

MARTIN LUTHER KING JR AND M. K. GANDHI: A COMPARATIVE STUDY

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Abstract

Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi made tremendous contribution to the freedom struggle for India while Martin Luther King, Jr. is acknowledged as a towering personality who successfully launched nonviolent struggle against racial discrimination in the United States. Time magazine declared King as a 'Child of Gandhi' and tried to create confusion in the historical accounts. Much research work has been produced on the Asian leadership but a comparison between the leadership of Asian and western societies is hardly taken up by the researchers in Pakistan. Through this article, an effort has been made to highlight similarities and dissimilarities between King and Gandhi. It also defies the myth pervasive in the world in general and in the US in particular that King was a disciple of Gandhi. The historical documents contain sufficient material to correct this misunderstanding consciously highlighted by the American media at the very outset of King's civil rights struggle for African-Americans in the early 1950s. Both the leaders contributed to their respective communities but King's image is deemed honourable equally by white and coloured people while Gandhi is remembered as a Hindu leader in the history.

Key words

Martin Luther King, Jr., Mohandas Kamran Chand Gandhi, non-violence, Africans, Hindus.

Martin Luther King, Jr. was an American civil rights leader and apostle of nonviolent protest who played remarkable role in the struggle of equal rights for African-Americans during the 1950s and 1960s as conferred in the US Constitution. Basically he was a clergyman but the plight of his community motivated him to enter the national politics to redeem his community from racial discrimination. He adopted nonviolent or passive resistance to confront the

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injustice inflicted by the white fellows. He experienced this strategy successfully during his civil rights drive, firstly at Montgomery, Alabama, in 1955. Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi was an Indian nationalist who contributed a lot to the freedom movement against the British rule in the mid-twentieth century. Philosophically, the teachings of Christianity and classical Hindi literature inspired him to struggle nonviolently to achieve his political objectives. Dr. King and Gandhi have similarities in many respects as both were religio-political personalities, both struggled for their oppressed communities and confronted with the white ruling authorities. Both the ruling nations thought themselves superior racially to the coloured people. Both the leaders considered racial discrimination inhuman and launched a crusade against it. The most important common aspect of their struggle was that both adopted the philosophy of nonviolence as the base to assault the racial prejudice. Both derived philosophy of nonviolence primarily from their respective religions. Nevertheless, much dissimilarity may be observed while studying these personalities. There was a tangible difference between the regions, societies, religions, political setup, and race relationship in India and US. King was a realist, constitutionalist and integrationist while Gandhi posed to be integrationist but in reality he was a Hindu theocrat and civilizationist. His utmost endeavour was to infuse Hinduism and restore Hindu authority in India while King sought to get the American Constitution implemented in the real and practical sense.

The United States is a multinational and multiethnic society. All came to the new world willingly except the Africans, who were brought forcibly to the Continent in 1619 and this human trafficking continued during the coming centuries. Hence they were enslaved and pushed into backwardness, in an ocean of sorrows, pains, despair, disappointment and tears. King after obtaining doctoral degree adopted priesthood but he resigned from his pastoral responsibilities and joined struggle against the ongoing injustice with African-Americans. He rightly asserted that the equal status in America was the African-Americans' undeniable right endorsed by the Constitution.

Montgomery Bus boycott was the incident which elevated King's stature to national level. On 1 December 1955, an incident brought a big change in the social and political history of the US. Like other Southern cities, Montgomery had a law that the African-Americans could use only back seats in the buses and they were bound to vacate their seats if white got on the bus. Rosa Parks, seamstress and NAACP¹ member, boarded a bus and sat down on the seat of the white passenger. At the Empire Theater, six white men got on the bus wherein they found no seat vacant in the white section. The driver James F. Blake, urged the nearest African-Americans to leave their places. All obeyed except Rosa Parks who was arrested by the police on violating the Montgomery segregation laws.² This arrest provoked the locals who decided to boycott the buses owned by the white people. However, the movement lacked discipline,

intellectual direction and practicality as a whole. King found no prudent strategy in the traditional legalism of NAACP and separatism of Marcus Garvey that hardly could attract the black Christians. He organized his “constituency around the black churches”³ knowing the importance and reliability of the religious places. Confident enough that only church could produce sincere, confident and sensible support, he sought help from the churches. Therefore, the mass movement of 1950s and 1960s was mostly backed by the people relating to the black churches.⁴

After assuming leadership, Dr. King exhibited the best intellectual discourse and course of action with deep commitment to root out the racial discrimination from the American society. His political ideals were based on the philosophy of nonviolence because he believed that ‘violence breeds more violence.’ He laid stress on the protest far away from violence in any conducive situation. The police arrested him under a seldom enforced law to diffuse the tempo of the boycott but it could not de-track the drive. King repeated his creed of using ‘the Weapon of Love.’ Expressing his unbent stance on the principle of nonviolence, he maintained, “We must meet violence with non-violence. We must meet hate with love”.⁵ ‘Persuasion’ was preferred to ‘coercion’ which created a vivid compatibility between his beautiful words and practice. His manifesto attracted both white and coloured people as he never believed that white lacked decency instead he expected a positive response by a big majority of the white people.

Nigel Richardson writes that King’s intellectual creed was deeply influenced by Walter Rauschenbusch who believed that religious people ought to make the people happier and fairer. Many historians tried to prove King as a disciple of Gandhi (1869-1948), a Hindu nationalist. King respected Gandhi as paying homage to Gandhi during his visit to India in February 1959 he said that he visited countries as a tourist but he came to India as a pilgrim.⁶ Gandhi struggled against the racial discrimination in South Africa and in India naming his struggle, “*satyagraha*.” He explained that ‘Truth’ (Satya) is ‘love’ and ‘firmness’ (graha) is a ‘force’ and synonym for force with love. Gandhi said that ‘truth and love produce force.’ He believed that in *Satyagraha*, physical action or reaction is not allowed even in the favourable situation.⁷ He asserted that truth is the most favourite word to God. Jesus and Muhammad (PBUH) were supreme “because they saw and expressed Truth”.⁸ Nonviolent struggle was an utter defiance against injustice. He got this idea from Henry David Thoreau’s essay on civil disobedience. Thoreau, in turn, studied the *Bhagavad-Gita* and many Hindi *Upanishads*.⁹

Retrospectively, King as a child conceived a lot from his environment. During student life, he seemed keen in intellectual work of the eminent philosophers of different ages. At Morehouse College, Crozer, Theological Seminary, the University of Pennsylvania, Boston University and Harvard

University, he read the work of Plato, Aristotle, Augustine, Aquinas, Kant, Hegel, Marx and Nietzsche. This enabled him to examine the social change caused by the black intellectuals and reformists such as Booker T. Washington, W. E. B. Du Bois, Marcus Garvey, Stokely (Stokeley) Carmichael, Elijah Muhammad and Malcolm X. Since King was convinced that “oppressed people have a moral obligation to resist non-violently the evil system that dehumanizes them”.¹⁰

At the seminary, King studied Christianity that taught him, how to oppose bloodshed. On the other hand, he concluded that Christian belief of ‘Turn the other cheek’ and ‘Love your enemies’ is practicable in conflict only among persons while not effective in resolving conflicts among racial groups and nations. King considered display of mere love a sign of weakness unable to bring positive change in society. Therefore, the Christian philosophy, an inspirational force left many questions unsettled in his mind. King attended a lecture Dr. Mordecia W. Johnson, President of Howard University in Philadelphia. Johnson evaluated the moral power of Gandhian nonviolence, which he urged, could also improve the relations between white and coloured people in the US society. The name of Gandhi was much familiar among many Americans and Abraham Johannes Must, a well-known pacifist and executive secretary of the Fellowship of Reconciliation, was known as American Gandhi who had already impressed King during his lecture at Crozer. Johnsones’ discussion about Gandhi’s protest inspired King who rejoiced that the spirit infused by Christianity could be materialized because Gandhi had exposed how it could work. “Even in conflict in group and nation, you could use the Christian ethics, Love your enemies, Turn your other cheek,” he had discovered the *Christen activism*, “When love pervades nonviolent methods, far from being a symptom of weakness it becomes a potent force for social transformation”.¹¹

George M. Frederickson does not concede that Gandhism had impressed King. He establishes his contention on the arguments that he (King) never discussed Gandhi in his writings or sermons before 1955. On the other hand, he absorbed enough of the *moral realism* of Reinhold Niebuhr who has doubts about *unconditional pacifism*. Taylor Branch, a historian of civil right era, believes that King facilitated the media and other people to present him the disciple of Gandhi only for the fame among the public. King was Niebuhrian rather than Gandhian. Niebuhr opines that nonviolence is usually the best way of expressing goodwill. It is a “type of coercion” that offers opportunities for harmonious relationship. Niebuhr urged in the case of Gandhi’s struggle in India that there was a contradiction between Gandhian philosophy and the power politics he displayed in the Indian politics.¹² He was against every kind of violence because his sect, Jainism, did not allow the killing of even “the most trivial insect.” Despite this, he “acted as a self-appointed recruiting sergeant for the British” in the World

War-I. ¹³ His fellow organization 'Hindu Mahasabha' also supported the recruitment of the Hindus in the world war to arm the community. ¹⁴

King evaluated coercion and moral force as interlinked phenomenon to materialise the philosophy of nonviolent resistance. His philosophy of 'creative crisis' sounds same meanings to *coercion*. Its main objective was to compel the rival to come to talks. This coercion could either settle down the problem or aggravate the situation which was supposed to invite the oppressors to take brutal action against the protesters. Such circumstances might convince the common people that authorities had been treating cruelly with the African-Americans and damaging the life and peace while this situation would create sympathetic sentiments and favourable propagation for the oppressed. ¹⁵

Protest is always a threat or coercion for privileged class and the same proved true in the case of the Montgomery bus boycott which was a severe economic threat to the owner and the staff of the bus company. King used it as an instrument to compel the pro-slavery whites for mutual dialogue as he said during his Birmingham camping: "it is historical fact that privileged groups seldom give up their privileges voluntarily". ¹⁶ This analysis shows his sense to assess the gravity of the situation which required tremendous struggle to bring pivotal change in the race relations. Niebuhr calls the Montgomery bus boycott realism and coercion; that was to force the rival group to come to bargaining. King named this strategy 'creative crisis' while 'direct action' was a physical appearance for protest on the scene. He was aware of love, force, protest, and other instruments of nonviolent campaign.

Time magazine, at the end of 20th century, declared Dr. King a disciple (child) of Gandhi that sounds an inappropriate analysis. It is coincidence that King had acquaintance with Gandhian ideas. Gandhi's *satya* (truth as love) was not a new phenomenon rather it existed already in Christianity and King had used it as force (Gandhi's *garah*) during his boyhood and the Montgomery bus boycott. King inherited love as moral force from his parents and Christian teachings as he once stated that he could comprehend the spirit of the words 'God' and 'love' because of his family tradition and domestic environment. He maintained that even his neighbourhood was blessed with the same religiosity therefore love was an integral part of the relationship he had experienced at every step of life. ¹⁷

If King had admired Gandhi's struggle, it does not mean that he should be declared as 'child' or 'disciple of Gandhi. Nkrumah and the Indian Premier Jawaharlal Nehru have not been declared 'children of King' if they admired King's struggle during his visit to Ghana and India. Taylor Branch, a historian, believes that because of public relations, King did not raise any objection when media and others were presenting him as a disciple of Gandhi. Reality came up when King once responded to the query about Gandhi's influence: "as a matter of fact, no....I have read some statement by him....I will have to truthfully

say.....that I know very little about the man [Gandhi]”.¹⁸ King on the other hand cannot be disciple of all whom he had studied including Marx, Hegel, Aristotle, Rauschenbusch, Reinhold Niebuhr and other European thinkers and American protestant theologians during his university days. With the leadership qualities in him, “King interwove ideas from the sources into the fabric of his experience”¹⁹ and attracted white and black people to his political creed.

Practicality and commitment with the mission elevated Dr. King to the international level which proved him a greater leader than Gandhi. To gauge King and Gandhi’s leadership, diverse political and social setup of both the countries, America and India, presents complex nature of the comparison. Racial and political problems were not of similar nature in India and the US. The British government itself motivated the Indian people to have political parties²⁰ and these political activities changed the scenario of the region. On the other hand, African-Americans had been living as slaves for centuries and they were discouraged at every move for social mobility. So, the social and political atmosphere in India was favourable for political activities but the American social and political conditions were hardly conducive and sympathetic for the civil right movement. Malcolm X has another style of comparison of both the leaders: “Gandhi had succeeded because he was big black elephant sitting on a small white mouse; but King was a small black mouse on top of a big white elephant. He could not win”.²¹ King seems more powerful, practical and competent leader than Gandhi because Gandhi led majority against a small and outlandish ruling minority. King was a leader of small, untrained, unorganized and severely depressed minority against a ruling majority²² that conceded African-Americans inferior racially, historically and religiously. The antagonism between Indians and British was not deep-rooted as the black and white communities had in US. The only similarity between the two leaders was that both decided ‘to confront the unjust rule non-violently.’ It is undeniable reality that there was contradiction in Gandhi’s nonviolence philosophy and its implementation during his anti-British campaign.²³ King, in such unfavourable circumstances, struggled nonviolently and redeemed his community from the white tyranny extended over centuries. Gandhi could do nothing in the partition of India while King’s voice suffocated all the separatist moves in his country. Therefore, King achieved his ideal while Gandhi met with an utter failure in realization of his dream.

Gandhi represented majority and for the reason he desired to integrate all the religious communities of India under the Indian nationalism while Muslims and Sikhs, the minorities, came up on the political scene as separatists. In the US, white Americans, the majority, did not want to merge the African-Americans into them as equal citizens. Even Abraham Lincoln favoured deportation of the African-Americans to Africa as a solution to the race problem.²⁴

King made excellent tirades with impressive eloquence, diction and oratorical skills and his speeches are quoted and discussed throughout the world because the main thrust of the text covered diverse facets of the human sufferings and the methods to cope with different problematic issues. His ideals and way of protest bred positive image of the movement among all the factions. His opponents in the US could not help praising his devotion and contribution to the civil rights movement. On the other hand, Gandhi lacked all these merits i.e., eloquence, liberal diction and oratory. Major segments of all the minorities living in British India did not appreciate Gandhi's role as projected by the Hindu scholarship. A big majority of the Muslims, Sikhs and *Achoot* criticized his political creed.²⁵ Even he himself claimed to be a non-political or non-Congressite while he was a potent motivating force behind the Congress politics. He participated in political dialogues with local and British delegations. King once owned an organization and the manifesto, he sacrificed every moment of his life to this mission. King was well aware of all the developments concerning with his community while Gandhi did not give even a look to a document of the constitutional package for the Indians that was a major shift from authoritarian to democratic rule.

No formal recognition appeared at international level regarding Gandhi's role while King received Nobel Peace Prize on 10 December 1964 in Oslo University, Norway. He was the youngest man (35 years) who received this prestigious prize.²⁶ He got honorary degrees from the Yale University and other universities. Gandhi experienced no physical torture during his struggle while King was kicked, slapped, knifed and even his house was bombed. Although it was because of the different numerical strength of the two communities in the US and India but the sufferings he experienced matter a lot in determining the stature of a leadership.

King used 'crisis' against the oppressors as dialogical rationale. It contained no damages, no physical reaction and aggressive retaliation from the protesters. Therefore, it is considered as a 'creative crisis'-such crisis that results in positive changes. Dr. King demanded no major constitutional and systematic change but a change, he sought, in the white behaviour that had been hurdle incessantly for centuries in the implementation of the existing constitutional right. The African-Americans were not striving to snatch something precious from the white country fellows instead they were longing for the acceptance of their citizenship rights. After centuries, they were still requesting the white people to accept their right to get a cup of coffee from the same point from where the whites used to get and go to the same parks, restaurants, drinking fountain, schools etc. where the whites went.²⁷ When King was sure that mere love had become weakness and seemed ineffective in bringing any change, he turned to Niebuhrian interpretation of Christianity-*Christian Realism*, which he hinted at in his letter from Birmingham Jail in which he criticized that the privileged groups

never hand over from their privileges unless any severe reaction to force them to do the same. Rights are always 'demanded' by oppressed. His entire life passed through the bitter experiences to achieve his goals. He experienced humiliation in courts and jails; he was kicked by the police, slapped and stabbed by others but he never adopted violent means in reaction.²⁸ His house was bombed and the militant groups of his community tried continuously to downgrade his image. The FBI (Federal Bureau of Investigation) tried its best to knock him down through illegal means but could not debar him to accomplish his commitment.²⁹ Commitment comes with involvement and patience.³⁰ King made a major shift from tradition to revolution in political and social domains. When, in 1955, others talked to shift from the south and desired to settle in the north, King was the only person who dared to lead the depressed people to face all this awkward position courageously. He encouraged the community of African-Americans to rise against segregation laws. His movement removed fear from their hearts. It also suffocated all the separatist movements, created racial harmony and brightened the American future. Unlike him, Gandhi always consoled the Muslims verbally but appreciated practically every strife paving the way for Hindu hegemony. He praised Maulana Abul Kalam Azad, a Muslim Congress leader, on the intrigue in 1946-47 against the All-India Muslim League which emerged as the largest Assembly party in the British Punjab but Azad ousted the League from the democratic right to form government and managed a coalition ministry under the British desire while Nehru disliked this anti-democratic drive.³¹ Due to the Hindu theocracy and suppression under the leadership of Gandhi, the Muslim separatists succeeded in achieving their goal, Pakistan.

Conclusion

Martin Luther King, Jr. and Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi enjoy similarity in the passive resistance. Both inherited intellectual wealth from their respective religions. They launched effective drive against the discriminatory attitude of the ruling whites towards the ruled people having dark or coloured skin. Philosophically both the leaders possessed strong base but in practical demonstration King utilized the nonviolent ideals more effectively than Gandhi. *Time* magazine declared King a 'child of Gandhi' that was an utter negation of the historical documents as King himself had rejected any deep influence of Gandhi on him and it was coincidence that both had similarity in the philosophy of nonviolence. King got lead on Gandhi when he maintained the spirit of the philosophy throughout his struggle while Gandhi seemed compromising on many times like World Wars and other negotiations with the British delegates. Gandhi led a majority while King led a minority and ultimately Gandhi remained leader of Hindu community while King's image is equally respectable among all the whites and African-Americans. Character testifies the place of a leader in history therefore, Gandhi is presented as a Hindu *mahatma* while King is projected as a leader of all communities and all generations of the United States. The day will

come when all the oppressed peoples will find the cult and creed of King the most suitable means to protest against injustice and the best solution to the issue of race relations. All would seek the paradigm set by Martin Luther King, Jr. Resultantly, King possessed more powerful leadership qualities than Gandhi. Gandhi is respected by his religious fellows as a spiritual personality while King is honoured as a political legend. The African-Americans gained power and embraced white Americans ultimately ³² while the Indian Muslims have been living a humiliating life as a rival minority under the same majority. They are facing the cruelty of attitude as before August 1947. Religiosity or spirituality depicts emotional attachment while political worth displays realistic and original form of the innersole of any personality. King's pragmatic approach towards nonviolent struggle made him a greater leader than Gandhi while Gandhi remained prey of the words.

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