

# The Real Reasons for Mahatma Gandhi's Greatness

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Mahatma Gandhi is today widely accepted internationally as one of the most admired leaders of the 20th century with an enduring contribution to world peace. However, increasingly his legacy is being disputed by critics who raise serious questions ranging from his several questionable decisions during the freedom movement to his stand on the Dalit and gender issues (also his controversial celibacy experiments). Unfortunately some followers of Gandhiji entirely ignore the voices of criticism. For them, Gandhi is above all criticism and doubts. This reduces the prospects of a more reasoned debate on Gandhiji's contribution and a more balanced evaluation of the same. Here I take the stand that many significant criticisms of Gandhiji are actually well-reasoned and well-justified. While endorsing these criticisms and adding to these, I nevertheless argue that serious though these flaws are, these do not detract from Gandhiji's overall greatness and his enduring contribution to the creation of a better world.

Contrary to popular myths, Gandhiji made serious mistakes in the course of his leadership of the freedom movement which were criticised at that time by prominent Congress leaders such as Subhash Bose, C.R. Das and even Jawaharlal Nehru. The withdrawal of the non-cooperation movement at the peak of the people's enthusiasm in 1922 was quite clearly a highly flawed decision, and was widely criticised as such by many leaders and participants, particularly the youth. This withdrawal created a void in the national scene which was filled by the communal elements.

The Gandhi-Irwin pact of 1931 and the negotiations leading to it were again a serious mistake, a mistake made worse by the colonial government going back on many of its promises. Above all, a great opportunity at this moment to launch a national movement, entirely in accordance with the principles of non-violence, against the death sentence given to Shahid Bhagat Singh, Sukhdev and Rajguru, ignoring all norms of justice and judicial procedures, was lost. The stand taken by Gandhiji was widely criticised by Congress members and leaders. The civil disobedience movement was withdrawn by Gandhiji again at a very wrong time.

While Gandhiji failed to do justice to Bhagat Singh, he was no less unjust towards Subhash Bose, particularly at the time of his second election as the President of the Congress. At this stage, Gandhiji's close followers behaved in the most unjust way towards Bose forcing him to resign.

All these decisions and actions were harmful for the freedom movement, and particularly the socialist trend within the freedom movement. These actions pushed back the freedom movement and checked the progress of those forces which would have fought communalism and partition at the grassroots.

Again, although Gandhiji belatedly took a somewhat bold stand in 1942, he made no detailed plans and organisational arrangements to support this so that there was hardly any national guidance and coordination for the ‘Quit India’ movement.

Despite such serious mistakes there is no doubt that on the whole Gandhiji made a very valuable contribution to the freedom movement. He created conducive conditions for the involvement of ordinary people in the freedom struggle. He spoke in a language and idiom that was widely understood and appreciated by them. Vast numbers of the Indian people, including women, responded to Gandhiji’s call for joining the freedom movement and other initiatives related to it.

Gandhiji’s greatest and most enduring contribution related to constantly evolving and persisting with the path of non-violence for resisting injustice and domination. This is the single most crucial contribution on the basis of which we can say sincerely that Gandhiji’s ideas and struggles have increasing relevance in the present-day world.

The persistence of large-scale violence in various aspects of everyday life (and not just in wars and civil strife) is one of the biggest causes of distress, and Gandhiji’s commitment to non-violence for resisting injustice clearly has enduring value in a world deeply troubled by violence at various levels.

Gandhiji’s great contribution to the freedom movement was the remarkable way in which he integrated many constructive activities with the liberation struggle. These constructive activities included, among others, the anti-liquor movement, campaign for sanitation and public hygiene, campaign for khadi and village/cottage industry, campaign against untouchability, campaign for communal harmony as well as several other campaigns and movements. These opened up the doors for many-sided reforms and rejuvenation activities needed by the country, while at the same time providing people many choices regarding how they can link up with the national awakening.

Gandhiji’s *swadeshi* campaign has great relevance for resisting the current highly distorted path of globalisation led by the increasingly powerful multinational companies.

Mahatma Gandhi’s message of *swadeshi* combined with *swaraj* has relevance for decentralisation, particularly rural decentralisation, and for genuine reform of the present-day panchayati raj in India.

Gandhiji’s overall emphasis on close integration of ethical issues with economic issues is of great importance not just for fighting corruption but also for a vision of alternative economy that gives the greatest importance to environment protection and helping the poor. He emphasised not enforced but voluntary simplicity of life, based not on greed but on need, which is really the base that is necessary for the protection of environment. He emphasised less mechanised technology based on human labour and skills which is of relevance for saving/generating jobs as well as for reducing greenhouse gas emissions and pollution. Gandhiji underlined the need to protect livelihoods from the onslaught of big business. Himself a deeply religious man, Gandhiji stressed the harmony of all religions and spirituality based on genuine respect for all religions. Atheism can also coexist in a respectable way with various religions in Gandhiji’s perception of respect for all faiths.

Gandhiji underscored transparency and openness not just in public affairs but even in personal life. He worked very hard and could carry many-sided burdens on his frail shoulders for long years.

All this helped to inject in Gandhiji a great moral force which he used to push forward many-sided important work of enormous social relevance. However, with the passage of time Gandhiji's great moral force was also eroded by his less-than-just attitude towards Bhagat Singh, Subhash Bose, Chandra Singh Gharwali, their colleagues and other great patriots. Gandhiji's social reform agenda was also marred by his less-than-adequate opposition of the exploitative caste system. Finally, his great moral force was also diminished by his indefensible celibacy experiments.

So Gandhiji also had some weaknesses—some of these were personal weaknesses and some of these were based on compromises he had to make or agreed to make with some powerful interests. But these do not take away Gandhiji's many-sided greatness and contributions. Subhash Bose and Shahid Bhagat Singh's father continued to appreciate the importance of Gandhiji's leadership because they realised the value of his many-sided contributions despite Gandhiji's obvious unjust attitude towards them. One hopes that the large band of Gandhiji's critics will take a similar balanced view of history and Gandhiji's place in it.

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