

# Gandhi and Sen: Visions of Leadership for India

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## Abstract

In order to free India from the British, a new sort of leadership was needed. Mohandas Gandhi wrote about satyagraha, or soul-force, an individual type of leadership. In contrast, Nobel Prize-winning economist Amartya Sen interprets leadership differently. Whereas Gandhi generally valued leadership at the village and individual levels, Sen argues that this kind of leadership is only possible if the right climate is present at a national level. This article compares and contrasts the leadership visions of Gandhi and Sen.

India is expected to become critically important in world affairs in just a few years. The way Indian leaders direct their country will play a key role in the way the country develops. For guidance, leaders can look to two Indian thinkers, Mohandas Gandhi and Amartya Sen. Gandhi, as one of the most important leaders in the fight for Indian independence, developed a distinctly Indian theory of leadership and non-violent resistance. Sen, a Nobel Prize-winning economist, has done a good deal of work on development, especially as it relates to India. From looking at Sen's ideal process of political, economic, and social development, we can infer the role he believes leaders ought to play. In this paper, I will compare two of these authors' works in order to discover what each has to say about the role of leadership in India.

*Hind Swaraj, or Indian Home Rule*, written by Gandhi in 1938, before Indian independence, deals with how India should be governed. In it, Gandhi contrasts the British style of colonialism with how he feels an independent India would rule itself, and he provides a plan for getting there: *satyagraha*, variously translated as soul-force, truth-force, or love-force. Key to Gandhi's vision of independent India is the idea of individual leadership and self-reliance: a literal interpretation of "home rule."

Gandhi blames the state of colonial India on the state of Britain. He finds many problems with the British idea of civilization, saying, "We, therefore, have before us in England the force of everybody wanting and insisting on his rights, nobody thinking of his duty" (Gandhi, 1938, 62).

In addition, Britain is focused on material goods rather than spiritual gains: "...what state of things is described by the word 'civilization.' Its true test lies in the fact that people living in it make bodily welfare the object of life" (Gandhi, 1938, 31). Such a civilization cannot survive, because it is completely focused on the individual rather than the society, while at the same time looking only to the government and to society, rather than to individuals, for leadership. But Gandhi doesn't put all the blame on the British—rather, he argues that the weaknesses of Indian society have enabled colonization. The same lust for money that drove the British to colonize India drove the Indians to let themselves be colonized, and so "...we have become deprived of self-control and have become effeminate. In these circumstances, we are unfit to serve the country" (Gandhi, 1938, 52).

In order to free India from the British, a new sort of leadership was needed: satyagraha, or soul-force. Gandhi writes in *Hind Swaraj*,

If I do not obey the law and accept the penalty for its breach, I use soul-force. It involves sacrifice of self....sacrifice of self is infinitely superior to sacrifice of others. Moreover, if this kind of force is used in a cause that is unjust, only the person using it suffers. He does not make others suffer for his mistakes (Gandhi, 1938, 69).

In this way, satyagraha is a type of individual leadership. Each person must obey the dictates of his own conscience. He can try to convince others to follow him in passive resistance to a perceived injustice, but each individual must choose which battles to fight. If the passive resister is right, no lives will be harmed in the process of expanding justice, but if he is wrong, he has only harmed himself. Gandhi argues that these resisters are, in fact, more courageous than those who use violence. The leadership of satyagraha is implicit. When a person employs satyagraha, other people can use his suffering as a means to finding truth. The leader has used something more innate and convincing than reason to win people to his cause (Bandhyopadhyaya, 1969, 220). In addition, it is not a leadership that involves delegating. The person performing satyagraha risks paying the ultimate consequence; there is no way to distribute a death from a hunger strike into a group of people. The leader will suffer as much as anyone.

Gandhi lays out the plan for how the India freed through satyagraha will be governed. This India will be profoundly religious, although not a theocracy—"In reality there are as many religions as there are individuals; but those who are conscious of the spirit of nationality do not interfere with one another's religion. If they do, they are not fit to be considered a nation" (Gandhi, 1939, 43). Rather than using arms to defend itself, it will use satyagraha—"Real Home Rule is possible only where passive resistance is the guiding force of the people. Any other rule is foreign rule" (Gandhi, 1938, 72). It will recover the culture it lost under the British—"Is it not a sad commentary that we should have to speak of Home Rule in a foreign tongue" (Gandhi, 1938, 78)? Most importantly, it will be a society in which each citizen is a leader. Gandhi claims, "...if we become free, India is free...It is Swaraj [self-rule] when we learn to rule ourselves" (Gandhi, 1938, 56). The society will be organized into small, self-sufficient communities. The spinning wheel at the center of the Indian flag is symbolic of this ideal; it shows Gandhi's plan that each individual will make his own clothes on the loom. In addition, India will be a country of small villages, and each village will live traditionally, with agriculture as the main occupation (Gandhi, 1938, 54). Gandhi's argument for this traditional lifestyle is India's heritage: "The condition of India is unique. Its strength is immeasurable. We need not, therefore, refer to the history of other

countries” (Gandhi, 1938, 57). Because it is difficult to become rich making a living in small village agriculture, Gandhi’s ideal India will escape the problem that led to its original downfall. It will not be a ceaseless chase after money like the British.

In order for India to realize the potential Gandhi sees—not to become a “great” nation in the sense of the British Empire, but to be a nation in which every man is at peace with himself—each individual must experience Swaraj for himself (Gandhi, 1938, 56). At the end of *Hind Swaraj*, Gandhi lays out nineteen points that will give Indians the strength to take back their nation. Included are calls for lawyers, doctors, and wealthy men to abandon their jobs for hand looms—if they do this, hopefully the rest of the Indian nation will give up trying to be like other countries. In this way, wealthy men exercise leadership by their influence. Gandhi warns that Indians must be prepared to suffer, but once they are free of Britain, they will be able to govern themselves. Although each village will be a self-sufficient community, they will be tied together by a common cultural heritage into one nation. Gandhi’s India thus achieves independence not only from the colonizer, but from colonial norms as well. It uses a uniquely Indian pattern of leadership to form a uniquely Indian society.

But Gandhi was assassinated shortly after Indian independence, and his dream of a traditional India never came true. Even if he had lived, it is unlikely that India could have followed the course he set out. The era of the global village was already beginning, making Gandhi’s dream of local villages a thing of the past. Another way to deal with the problem of leadership in Indian development has been provided more recently by Amartya Sen, who tackled the problem from a different angle in his book *Development as Freedom*. Sen’s main argument is that development must be seen from a holistic perspective; that is, rather than counting development as increases in GDP, we ought to measure it by increases in freedoms. In making this assessment, Sen disagrees with Gandhi right off the bat: while Gandhi doesn’t see conventional development as a good at all, Sen believes that economic, political, and social developments should go hand-in-hand, with the resulting increases in freedom corresponding with increases in general well-being—an India of villages cannot give its people the opportunities a developed India can. Sen’s analysis is in some ways more relevant than Gandhi’s to India’s current condition.

Sen interprets leadership differently than Gandhi does. In Sen’s analysis, government must play a larger role: rather than the self-sufficient individual villages of Gandhi’s India, Sen envisions a development process directed from the top down and from the bottom up. In this way, both political and individual leadership play a role. Unlike Gandhi, Sen believes that development can be a good thing: where Gandhi says that “this civilization is irreligion,” Sen thinks that the freedoms and rights that come with his version of development “may *also* be very effective in contributing to economic progress” (Gandhi, 1938, 33; Sen, 2000, 37). While in Gandhi’s India, freedom and economic development are in many ways opposed, in Sen’s they help each other along. People who can rely on technology to do some of the work they once had to do can now have more time for voting, say, or educating their children. Like Gandhi’s India, Sen’s would not place money at the fore, but unlike Gandhi’s, it would recognize that money does play a role in improving civilizations.

Political leadership is very important to Sen’s analysis in *Development as Freedom*. Because he sees development as the enhancement of people’s abilities to do what they like, he argues that a

strong democracy is necessary for development: “the intensity of economic needs *adds to*—rather than subtracts from—the urgency of political freedoms” (Sen, 2000, 148). Whereas Gandhi generally wants leadership at the village and individual levels, Sen argues that this kind of leadership is only possible if the right climate is present at a national level. In India, an example of this type of leadership comes from Jawaharlal Nehru’s time as prime minister. Nehru saw that India could pursue rapid agricultural development, but he realized that that might lead to the permanent impoverishment and disenfranchisement of the lower classes. Instead, he chose to accept foreign aid, making India dependent on other countries in the short term, but aiding development in the long run (Varshney 1998). This sort of leadership, in Sen’s view, aids a developing country such as India. It recognizes benefits other than economic, but it realizes that attention must be paid to money as well. Indians cannot survive without economic development, but they cannot live well without freedom. Sen and Gandhi share the view that the people’s voice is important to a leader. Gandhi’s standard is hard to fault: “He believes that the satyagrahi [person performing satyagraha] should yield to public opinion in matters which do not involve departure from his personal religion or moral code” (Dhavan, 1962, 117).

Once a good climate is created at the top, individual leadership is necessary in Sen’s scheme as well. He comments, “Democracy does not serve as an automatic remedy of ailments as quinine works to remedy malaria. The opportunity it opens up has to be positively grabbed in order to achieve the desired effect” (Sen, 2000, 155). Individual leadership is required—development as freedom means that you have to take advantage of the freedoms recognized by a government. Democracy is arguably the best system that we know of to advance freedoms, but individual leadership is required within that framework. Similarly, Gandhi’s satyagraha can be creatively applied to different situations, “the concrete form of action in every case being dependent on the attending circumstances, the nature of the issue, and the parties involved” (Bandyopadhyaya, 1969, 235). Leaders at the government level, or at levels below, must decide what freedoms to give or to take and how to use those freedoms. The political system should encourage individual leadership; as Sen says, “Public policy has a role...in facilitating and guaranteeing fuller public discussion....Central to this approach is the idea of the public as an active participant in change, rather than as a passive and docile recipient of instructions or of dispensed assistance” (Sen, 2000, 281). Government can facilitate individual leadership by increasing educational, economic, and social opportunities, and it must also allow the public to speak out. When this is allowed to happen, Sen’s development process can take place.

Leaders in India and elsewhere can learn from Gandhi’s and Sen’s visions. Gandhi shows the importance of principled stands by individual leaders. His is a leadership by example. It is crippled, though, by his insistence on an India that no longer exists. Sen gives us a model for India as it is. If a leader can combine Sen’s democratic leadership structure with Gandhi’s moral tactics, he will be able to take India far in the economic, political, and social realms.

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