

WEBINAR REPORT

Mahatma Gandhi: Making of History and Contemporary

Department Of Mass Communication And Journalism, Tezpur University

15 August, 2020

Department of Mass Communication and Journalism, Tezpur University organized a webinar through Google Meet on the topic - 'Mahatma Gandhi: Making of History and Contemporary' on 15 August, 2020, on the auspicious occasion of two-years long program commemorating the 150th birth anniversary of Mahatma Gandhi, and also 74th Independence Day.

Introducing the theme of the webinar to participants, Dr. Anjuman Borah (Assistant Professor, Department of Mass Communication and Journalism, Tezpur University) highlighted Mahatma Gandhi's relevance in shaping the course of history as well as how he continues to live in on our collective consciousness in the form of a metaphor for truth, non-violence, unbounded courage, indestructible conviction and irreplaceable optimism. Dr. Borah welcomed the esteemed speakers – Dr. Jacob Pulickan and Prof. Biswajit Das, and also the participants consisting representatives of media educators, media professionals, development professionals, researchers and students from over 50 different institutions and organizations across the length and breadth of the country.

Webinar Director Prof. Sunil Kanta Behera (Professor of Eminence, Department of Mass Communication and Journalism, Tezpur University) further contextualized the relevance of Mahatma Gandhi in shaping the contemporary times. Prof. Behera elaborated how Gandhian thoughts are now being put into practice by citing examples of recent developments like boycott of Chinese goods and reliance on domestic production for Atmanirbhar Bharat. Explaining how Self Help Groups are boosting Swadeshi mode of production during Covid pandemic, Prof. Behera emphasized that every state has been working towards production of masks with cultural motifs like Gamucha in Assam, Sambalpuri in Odisha, and the like. Manifestation of our cultural roots in the domestic production of masks is serving as revolutionary visual symbol like what Khadi had done few decades ago. In order to highlight the indelible impact the great Mahatma had made on the minds of leaders across the globe, Prof. Behera quoted personalities like Nelson Mandela, Dalai Lama, Martin Luther King Jr., Albert Einstein, Rabindranath Tagore and George Bernard Shaw. Prof. Behera also introduced the esteemed speakers – Dr. Jacob Pulickan and Prof. Biswajit Das to the participants. It was followed by the talks delivered by the speakers.

Dr. Jacob Pulickan – Director of Gandhi Centre for Rural Development and Founder Coordinator of Centre for Gandhian Studies, University of Kerala, delivered the first talk on **Contemporary relevance of Gandhi**.

Dr. Pulickan elaborated about the National Committee formed by the Government of India to commemorate the 150th birth anniversary of Mahatma Gandhi. The Committee is bestowed with the responsibility to guide and approve policies, programs and activities for the commemoration, and also supervise implementation of the decisions undertaken in due course. Dr. Pulickan also mentioned about the constitution of Executive Committee, headed by Hon'ble Prime Minister with 19 members, which is mandated to consider policies, lay down guidelines, and also be responsible about the execution of the plans/programs/activities pertaining to the commemoration. Dr. Pulickan described about his own proposals set forth before the Committee, like implementation of Gandhi Darshan Programs in primary and higher secondary schools and facilitating homemade Swadeshi products through skill development.

Dr. Pulickan underlined the core Gandhian philosophy of Live and Let Live in his talk. He emphasized that the quintessence of Gandhian Philosophy is human values and bringing about humane face to development. Dr. Pulickan elaborated about the significance of holistic sustainable development in a society, and how that can be achieved by maintaining several balances like – philosophical balance, structural balance, technological balance, distributional balance and ecological balance. He elaborated, Philosophical balance highlights the balance between material and moral well being in an individual and is necessary to instill the values of equality, liberty and dignity in people along with economic prosperity. Structural balance proposes a balance between rich urban population and poor rural population where the cities should not be enriched at the expense of the villages. Technological balance proposes inclusivity, customization for development of every area, judicious use of machines, and criticizes the use of machines that replaces men or makes them subservient to machines. Distribution balance proposes equitable distribution of wealth amongst weak and strong, rich and poor. Ecological balance requires a balance in utilizing the resources through sustainable methods and criticizes depletion of resources.

Dr. Pulickan highlighted on Gandhian views on decentralization, community based economics, rural development and use of low capital-intensive appropriate technology for self-sufficient economy, to empower the last person in the remotest village. Dr. Pulickan emphasized how the Mahatma had envisioned smudging the glaring difference between haves and have-nots; he worked relentlessly to develop each individual, as development of each individual is intertwined with development of the society, and ultimate goal of Sarvodaya (development in all facets of life). Dr. Pulickan being a practitioner of Gandhian philosophy, concluded his talk by citing examples of how he is working to provide trainings on Swadeshi homemade products like soap making, food processing, jewel making, paper bag making, glass and fabric painting, etc., and so far more than one lakh individual received the training.

Prof. Biswajit Das – Founder Director and Professor of Centre for Culture, Media and Governance, Jamia Millia Islamia, New Delhi, delivered the second talk on **Gandhian Thought and Practice: Perspectives from Intellectual History of Communication**.

In order to clarify the multifaceted dimensions of Intellectual History of Communication, Prof. Das at the outset of his deliberations underlined the distinction between history of ideas and intellectual history of ideas, which regards ideas as historically conditioned that can be best understood in terms of larger context like cultural, social, economic, linguistic, and the like. Prof. Das highlighted the significance of understanding Gandhi from communication perspectives, as Gandhi with a thinking mind always had deeper purpose behind every act of communication. Gandhi as a communicator was extremely transparent and straightforward, and had earnestly admitted that ‘what I say now is what applies, what I said earlier is not true anymore, because I have done some thinking since then’. The strategies undertaken by Gandhi to conduct freedom movement, the philosophy and tactics together, taking the literal and metaphorical as one truth, provide a pathway to decode the intellectual history of communication.

Prof. Das elaborated that Gandhi was not a mere theoretician as his ideas and ideals were not codified in the form of a doctrine or manifesto, but were diffused in the form of his activities. The Mahatma did not consciously construct a blueprint, either of his theory or of an ideal social order, and often said that his life was his message. Gandhi left behind many decades of social as well as political activities and people have to extrapolate his ideas and ideology from an assemblage of actions. He himself had said that anyone wishing to follow him, after he was dead and gone, should simply look at what he did and how he did it, rather than look for any well-codified doctrine.

Prof. Das elucidated how Mahatma Gandhi used unique communication techniques and appropriated myth, metaphors and symbols to communicate with masses in order to disseminate his ideas related to modernity and nationalism. In Gandhian thought, the power of a symbol is not independent of the truth of the message. Further, for Gandhi, the medium as the message works diametrically opposite to the manner in which Marshall McLuhan enunciated it. From the Gandhian point of view, the message is not independent and not every medium can carry every message. Thus, the medium is not neutral in the sense of truth and truthfulness. Gandhi was metaphorical; he knew how to use the language, which for him was a vehicle of culture for civilization. He was an experimenter with idiomatic vernacular expressions. Gandhi used language not in a very formal instrumentalist sense, but as a linguistic being to capture human agency.

Prof. Das delineated how Gandhi used striking visual symbols to communicate his philosophy to the masses. He termed workers struggle as ‘*Dharmayuddha*’, which means a war for righteousness. Describing *Padayatra* and also vividly distinguishing *Satyagraha* and *Duragraha*, Prof. Das explained how these channels of communication help in studying Gandhi ji’s earliest public engagements in India

and abroad, and how far these visual symbols were effective in transmitting his views to the public. The use of Charkha and burning of foreign clothes can be seen as yet another visual symbol. The Gandhian Khadi movement responded to the colonial challenges not merely at the level of economics and culture, but also by providing alternative to the colonial science and knowledge system. One of the primary objectives was to revive household spinning by challenging the notion of inferiority of Indian cotton production. Gandhian leaders soon appropriated the spinning wheel as a symbol of loyalty and an image to reflect true nationalist spirit. Khadi became an ideological symbol on which one's political and personal beliefs could be indicated. Khadi's core semiotics lay in it being presented as a commodity of colonial resistance. A wearer of Khadi became, in the eyes of authority, a rebel. In refurbishing Charkha, there was the use of tradition, but the new reinvented Charkha was put in the service as modern carrier of import substitution.

Prof. Das also highlighted several instances where Gandhi did not succeed as a communicator. There were occasions where Gandhi's communication was successful because others made it possible. He mentioned how besides Gandhi's own act of communication, people organized Gandhi Katha, stories narrated about Gandhi in groups, that were part real and part derived from Gandhi's body of work. Prof. Das emphasized how Gandhi, through his writings, made a trenched critique of enlightenment premised on the philosophy of progress through instrumental modernity. He felt such a program displaced cultural values and faith from its technologies of enquiry, and constructed a new social order around market relations overseen by secular state. Prof. Das concluded his talk by elaborating that the fundamental argument of Hind Swaraj is that the locus of value in modernity is shifted out of human locus into the world of 'things'. Thus, Gandhi used the word '*Swaraj*', and criticized how Indian expatriates were in the hypnotic grip of all-pervading westernized wisdom that was not good for the welfare of humanity.

The talk was followed by Q & A Sessions in which participants asked several questions like - Gandhi's take on partition of India as often people frame him as a person responsible for the partition, feasibility of balances and Ramrajya in the sense Gandhi had envisioned, how can Gandhi be appropriated in the present context, Gandhi's role in emancipation of women, etc.

Dr. Joya Chakraborty (Professor and Head of Department of Mass Communication and Journalism, Tezpur University) concluded the two and half hours long webinar by acknowledging gratitude to the esteemed speakers for such enlightening talks. She also acknowledged assistance of Dr. Manoj Deori (Assistant Professor, Department of Mass Communication and Journalism, Tezpur University) in providing technical support, and appreciated the participants for posing questions, which made the webinar more engaging.