and their supporters are not engaged in what Gandhi called "an experiment with Truth". This is perhaps because politics in contemporary India, as everywhere else in the world, finds itself prisoner of the administrative system and the corporate mindset, both of which suffer from a severe absence of self-examination. Indeed, what India needs most at this time of elections is not mass mobilisers but moral leaders.

Considering the profound spiritual nature of Gandhi's personality and his deep ethical view of politics, we could say that if he was among us today, he would have certainly boycotted the elections. He would have been troubled by the Machiavellian essence of Indian politics and its populist and demagogic end results. Assuredly, it is important to grasp Gandhi's character above all as a man who remained all through his life as a person truthful to the ethical.

In a sense, then, Gandhi's view of politics starts where party politics ends. What Gandhi understands by politics is the art of organising society, not the technique of power making and party organising. That is why



"Gandhi is perhaps more relevant now than ever before for our understanding of elections." File photo of Gandhi at Mani Bhavan, Bombay. ■ THE HINDU ARCHIVES

Gandhian politics is at the same time anti-populist and anti-elitist.

Democracy and mobocracy

Gandhi has always been considered as a charismatic leader, but his unmediated appeal to the citizens was based neither on a Manichaean friend-enemy distinction, nor on the supreme will of the masses. As the history of modern India shows us, while political parties have been subservient to the masses and the masses have followed party leaders without questioning, some political figures like Gandhi or Ambedkar had the courage to turn against mobs. Gandhi considered democracy and mobocracy as opposite forms of conducting politics and organising Indian society. Gandhi affirmed: "Those who claim to lead the masses must resolutely refuse to be led by them, if we want to avoid mob law and desire ordered progress for the country. I believe that mere protestation of one's opinion and surrender to the mass opinion is not only not enough, but in matters of vital importance, leaders must act contrary to the mass opinion if it does not commend itself to their reason."

In other words, Gandhi considered contempt for civic virtue as a betrayal of the spirit of democracy. For him, democratic governance, unlike party politics, which always tends towards unexamined and obedient masses, was based on the maturity of citizens. Gandhi's sharp reaction against the Chauri Chaura incident was an expression of his re-

jection of mobocracy. After this incident, Gandhi revoked his plans for launching mass civil disobedience at Bardoli on the ground that the masses were not morally prepared for a non-violent struggle against the British. But it is also worth mentioning that Gandhi considered masses guilty of what politicians became. As he put it: "We the people make the rulers what they are." Moreover, Gandhi insisted on the twin concepts of self-transformation and civic maturity. As a matter of fact, he underlined: "If we reform ourselves, the rulers will automatically do so."

Gandhi, therefore, approached pragmatic politics as a form of character-building and not necessarily organising a political party and winning seats in Parliament. He called it "a capacity to regulate national life". However, inspired by the American Transcendentalist, Henry David Thoreau, he underlined, "If national life becomes so perfect as to become self-regulated, no representation becomes necessary. There is then a state of enlightened anarchy. In such a state everyone is his own ruler. In the ideal state therefore, there is no political power because there is no state. But the ideal is never fully realised in life. Hence the classical statement of Thoreau that the government is best which governs the least."

Undoubtedly, Gandhi, the moral leader, was not a pure idealist. He was a pragmatic practitioner, who wanted to apply ethical values and civilisational criteria to the political or-

ganisation of Indian society and beyond. Strangely, the Gandhian common sense is considered as an irrelevant and insignificant matter to the eyes of those who are ruling India and the world today. Unfortunately, in today's world, political circumstances and temperaments do not allow politicians to concentrate any more on the education and duty of citizens. That is why, while uncritical and utilitarian minds are shaped and formed in universities in India and around the world, originality and exemplarity of future Mahatma Gandhis are killed in the embryo.

But what if Gandhi were alive? He would have certainly tried to create awareness in the minds of the younger generation. Let us also agree that he would have had a strong intervention (example, fasting unto death) in relation with the cases of corruption, sexual harassment and populist demagogic in everyday politics.

When power politics took over

However, this would have been too much for those who are involved today in politics. Frankly, despite the symbolic devotion which is shown to Gandhi by political leaders, there is a feeling of comfort that a stubborn and critical veteran of democratic action like him is no more around.

In a more sinister manner, we even find strong reasons of rejecting a national figure like Gandhi in Nathuram Godse's analysis of his assassination: "I foresaw that I shall be totally ruined and the only thing that I could expect from the people would be nothing but hatred and that I shall have lost all my honour, even more valuable than my life, if I were to kill Gandhiji. But at the same time I felt that Indian politics in the absence of Gandhiji would be more practical, able to retaliate, and would be powerful with armed forces." Godse was right. Once Gandhi was eliminated, power politics could take over. India has been independent for 71 years based on electoral liberalism in the name of Gandhi. But for more than 71 years, politicians have distanced themselves from Gandhi's legacy. Unsurprisingly, once again Indians will go to the polls without having the Mahatma on their minds.