

If Gandhi were alive today

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



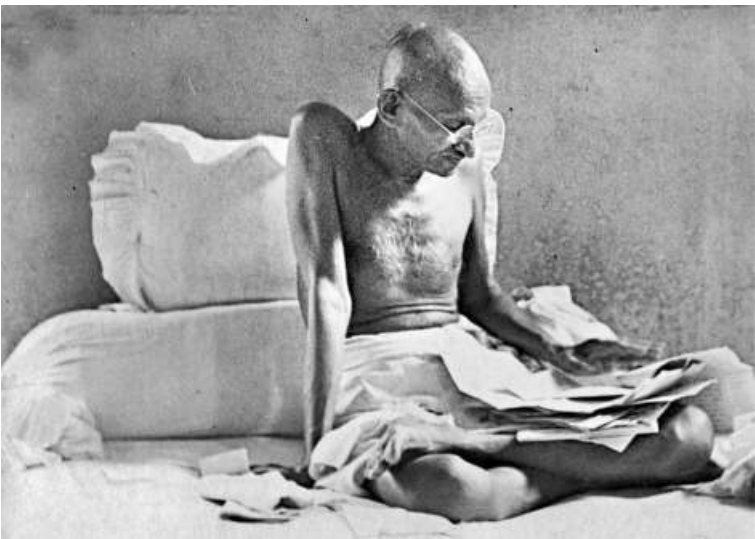
RAMIN JAHANBEGLOO

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 Manichaeen 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 demagoguery 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.

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FROM THE READERS' EDITOR

Retaining the ability to question

If journalism has to survive, it should maintain critical distance from official propaganda



A.S. PANNEERSELVAN

It may sound unreal. But how do I explain receiving two contradictory mails within a span of 20 minutes on the role of journalism? One reader wanted to know the Indian parallel to the exclusive investigation by *The New York Times* into Rupert Murdoch, the founder of a global media empire that includes Fox News, and its disturbing hold on political outcomes. Each of the media outlets in that empire has destabilised democracy in North America, Europe and Australia. The reader wanted to know whether the broadcast of NaMo TV shows India as moving in the same worrying direction.

Claims and counter-claims

At the same time, I got a mail from a reader from Uttarakhand, who questioned this newspaper's reportage on the U.S.'s count of Pakistan's F-16 fighter jets. *Foreign Policy* reported a few days ago that it spoke to two senior U.S. defence officials, who told the magazine that U.S. personnel recently counted Pakistan's F-16s and found none missing. The reader from Uttarakhand was certain that since the report in the magazine was not issued by an official channel, it was unverified and aimed at hurting the electoral prospects of Prime Minister Narendra Modi. This reader refuses to see the overt politicisation of security measures and the use of the armed forces for political ends.

How did *The Hindu* report this story? Headlined “U.S. count of Pakistan's F-16 fighter jets found none missing, claims American magazine”, the report from Washington, DC by the newspaper's U.S. correspondent quotes the magazine as meticulously listing out the contradictions in the claims made by the Indian security establishment since the aerial engagement between India and Pakistan in February this year.

Various Indian agencies suggested that Wing Commander Abhinandan Varthaman had downed an F-16, based on his debriefing. Defence Minister Nirmala Sitharaman also repeated the claim that an F-16 was downed. *The Hindu* report documents the fact that India had asked the U.S. to investigate whether

Pakistan had breached the terms of its F-16 deal with the Americans. The count had now been completed and the U.S. said that “all aircraft were present and accounted for”.

How can a report based on information in a respectable magazine be seen as an attempt to play politics? In its response, the Indian Air Force reiterated that the aircraft shot down in a dogfight by a MiG-21 in Nowshera sector on February 27 was an F-16. It rejected the claim in the *Foreign Policy* report that none of the Pakistan Air Force's U.S.-supplied jets was found missing after a recent count. It is crucial to note that authorities tend to hide behind anonymity. The Indian Air Force's version was circulated through the news agency IANS.

The U.S. magazine report, in the opinion of the foreign policy writer of this newspaper, Stanley Johny, confirmed that India lost a jet and a chopper, that an Indian pilot was captured by Pakistan and paraded before camera, and that there was no evidence that India's strike in Balakot had hit the actual target and killed terrorists. In a sense, the facts negate the narrative that has been flowing from the political establishment. A close reading of the facts raises many questions.

Serving the public good

Elections do generate pressure on journalists to deviate from the core values of journalism. War has the potential to generate passion that sways both the electorate and the media. It becomes a deadly combination when war machines and the electoral processes are permitted to intertwine. If journalism has to survive and serve the public good, it should maintain its critical distance from official propaganda. It needs to retain its ability to pose questions. *The New York Times* story has come up with some crucial takeaways in its investigation into Mr. Murdoch's media industry and the central lesson is that his family sits at the centre of global upheaval.

What *The Hindu* did in reporting about the F-16 numbering is a part of the essential elements of journalism. George Orwell once said, “In a time of deceit telling the truth is a revolutionary act.” Talking about the military and its claims in a dispassionate manner is central to democracy. It is an attempt to retain journalism within the spirit of public inquiry and not reduce it to a force multiplier for electoral gains.

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SINGLE FILE

Cleaning up the mess

India needs a waste management policy that stresses the need for decentralised garbage disposal practices

MADHURIKA SANKAR



Hyperconsumption is a curse of our modern times. Humans generate monumental amounts of waste, a sizeable portion of which is disposed in landfills and through waste-to-energy incinerators. However, billions of tonnes of garbage, including microplastics, never make it to landfills or incinerators and end up in the oceans. This garbage chokes marine life and disturbs zooplankton, which are vital to the elimination of carbon dioxide from the atmosphere.

Landfills are seedbeds of methane and other greenhouse gases, which contribute to global warming. These toxic chemicals poison the soil and their leached run-off makes its way into the oceans. And while they do generate energy, waste incinerators cause health issues such as cancer. In India, nearly 60% of the household waste is wet organic waste, with low calorific value. This makes options such as waste-to-energy incinerators inefficient. We need to design incinerators that are suited to Indian conditions.

It does seem overwhelming, but there are solutions to the garbage pandemic through the crucial processes of material recycling and composting. Efficient composting is possible through an optimal combination of microbes and temperature to produce a nutrient-dense soil conditioner.

Mathangi Swaminathan, in her article in *Economic and Political Weekly*, sheds light on India's broken waste management system. In India, less than 60% of waste is collected from households and only 15% of urban waste is processed.

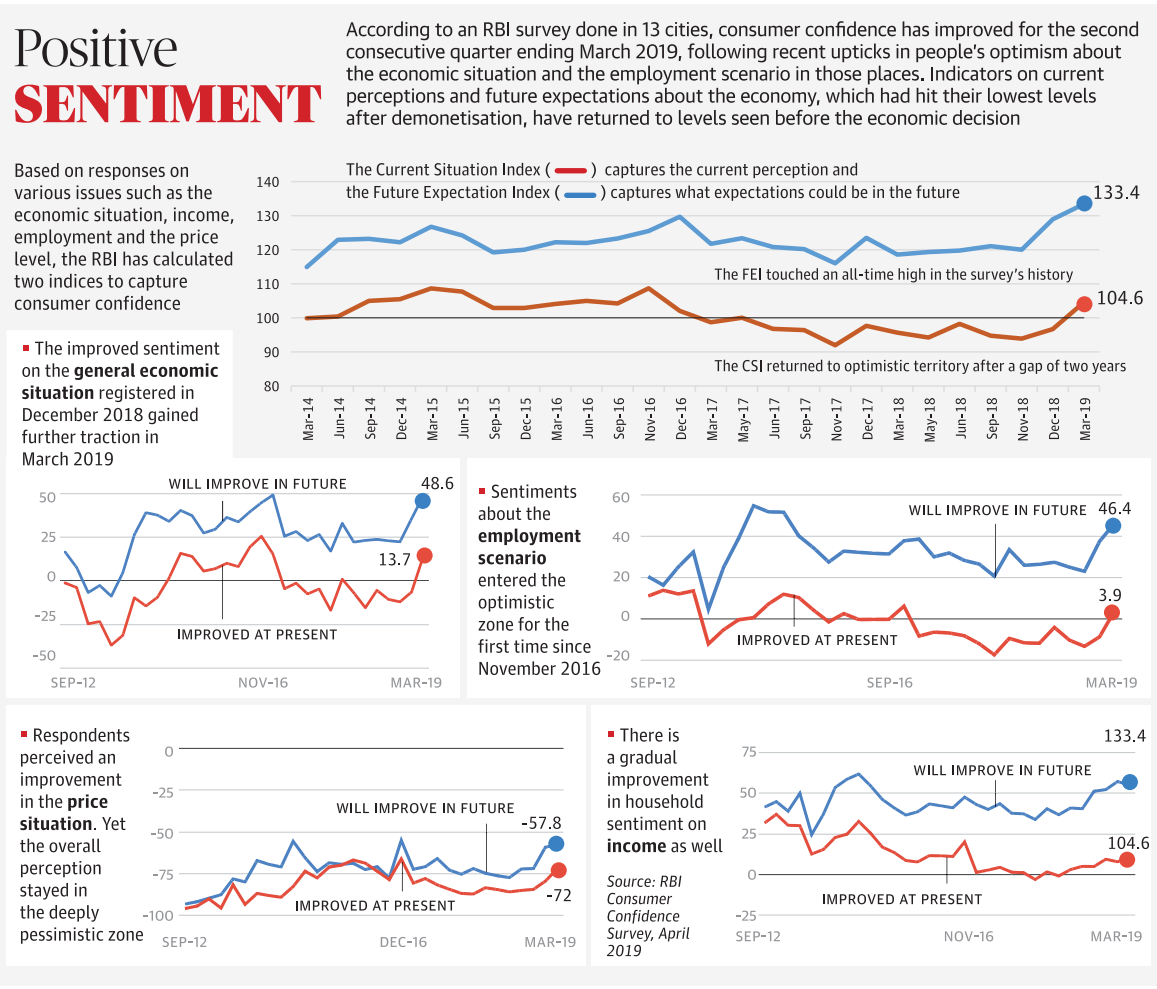
There are several problems in India in how waste is treated. First, segregation of waste into organic, recyclable and hazardous categories is not enforced at source. As a result, mixed waste lands up in the landfills, where waste-pickers, in hazardous conditions, try to salvage the recyclables, which are of poor quality and quantity by then. Second, ideally, waste management should not be offered free of cost to residents. Only if residents pay will they realise the importance of segregation and recycling. Third, there is the issue of logistical contractors who are motivated to dump more garbage in landfills as their compensation is proportional to the tonnage of waste. They are also prone to illegally dump waste at unauthorised sites to reduce transportation costs. Fourth, and importantly, organic farming and composting are not economically attractive to the Indian farmer, as chemical pesticides are heavily subsidised, and the compost is not efficiently marketed.

We need a comprehensive waste management policy that stresses the need for decentralised garbage disposal practices. This will incentivise private players to participate. Unless these concerns are addressed, what will we tell our children who inherit this planet? That our greatest existential challenge, climate change, was also facilitated by garbage?

The writer is based in Chennai



DATA POINT



FROM The Hindu. ARCHIVES

FIFTY YEARS AGO APRIL 8, 1969

Talks to be held with Kenya on Indians' assets

The Deputy Minister of External Affairs, Mr. Surendra Pal Singh, disclosed in the Lok Sabha to-day [April 7, New Delhi] that India proposed to hold talks with the Kenya Government on the question of repatriation of assets of Indian citizens and Indians holding British passports. He said that the talks were contemplated to see that these people did not suffer untold difficulties. Mr. Singh was intervening in the debate on the budget demands of the Ministry of External Affairs. The debate was inconclusive. The need for filling the “power vacuum” in the Indian Ocean that would arise from the withdrawal of Britain was one of the points raised.

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO APRIL 8, 1919.

Civil disobedience. Mr. Gandhi Leads.

The Satyagraha Committee advised [in Bombay] that for the time being laws regarding prohibited literature and registration of newspapers may civilly disobeyed. Accordingly, a number of copies of Hind Swarajya, the Sarvodaya or Universal Dawn, the Story of a Satyagrahi, all by Mr. M.K. Gandhi, and life and addresses of Mustafa Kamel Pasha, were publicly offered for sale this evening [April 7] and found some ready buyers. The hawkers were all prominent Satyagrahis among whom were Mr. Gandhi, Mrs. Naidu, Mr. Sobani, Mr. Lakhimdas Tairsee and others. All books sold contained the signature of the Hawkers. A number of unregistered newspapers, mostly resembling ordinary posters and leaflets both in Print and Handwriting in Guzerathi were also sold.

POLL CALL Bicameral legislature

Bicameralism is the practice of having two Houses of Parliament. At the State level, the equivalent of the Lok Sabha is the Vidhan Sabha (Legislative Assembly), and that of the Rajya Sabha is the Vidhan Parishad (Legislative Council). A so-called Upper House is considered important in the parliamentary system, as only a third of the seats are filled every two years and it therefore acts as a check against potential impetuosity of electoral majorities in the Lower House. With members mostly indirectly elected, the Upper House also ensures that individuals who might not be cut out for the rough-and-tumble of direct elections too are able to contribute to the legislative process. Under Article 169, Parliament may by law create or abolish the second chamber in a State if the Legislative Assembly of that State passes a resolution to that effect by a special majority. At present, seven Indian States have bicameral legislatures. Some argue that unlike the Rajya Sabha, the Vidhan Parishad does not serve must purpose and poses a strain on States' finances.

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