



## Gandhi as MAHATMA: A Politico-cultural Study of Gandhi

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An ideal state, a good social order, and a moral way of life have always been the quest of every society at all times. Every culture and society always looks for role models who could be a source of inspiration for rest of the society. Mahatma Gandhi was one of such great men who worked for the salvation of his country and showed the people a new way of life.

The word Mahatma refers to a person of high-mindedness, wisdom, and selflessness.

Mahatma is an adaptation of the Sanskrit word mahatma, which literally meant "great-souled." As a general, uncapitalized English noun, "mahatma" can refer to any great person; in India, it is used as a title of love and respect.

In our view, Gandhi was a mahatma, not in any technical sense of the term, but in the sense and form which is prevalent in India's folk lore and popular culture. It is claimed that Gandhi adopted a special type of attire in order to prove this belief. (Balakrishnan, 2016)

It is said that Tagore used the term Mahatma for Gandhi for first time on March 6 1915. According to another view, the residents of Gurukul Kangari honored Gandhi with title Mahatma in April 2015. ). However, a document giving him the title "Mahatma" on 21 January 1915, in Jetport, Gujarat, by Nautamlal Bhagvanji Mehta is preserved at the National Gandhi Museum in New Delhi. This document remains the earliest record of the title "Mahatma" being given to Gandhi. (The Indian Express, 2012)

It must be kept in mind that Gandhi was not the first person to project himself as the emancipator of society and his country in the form of Mahatma. There are numerous stories of heroes in the form of avatars and Rishies who freed the society from social evils and established a good social order. People of this country are not so much concerned about historicity of such characters, but more about the depiction and image of these heroes in the folk lore and cultural traditions

It is found that the figures of folk lore have been more popular than the actual historical figures in Indian society. They have put greater effect on the minds of the people in comparison to actual historical figures.

The historicity of Ram, the hero of great epic Ramayana is doubtful. But, the Ram and his life story which is so popular among the masses of northern India is part of folk stories spread by the saints of Bhakti movement including Goswami Tulsidas. According to prof. R K Tripathi, "History requires concrete evidence in the form of coins, inscriptions, etc to prove the existence of a character. Even if we take into account places mentioned in the Ramayana like Chitrakoot, Ajodhya, which still exist, the fact is that Ramayana is not a historical text. So, from that perspective, there is no historical evidence available of Ram." Having said that, we still cannot negate Ram's presence easily, since he has been a part of our collective consciousness for a long time." (Atul Sethi, 2007)

Same is true about the legendary figure of lord Krishna. Krishna's journey began as a hero of the Vrishni tribe, part of the Yadava clan, and ended with hailed as an incarnation of Vishnu. (Ruchika Sharma, 2016) Thus, the figure of Krishna has not been actually real character but a hero of Indian folk lore who gradually evolved into a complete god.

Even the authentic historic figures have been popularized among the people with the help of stories and beliefs associated with those heroes. The love story of Pritviraj Chauhan and sahnjukta and the glorious demise of Chauhan at Gazni is an imaginary story by Chand Bardai and do not match with actual history. Similarly, the story of Padmavati, written by Jayasi and recently picturized is a popular folk tale and has nothing to do with proven history. There are so many folk stories associated with great heroes of medieval India such as Maharana Pratap and great Maratha king Shivaji.



Same thing is seen to some extent in the case of Gandhi. Mahatma Gandhi is one of the great leaders of the modern India. He was most popular figure in Indian politics during India's freedom struggle in the post first world war era. He was the person to make India's national movement a mass movement.

It must be kept in mind that the techniques of Swedish, boycott of foreign goods and passive resistance were not new in India's national movement. Even before the emergence of Gandhi in India's national movement, all these methods were used by leaders like Tilak and his associates. The question arises then, what makes Gandhi so different from these leaders? Why was Gandhi so successful in turning an elite movement into a mass movement?

Gandhi as a smart leader knew the art of mobilizing the masses. He understood the mass psyche of Bhakti and traditionalism of Indian people and used that understanding to give Indian freedom struggle movement, a form of mass movement. For him, the attire of a Mahatma was most appealing to the Indian people.

The political life of Gandhi began in South Africa where he went as a lawyer for making his living. While he was travelling by train to Pretoria, Gandhi, despite having first class ticket, was thrown out of the train by the authorities because a white man complained of an Indian traveling with the white men.

In order To fight this racial discrimination, Gandhi formed the Natal Indian Congress in 1894. This organization organized non-violent passive resistance movement against the oppressive rule of the white people which was based upon the policy of racial discrimination towards the native Africans and Indians. It was in South Africa where Gandhi invented the technique of Satyagrah which remained not only a weapon to fight injustice but a philosophy of life for Gandhi throughout his life. (India Today, 2016)

While waging a struggle against the apartheid regime of South Africa, Gandhi came to the conclusion that it was not the British government and white people, but the modern civilization, which they were following and which was responsible for the exploitation of the colonies like South Africa and India. So, he gave up the modern style of living and established finics farm where he started living a simple pre industrial life with his associates. This was the beginning of his austere life which he continued for rest of his life. (Gandhi, 1909)

Gandhi had become quite popular among the masses during the non cooperation movement of 1920-21. According to Shahid Amin, The common people had great honor for him not only because of his leadership qualities or qualifications. But, because they believed that Gandhi possessed some mystical powers which made him capable of challenging a mighty British empire. In his own words, "The pedagogy of nationalism consists then in transmitting its ways to the common people (sadharaan janta), the menu people or nanhjat, the 'idiotic peasants' of Marx, whose world view is no wider than the combined backsides of the pair of bullocks they routinely contemplated while ploughing the fields. These simpletons have to be stirred, 'mobilized' away from their routine exertions into doing (participating in) accredited nationalist acts. This happened most dramatically with Gandhi, the author of non-cooperation, carrying its message to large gatherings at nearly every mufassil rail station during his hurricane tour of North India and Bihar in the winter of 1921-22 (Gandhi had stopped at the rail station of Chauri Chaura as well on his way to the district headquarter of Gorakhpur in early February 1921). Talking to peasants and converting them to his cause of a new nationalism, Gandhi – already the Mahatma of the masses – proposed a simple set of dos and don'ts. These, when understood in specific peasant ways (very often mixed up in the popular mind), had the capacity of turning the 'simple' unlettered away from the 'sadharaan janta' of nationalist prose – devotees transfixed, so to speak in a mudra of abject devotion – into active followers of the Mahatma. (Amin, 2015)

Shahid Amin further says that during the non cooperation movement in 1921, numerous stories were spread among the people of then U P which supported idea of mystical powers of Mahatma.

Gandhi used the method of non violence marked by the technique of Satya Grah against the British government during his struggle against the British. Many historians do not believe that the use of non violence as a means for struggle was a pragmatic decision as the Indian freedom fighters had the power to fight with the British nor had the support of all the social classes of India against the British. But, for a common man of India, Gandhi adopted these techniques because he was a mahatma in real sense of the term.



It must be born in mind that non violence is not a new thing for India. It is found in the traditional Indian culture of Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism. Gandhi thus used the traditional methods embedded in the culture of India in a new form for the cause of India's independence. (Parik, 120-125)

During his struggle against the British regime, Gandhi demanded the dominant status for India which was popularly known as self rule or home rule or Swaraj at that time. It legally meant partial independence from British hold, some type of autonomy in the internal affairs of the country. However, a common man regarded Gandhian movements as a means to end the British rule and to begin the Gandhi raj. The idea of Gandhi raj was not a legal or political thing but a sort of popular belief prevalent among the people of India.

Another important quality of Gandhi was his vow of chastity and self control which he took at the age of 35 when he was in South Africa. According to Bhiku Parik, these values are a part of traditional culture and ethos of India. Gandhi claimed that he had full control over his mind, desires and passions. The common people did not know anything about scientific truth of these qualities. But, they did believe in Mahatma's austerity and self control due to his image of Mahatma in society. It is a common belief in Indian society that chastity, self control and selfless action may make a person physically and spiritually superior than others. (Parik, 191-200)

The popular idea of simple living and high thinking along with a closeness to nature made Gandhi popular even among the Adivasies of India. Popular environmental movements such as *Chipko* movement by Sunderlal Bahuguna and *Narmada Bachao movement* by Medha Patkar have been so successful due to the involvement of Adivasies and the local people. Both of these environmentalists along with others call themselves follower of Mahatma Gandhi.

## Conclusion

Thus, we find that it was the power of Indian culture and folk tradition which was used by Gandhi to make India's freedom struggle movement a success story. It was Gandhi who made India's freedom struggle movement a mass movement. It was only through the genius of Gandhi that the poor, illiterate and backward masses of India were mobilized on such a large scale for waging a decisive struggle for India's liberation from British colonialism.

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