



Revisiting Gandhi in Our
Contemporaneous World
Virendra Kumar

UGC Emeritus Fellow

Email: vkumar1459_42@yahoo.co.in

I. Introductory

While exploring the relevance of Gandhi in our contemporaneous world within the ambit of the given theme, “Mahatma Gandhi Then and Now,” the question that needs to be raised at the very outset is, ‘what is Gandhi?’ and not just ‘who is Gandhi?’ ‘Gandhi is dead; long live Gandhi,’ as we may say in a jurisprudential discourse for providing continuity of one generation to another. Likewise, in our contextual response, Gandhi stands for a unique idea, an innovative thought, or simply a benevolent philosophy of life emanating from the model of his own conduct, his life and his thoughts and actions. This is what survives even after the exit of Gandhi from the temporal world and this is with which we have to do with.

For deciphering the values of Gandhi’s life, which have profoundly impacted the world in ways more than one in shaping its social, economic and political thinking, I tend to turn to the limited arena of his experiment during the freedom struggle with a diehard revolutionary. This was the young man, by the name of Prithvi Singh, with a chequered history of revolutionary exploits, carrying a heavy price on his head, and who voluntarily surrendered himself to Gandhi in 1938.

The historic account of the life of Prithvi Singh is well documented in the biography penned down by Rahul Sankriyayan, known as the Father of Indian Travelogue

literature, in Hindi under the title, *Sardar Prithvi Singh*(1944):¹ This account stands updated by Prithvi Singh in his own autobiography in Hindi, *Krantipath ka pathic* (1964) ² with a Foreword by Dr. Hazari Prasad Dwivedi, an eminent Hindi novelist, literary historian, essayist, critic and scholar par excellence.³ The second Hindi edition was further updated and translated into English, and published by the Bhartiya Vidya Bhavan, Bombay, with the title, *Baba Prithvi Singh Azad – The Legendary Crusader* (1987).⁴

Baba Prithvi Singh Azad (1892-1989), was one of the founder members of Gardar Party in the United States of America in 1913, who suffered incarceration during the pre-independence period, including a long term in the Cellular Jail in Andaman. He was accorded the privileged position of eminence by having him as the President of 'All India Freedom Fighters' Organization' with concurrence of all who steered the freedom movement. The grateful Nation honoured him with the award of Padma Bhushan in 1977 "for his distinct contribution to society." In 1978, he earned the Soviet Land Nehru Award for his reminiscences (in Hindi) – *Lenin ke desh mein* (in the Land of Lenin).

This article is an attempt to bring to light some of the basic values of life emanating from the intimate interaction between Gandhi and Prithvi Singh. And how Gandhi's philosophy of truth and non-violence tempered and moulded the life of Prithvi Singh, who was steadfast in his belief anchored in violent revolution. In this dedicated discourse, what is of crucial significance is, not merely the end-result of attainment of freedom from the foreign rule but, also the *means* to attaining that end. It is in this process of pursuing that ultimate goal of freedom, some

1 Peoples Publishing House, Pt. Ltd., New Delhi. The first edition of 1944 was followed in quick succession by the second edition in 1946, and thereafter the third edition in 1979. Rahul Sankrityayan (9 April 1893 – 14 April 1963) is the one who played a pivotal role to give travelogue a 'literature form'.

2 The first edition was published by Pragya Prakashan, Chandigarh. The second edition published by Shivalal Aggarwal & Co.; Agra appeared in 1970.

3 Dr. Hazari Prasad Dwivedi (19 August 1907 – 19 May 1979) in his Foreword has, inter alia, commended: "What is special about Baba Prithvi Singh's autobiography is the evidence of great faith and self-confidence, integrity and introspection. It is remarkably free from bitterness. He does not try to prove his point of view by condemning others. There is no place in his life for obstinacy. When he surrendered himself to Gandhiji, he showed an open mind, supreme courage and commendable detachment. He has the courage to shed his pet convictions...." See, below, *The Legendary Crusader*, at p. xx.

4 Hereinafter simply cited as *The Legendary Crusader*. (1987)

ideas, thoughts or principles get crystalized, what may be typically termed as the Gandhian principles of life. In this contextual matrix, we may finally examine how, in what respect, and to what extent those crystalized Gandhian principles continue to be of any relevance in our contemporary world, which is beset with multiple challenges in education, self-reliance, social relations, environment, etc., impinging upon the lives of people both as individuals and individuals as an integral part of society.

II. Saga of revolutionary exploits of Prithvi Singh (Prior to his voluntary surrender to Gandhi in 1938)⁵

Prithvi Singh, at heart ever a revolutionary, left his home and hearth at the prime age of 17 with the objective of liberating the motherland from the oppressive rule of the British. He oddly travelled to Singapore, Hong Kong, Manila, and America incognito to seek support for his mission by avoiding police detection. During his sojourn in America, he joined the group of like-minded young people in 1913, who had founded a party - Gadar Party - vowing to uproot the foreign power from the Indian soil. For accomplishing their liberation mission, a group of those young revolutionaries, called Gadarites, returned to India by ship. However, while doing so, they all were caught at Calcutta port, excepting only one member, who managed to evade his detection at that time. But sooner than later, he was also caught, and sent to serve a long-term imprisonment. He was Prithvi Singh.

Owing to his exemplary courageous revolutionary spirit, Prithvi Singh was implicated in the First Lahore Conspiracy Case (1915), and sentenced to death. However, as if by quirk turn of history, the death sentence was commuted to life imprisonment, and he was lodged in the Cellular Jail in Andaman, which was the place for keeping aloof and apart the persons who were either most dreaded criminals, or who were considered as the deadliest enemy of the colonial rule in India.

5

This account has been abstracted from *The Legendary Crusader* (1987).

During his lodging at the Cellular Jail for about seven years, Prithvi Singh was not deterred to create a sort of revolution amongst the otherwise subdued prisoners by undertaking fast unto death for the inhuman treatment meted out to the fellow 'human' prisoners.⁶ Somehow or the other, that news about the totally unacceptable beastly treatment of prisoners and the unprecedented fast unto death for five long months leaked into the mainstream population of India. This instantly created unrest and upheaval amongst the Indians across country, and, which, in turn, forced the British to immediately shift him from the Cellular Jail in Andaman to the prison house somewhere else in India.

In this process of transferring and re-lodging, while being escorted to Calcutta, Prithvi Singh jumped out of the running train in order to escape from the life-term imprisonment. However, he was caught again sooner than later and thereby ending his devilishly earned short-lived, transient, 'freedom'. It seems, in due course of time, this mode of escape proved to be a mere rehearsal for his second similar attempt of jumping out of the running train in 1922, and thereafter Prithvi Singh remained underground and untraced for the next 16 years. During this long period, he pursued his revolutionary mission in close proximity of leading lights such as Dr. Narayan Damodar Savarkar, the younger brother of Veer Vinayak Savarkar, Shri Ganesh Raghunath Vaishampayann, Dr. P.V. Kane. With the generous grant from Maharaja Krishan Kumar Singh of Bhavanagar, a petty State in Saurashtra, and the invaluable advice and help of Col. Zoraver Singh, Advisor to the then Resident on behalf of the British Government, Prithvi Singh managed to start a *Vyayamshala* (gymnasium), known as Ganesh Krida Mandal, and established himself as a 'physical instructor' under the assumed name of Swamirao. This gave him an opportunity to meet thousands of young minds and fill them with patriotic fervour.⁷ However, during all these years of underground life in disguise, Prithvi Singh was carrying a heavy reward on his head, dead or alive, to any person who could help the British police in tracing him!

With the launching of Satyagraha Movement by Mahatma Gandhi in 1930s, there came about a perceptible change in the political awakening of masses in India.

6 Some of them died. However, Prithvi Singh survived with forced feeding over five months.

7 See, *The Legendary Crusader*, at pp. 122-15.

This changed scenario made Prithvi Singh realize and re-think at least on two clear counts. One, to overthrow the British power in India through armed rebellion was neither feasible nor desirable. Two, and this was indeed a knotty question, what sort of critical contribution he could make on the liberation front by remaining underground under the continual shadow of death?

At this critical juncture, Prithvi Singh by virtue of his exploits in disguise against the British rule, which were amply reflected in the look-out notices affixed at all railway stations and other prominent public places, he was tracked down as a fellow revolutionary by Sardar Bhagat Singh, Chandrashekar Azad and Sukhdev. This became feasible through the agency of trusted friends in the State of Gujrat. The trio instantly persuaded him to go to Soviet Russia as a member of Republican Army with the objective of learning the strategy that ensured the success of the Red Army in bringing about a socialist revolution in Russia. How, in what manner, and at what opportune time to reach Russia, 'the land of revolutionaries' political dream', was left to the ingenuity of Prithvi Singh himself! However, as a token of affirmation of their faith in the fellow revolutionary, they gave him fifty cartridges along with an automatic pistol that could fire 11 bullets.⁸

Prithvi Singh managed to reach Soviet Russia, studied the strategies of bringing about revolution, which were essentially premised on the fundamental principles of communism. He stayed in Russia for about three years. Soon thereafter he returned to India and roamed stealthily for about five years there and everywhere in search of an opportunity to accomplish his mission of liberation. However, one thing became increasingly clear to him that it was no more possible to remain undetected by the British police and their CID. This thought of being caught at any moment became confirmed by the flashed news about the arrest of one of his own very close fellow revolutionaries, Comrade Gurmukh Singh, due to the betrayal by an acquaintance of his.⁹ This was a sharp reminder to him of the imminent danger of his being similarly caught at the instance of a bare acquaintance, who may not be able to resist the temptation of claiming large reward by just informing the police about his whereabouts! And that would, besides his own instant

8 Id., at p. 144.

9 Id., at p. 203.

elimination, also play havoc with the life and interest of all the patriotic persons, who had hitherto helped him directly or indirectly in remaining underground for long 16 years!¹⁰ This in itself was the most baffling thought that was pricking the conscience of Prithvi Singh continuously.¹¹

Moreover, he also clearly perceived and understood that, by the year 1938, the political climate in India had dramatically changed. No more was there any such revolutionary activity going on as would require collection of arms or running an underground press for creating the environment of armed rebellion against the British rule. Weary of living an underground life under the continual shadow of death, Prithvi Singh shared his predicament with his “communist comrades” and sought their counsel.¹² “They had nothing to guide me except to approach Gandhi ji,” recalls Prithvi Singh in his autobiography.¹³

III. Prithvi Singh ‘approaching’ Gandhi through his soul-stirring surrender and its profound impact on the former

Prithvi Singh with the chequered history of revolutionary exploits against the British Rule in India, and who was also carrying a reward over his head, met Gandhi in person for the first time in 1938. The meeting was arranged through persons close to Gandhi at about 10 p.m. on May 17, 1938 as soon as Gandhi returned to Ashram after attending the Working Committee meeting of the Congress party.¹⁴ The moment Prithvi Singh introduced himself as a person who remained underground for 16 years and what kind of life he had hitherto lived under the assumed name of Swami Rao, Gandhi became instantly interested in him as he had already heard

10 Id., at pp. 203-204.

11 Id., at 204.

12 Ibid,

13 Ibid.

14 The meeting was arranged through the intervention of two prominent personalities, Pattabhai Sitaramayya and Nanabhai Bhatt. See, *ibid.*

the name of Swamirao and his constructive work amongst the youth of Gujarat.¹⁵ Spontaneously, Gandhi asked him to write down a brief account of his life and bring that narrative to him the next day.

Prithvi Singh took the temporary shelter at the residence of one of his most trusted beneficiaries, and spent the whole night in writing what Gandhi wanted him to reveal about himself. After doing what he was desired to do by Gandhi, Prithvi Singh felt somewhat shaky for a moment in his resolve of surrendering. Since that short candid account of himself in his own handwriting constituted clear confessed evidence against himself, it merited his instant hanging by the British government. In this alarming situation, he at once wanted to consult his "communist friends at an appointed time," but "they did not turn up."¹⁶ And this "hurt" him much.¹⁷ His predicament at that moment, in his own words, was: "Surrendering myself to the police whom I had eluded for so many years with so many hair-breadth escapes was a question of life and death to me."¹⁸

Be that as it may, the next day, before the daybreak, Prithvi Singh moved to the residence of one of his confidence¹⁹ and stayed with him till the sunset. At night fall, he called on Gandhi at the appointed time and place and submitted his self-account narrative. Gandhi read his narration with "all seriousness," and spontaneously "remarked" that Prithvi Singh was "a dangerous man to the British Government," and that his release was "next to impossible."²⁰ However, there was

15 Swamirao of Ganesh Krida mandal was the house-hold name in the State of Gujrat.

16 The Legendary Crusader, at p. 204.

17 Ibid. The feeling of 'hurt' in the situational context, it needs to be born in mind, should not be construed in the sense of 'betrayal', for it has already been stated, that the eventual decision of surrender was taken by Prithvi Singh in consultation with his close communist friends, see, *supra* notes 12 and 13, and the accompanying text. Thus, the so-called 'hurt' was just a panic reaction when there was every danger of being caught by police even before he could surrender himself to Gandhi, the prospect that he hitherto successfully avoided for 16 long years. May be, those communist friends had nothing more to add to what was already known and decided, and that there was no easy mode of communicating to Prithvi Singh to that effect either. Moreover, the chances of his being caught turned out to be true by the news of Prithvi Singh's anticipated surrender to Gandhi before his actual surrender. See, *infra*, note 24.

18 Ibid.

19 Shantilal Shah, see, *ibid*.

20 Ibid.

still one “more serious problem” appended to his voluntary surrender: whether the British Government would let him “live”? And this prompted Gandhi to add:²¹

“You had better give up the idea of self-surrender and spend the rest of your life as you did for about 16 years. This country is bound to be free sooner or later. And then you would be a free man.”

To this candid counsel of Gandhi, filled with genuine concern for the safety of his life, Prithvi Singh readily responded with equal vehemence by saying:²²

“Self-surrender does not mean only my personal [physical] freedom. It is high time to come into the open and play the political game and set an example to the youth of the country.”

In the light of this intense interaction, although very short and cryptic, yet revealing the profound purport of voluntary surrender, Gandhi “postponed the issue for the time being,” and desired that “in the meantime we both have time to think over and decide.”²³

However, the “time to think over and decide” was not to be, as the news of Prithvi Singh’s intended surrender leaked out.²⁴ This led Gandhi, who intended to correspond with the Viceroy on the issue of voluntary surrender by Prithvi Singh, to change his mind the moment he was told that his idea had leaked! Without losing any time, Gandhi penned down a letter on the issue of voluntary surrender by Prithvi Singh and sent the same through his private secretary to the Commissioner of Police, Bombay. In his communication, he stated frankly, without any prevarication, that Prithvi Singh, who was a rebel against the Government and had broken jail more than once, had taken refuge in his Ashram, and that the Commissioner of Police was welcome to come and arrest him while in his

21 Ibid.

22 Ibid.

23 Ibid.

24 This news was confirmed by one of the very close friends of Prithvi Singh, namely Bahuddin Usman, who immediately rushed to meet Mahadev Desai, the private secretary of Gandhi, to check the veracity of the news, and found that it was absolutely true. See, id., at p. 205.

custody. To this cryptic communication, Gandhi added an earnest suggestive plea that if the Police Commissioner would let Prithvi Singh stay on in his Ashram, “it would be good of him.”²⁵

Realizing the fugitive character of Prithvi Singh and the anticipated portentous fallouts of his voluntary surrender, the Police Commissioner did not desire to act on his own. Promptly he wrote to the Central Government for seeking their urgent directions in the matter. Lo and beholden, the Viceroy ordered him “to arrest Prithvi Singh, who was a dangerous criminal and to do so with due care.”²⁶ Pursuant to this directive, the Police Commissioner rang up Gandhi to say that “according to instructions received from above, he would reach the Ashram the following day at two o’clock to arrest Prithvi Singh,” and that “he would be grateful if Prithvi Singh was made available then.”²⁷

When this news of his impending arrest by the police was conveyed to Prithvi Singh, he felt happy without entertaining any feeling of remorse whatsoever. At this cheerful voluntary surrender by Prithvi Singh, Gandhi “felt gratified.”²⁸

The Police Commissioner along with a CID Officer arrived at the Ashram on the stipulated time. On his arrival, he immediately dismissed the Bombay police force, which had reached earlier and surrounded the Ashram for meeting any eventuality or untoward situation. While disbanding the police force, the Commissioner said that he himself would take charge of Prithvi Singh and escort him to jail. The inmates of the Ashram assembled and began to recite prayers as a token of their farewell to Prithvi Singh. Some snapshots were also taken. With their blessing, Prithvi Singh left the Ashram happily and walked out with the Police Commissioner to Jail, his new abode!

The next day, the news of Prithvi Singh’s surrender to the police was published in the local newspapers along with the political statement of Gandhi. However, an

25 Ibid.

26 Ibid.

27 Ibid.

28 Ibid.

authentic historic account of how, in what manner and under what circumstances, Prithvi Singh approached Gandhi, and then how he had voluntarily surrendered to the Police, was affirmed by Gandhi ji editorially in his weekly, *The Harijan* (May 28, 1938) under the title, "The Fellow Pilgrim." After a detailing account of how Prithvi Singh was convicted for life sentence in the Lahore Conspiracy Case of 1915, how he spent years in Andaman Cellular Jail and other jails in Madras and Rajmahendri, and how he succeeded in escaping from police custody by jumping out of the running train in 1922, and how thereafter he remained underground for 16 long years till the date of his surrender to him on May 18, 1938, Gandhi described him as a "great revolutionary", who "master minded his own movement." How Gandhi came round to take him in his Ashram, he wrote:

"My ideology has no place for any kind of secrecy and I made it clear to him the self-surrender to the police was an act of national service. He accepted my view and offered himself on May 18, and the very next day I wrote to the District Collector that I would like to talk about his release for he had offered himself to the Government. And if the Government was not prepared to permit him to stay in my Ashram, the District Collector can come to my Ashram and take Prithvi Singh away. He wrote back that he had no power to order his release. He came the next day with the Superintendent of Jail and took Prithvi Singh away.

I was assured that he would be treated as an 'A' Class prisoner which I thought he richly deserved from the account of his life which he had written down at my instance. I am still of the opinion that he had done nothing to be ashamed of.... He told me that he was wholly devoting himself to the study of non-violence in all its aspects, particularly its applicability in the struggle for freedom and that other revolutionaries like him were thinking along these lines. They had no other aim in life but freedom of their country. He put his case so seriously and earnestly that I did not find it difficult to agree with him. Rather, I felt happy to be in their company on our pilgrimage."

Thus, began the new chapter in the life of Prithvi Singh in prison, from which he would be released (as per the history sheet appended to his case) in the year

1966 after serving life sentence. For Prithvi Singh, his past was dead on May 18 (on the day of his surrender to Gandhi), and a new birth began on May 19 (on the first day of his prison life) – this is what he wrote in his diary, in which he began to write his autobiography at the instance of Gandhi.

Soon thereafter, Gandhi continued to write persistently to the Viceroy for the release of Prithvi Singh, but all in vain. The British Government could not afford to oblige Gandhi on this count, for “they were not going to put their trust in Prithvi Singh, taking him to be the most dangerous prisoner ever held.”²⁹

In prison, Prithvi Singh spent most of his time spinning, reading and writing his biography as advised by Gandhi. He was also encouraged by Gandhi to write to him regularly, giving an account of his activities. Gandhi’s responses to his letters are truly illuminating and instructive. To wit:

On August 24, 1938³⁰–

“... I had your letters. I am glad you are having good treatment and that you have mental peace. I know that non-violence in thought is the most difficult of attainment. And yet without the co-operation of thought, non-violence in word and action does not become the all-pervading irresistible force that it undoubtedly is. Such non-violence comes through God’s grace. And that grace descends only on those who make ceaseless effort much greater surely than what we make to attain material ends....”

On October 5, 1938,³¹ recognizing the importance of spinning in attaining non-violence in thought, Gandhi, *inter alia*, wrote:

“I must get hold of the new type of wool-spinning Charkha” for you.

29 Id., at p. 212

30 Gandhi’s letter to Prithvi Singh, placed in Appendix at p. 318.

31 Gandhi’s letter to Prithvi Singh, placed in Appendix at p. 319

On December 21, 1938³²–

“Though I do not want to publish your letter, as the authorities may not like its publication whilst you are still a prisoner. I am going to make judicious use of it amongst those who are still unconvinced of the matchless superiority of non-violence over violence. ...”

On May 21, 1939, after the completion of Prithvi Singh’s one year in prison, Gandhi, responding to his letters, *inter alia*, wrote:³³

“It is satisfying to note that you have sufficient inner-experience. You would have noticed in my recent articles that I lay much importance to spinning as a means of developing a sense of non-violence. I take it as a symbol. The pleasure that one receives on working at the spinning-wheel for a long time does prevent him from getting ruffled easily at a small provocation. If the wheel is in order, one is apt to be lost in one’s own thought, for the harmonious sound of the wheel helps focused thinking: one who does not possess control over spinning, cannot be called a spinner.

I hope that in the second year of your jail life, you would acquire great skill in spinning for the development of your belief in Ahinsa. *Your experiment and experience would be very helpful, for I think that you are one of the few who are capable of understanding their mind. People are deceived more by themselves than by others...* [Emphasis added]

A year later, Gandhi’s emissary, Mahadev Desai, his private secretary, visited Prithvi Singh in jail. In his editorial note of *The Harijan* (September 1939) under the heading, “A Prisoner among Prisoners”, he recorded that he found Prithvi Singh in absolute cheerful exposition without bothering about his early release, and that he had “already spun eighty pounds of wool” during his sojourn in prison.³⁴ Gandhi

32 Gandhi’s letter to Prithvi Singh, placed in Appendix at p. 320.

33 Gandhi’s letter to Prithvi Singh, placed in Appendix at p. 321. See also, *id.*, at p. 216-217.

34 *Id.*, at p. 213.

felt extremely happy to learn that Prithvi Singh fully comprehended his “ideas on spinning” and that he had “no difficulty in understanding the working of Ahimsa.”³⁵

The sudden breakout of World War II in September 1939 brought about an understanding between the Viceroy and Gandhi to co-operate with the British Government in “emergency”. This instantly resulted in the release of Prithvi Singh on September 23, 1939. And, the unexpected release brought him to the Ashram of Gandhi at Sevagram in Wardha, where he saw in person, how Gandhi, through the exemplary mode of his own conduct, was desperately trying to teach how to imbibe the principles of ‘truth and non-violence’ in our thought and action by leading a ‘simple life.’

IV. Crystallization of value-principles of life from the interactive association between Gandhi and Prithvi Singh and their relevance in our contemporaneous world

Under the mould of Gandhi, Prithvi Singh truly turned into a different human being. On the very day of his voluntary surrender to Gandhi on May 18, 1938, we may recall that Prithvi Singh himself recorded in his prison diary that his past was dead and a new life began. How has this metamorphosis come about? In order to find an answer to this seemingly simple question, we need to remember the first point of contact between Gandhi and Prithvi Singh, and then ask ourselves: Why did Prithvi Singh choose Gandhi and surrender himself and his fate to him? It was indeed a very difficult and dicey proposition, involving the issue of his ‘life and death.’

By the account of the unfolding story of the life of Prithvi Singh, the initiating thought was no other but the innate feeling of Trust or Faith in Gandhi and his philosophy of non-violence. This very thought with due deliberation took him to Gandhi on the night of May 17, 1938. What did Gandhi do? Did he take him instantly mere at his words? No. Instead, he asked Prithvi Singh to come the next day with a brief written account of his life!

35 See Gandhi's letter to Prithvi Singh, placed in Appendix at p. 217.

After putting down the few naked facts about his underground life of 16 years in his own handwriting, and that how he was sentenced to death in Lahore conspiracy case of 1915, and how he made the daring escape by jumping out of the running train, Prithvi Singh himself became somewhat suspect and shaky in his resolve to seeing Gandhi. He immediately contacted his confident communist friends and wanted to consult them before he took that critical step of surrendering, for it was pregnant with the possibility of his instant death by the British government on the basis of his own recorded handwritten statement without requiring any more corroborative evidence! Since nobody turned up to help him as promised, Prithvi Singh, albeit with a feeling of a little trust-deficit in his decision-making, met Gandhi on the night of the following day.

On bare reading of Prithvi Singh's candid account, we may recall what Gandhi said. He stated spontaneously that he would like him to re-consider his decision of voluntary surrender, as it would be 'next to impossible' for him (Gandhi) to get Prithvi Singh released, for he was already identified as the most "dangerous man to the British Government."³⁶ The decision on voluntary surrender was, thus, deferred for the time being.

What was the impact of this deferment? Prithvi Singh's trust in Gandhi as a saviour of the situation got confirmed and validated. Gandhi's trust in Prithvi Singh gained ascendancy in his estimation, for he saw and visualised his critical role in the struggle for freedom. This made Gandhi to plan at that very moment to correspond immediately with the Viceroy about his case being treated differently as that of a surrender by a political person and not by a fugitive.³⁷ This mutuality of trust turned out to be of crucial significance: Prithvi Singh's 'hesitant' surrender became truly 'voluntary,' as it was based upon 'understanding' the intent and spirit of Gandhi; and Gandhi also felt assured in his resolve, as he perceived the possibility of transforming a 'violent' man into a person pursuing the principle of 'non-violence' in his thought and actions for attaining the goal of freedom.

36 See supra note 20 and the accompanying text.

37 See supra notes 24 and 25 along with the accompanying text.

This background of mutuality of 'trust' and 'understanding' on both sides led Prithvi Singh to enter prison life with a positive mind. And with this began a new relationship of 'teacher and taught' between Gandhi and Prithvi Singh! At the very threshold, as a first step to comprehend the principle of 'non-violence' (*Ahimsa*), Gandhi exhorted Prithvi Singh to make 'spinning-wheel' his constant companion. Which he did decisively, without entertaining an iota of doubt. So much so he spun about eighty pounds of wool within a short span of about eight-month-prison-life and proudly sent the same to Gandhi, his revered teacher, for his kind perusal!

What is the inherent linkage between 'non-violence' and 'spinning'? Through his several letters to Prithvi Singh in prison, Gandhi would explain to him how spinning on Charkha is a singular mode of going into 'meditation.' Spinning requires a person his utmost concentration. Slightest distraction or deviation in thoughts of the spinner would cause discordant between the spinning thread and the wheel, resulting in breaking of the thread. With ceaseless practice of spending hours at the spinning-wheel, the power of concentration increases, which, in turn, makes one's own inner thoughts pure and sublime, free from hatred and prejudices, and thereby inculcating the values of compassion, simplicity and self-sacrifice. Thus, the spinning exercise itself manifestly becomes, as Gandhi himself put it, "as a means of developing a sense of non-violence."³⁸ In Gandhi's estimate, Prithvi Singh is "one of the few who are capable of understanding" and realizing this simple truth in their 'thought and action'.³⁹

In sum, the Gandhian principle of non-violence (*Ahimsa*) is not just an opposite of 'violence' (*Hinsa*), but an all pervading, comprehensive, concept, inhering the multiple core values of life. And 'the teacher-in-Gandhi' successfully taught those values to 'the student-in-Prithvi Singh'. This teacher-taught relationship between Gandhi and Prithvi Singh, in our understanding, is premised on the Upanishdic principle of lore, which clearly states that one can attain 'enlightenment' 'only through faith, understanding, and realization. This is what had happened in the

38 See, supra note 33 and the accompanying text.

39 Ibid.

life story of Prithvi Singh under the benevolent influence of Gandhi.⁴⁰ In the light of this narrative of teacher–taught relationship between Gandhi and Prithvi Singh, we may now examine its relevance in the contemporary system of education in India.

Most recently, our modern system of education stands marked by the latest new National Educational Policy (NEP) of 2020. This policy has been searchingly formulated with the emphatic objective that the purpose of education is to “enable personal accomplishment and enlightenment, constructive public engagement, and productive contribution to society.”⁴¹ With the formal announcement on July 29, 2020, the new NEP (2020) “replaces the 34-year-old National Policy on Education and is aimed at paving the way for transformational reforms in school and higher education systems to make India a global knowledge superpower,” proclaimed Prime Minister Narendra Modi.⁴² Contextually he elaborated that there was a need “to take knowledge related to agriculture and its practical application to school level,” and that under the NEP (2020) efforts are on “to introduce Agriculture subjects at middle–school level in villages.”⁴³ He sanguinely hoped that “the cooperation of the agricultural universities in developing ecosystems to streamline the flow of knowledge and expertise from campus to field” would indeed play a vital role in the reconstruction of society.⁴⁴

40 See supra notes 30–33, and the accompanying text, bringing out the correspondence between Gandhi and Prithvi Singh, showing how the teacher in Gandhi influenced the student in Prithvi Singh, so much so in the estimate of Gandhi, Prithvi Singh was “one of the few who are capable of understanding their mind.”

41 The NEP (2020) took about six years to fructify since January 2015, and is premised upon nearly two lakh solid suggestions emanating from unprecedented wide range consultation that took place with 2.5 lakh Gram Panchayats, 6,600 Blocks and 676 Districts in Committees constituted under the chairmanship of former cabinet secretary TSR Subramanian and eminent scientist K Kasturirangan. In this respect, the objective of successive national educational policies as reflected in University Education Commission (1948–49), Secondary Education Commission (1952–53), DS Kothari Commission (1964–65), and the National Policy of Education (1968) may be compared.

42 See, The Indian EXPRESS, August 30, 2020: “Need to take farm education to middle–school level!” The PM Modi made this elaboration after the virtual inauguration of the College and Administration building complex of the Rani Lakshmi Bai Central Agricultural University, Jhansi (Haryana) on August 29, 2020.

43 Ibid.

44 Ibid.

Speaking at the Conclave on NEP (2020) organized by the Ministry of Education via video conference held on September 11, 2020, Prime Minister Modi spoke again on the inherent and implicit value of new education policy. He laconically stated that hitherto in our approach to education, “mark-sheet” has become a “pressure sheet” for students and a “prestige sheet” for parents!⁴⁵ Recognizing this “marks driven” approach as a “major drawback,” he emphatically recounted that NEP (2020) is essentially and basically focused on true “learning” by moving “away from high stakes tests” and “towards self-assessment and peer assessment.”⁴⁶

This pragmatic perspective of NEP (2020), it needs emphasis to state, stood fully realized by Gandhi in his exposition of the prime principle of truth and non-violence. Prithvi Singh has alluded to this prime principle of Gandhi as an integral component of the daily life of an individual by observing:⁴⁷

“Bapu had taught us to prepare compost manure but our countrymen have not yet appreciated this cheap method of doing so. It is not mere hygienic consideration, which keeps our latrines clean. It has an economic value which we should learn to understand and to carry out. On occasions, I have explained to others Bapu’s point of view. But most of the Ashramites did it, only to please Bapu and to earn his blessings.”

The new policy of education with its central focus on “personal accomplishment and enlightenment” of each and every individual, engaging one and all to contribute towards the gigantic task of socio-economic re-construction by being one’s own productive best, is indeed a historic step. In our own view, NEP (2020) resolutely rejects the policy of ‘exclusion’ premised upon the contrived processes of ‘selections’ through an incredibly high rate of ‘rejections’. This was the colonial concept of education. It was indeed a shrewd strategy of creating an elite class out of, and amongst, the Indian masses. It created a sharp divide rather than

45 See, The Indian EXPRESS, September 12, 2020: “Mark-sheet shouldn’t be pressure sheet or prestige sheet.”

46 Ibid.

47 Legendry crusader, at 220.

uniting people. Gandhi vehemently opposed it. As early as during the Round Table Conference in 1931, Gandhi is reported to have said then in one of his speeches:⁴⁸

“The beautiful tree of education was cut down by you British. Therefore, today, India is far more illiterate than it was 100 years ago.”

The colonial concept of education was good for them, but no good for us. Unfortunately, however, we have lingered on with their concept, perhaps unwittingly. Hitherto we have been structuring the whole range of course curriculum, right from the school to the university level, which would promote the prospect of gullible students to prepare for the high stake national competitive examinations. Seemingly, bearing in mind this state of slant in our system of education, a distinguished duo of a teacher and a researcher from a reputed IIT proffered their incisive comments. They were prompted to make their comments in the context of UGC mandating all the Universities to hold various entrance examinations before the stipulated date of September 30, 2020 despite the persisting pandemic of Covid-19. ⁴⁹Poignantly, they pointed out:⁵⁰

“National competitive exams such as JEE (Joint Entrance Examination), NEET (National Eligibility-cum-Entrance Test) and GATE (Graduate Aptitude Test in Engineering) have become the de-facto standards for education. The folly of this is well-known. They adversely impact the overall development of our youth. They encourage coaching, and intervene in the state’s ability to provide doctors and engineers from the local population. They distort the meaning and practice of science. And yet their impact on students and society has not been formally measured or accepted by

48 This prophetic statement of Gandhi has been quoted by Arjun Ram Meghwal, Union Minister of State for Parliamentary Affairs and Heavy Industries & Public Enterprises, while commenting upon the new NEP (2020): see, The Indian EXPRESS, August 31, 2020: “On education, looking ahead,” wherein he acclaimed the NEP as “an important milestone in India’s journey towards becoming a global knowledge superpower” inasmuch as it makes a significant departure from the hitherto held policy-perspective of education..

49 See, “UGC versus States,” by Milind Sohoni, who teaches at IIT Bombay and IIT Goa, and Oshin Dharap, a researcher at IIT Bombay, published in The Indian EXPRESS, August 27, 2020.

50 Ibid.

the MHRD. The most exceptionable is the UGC-NET, the qualifying exam for college teachers.” [Emphasis added]

Hopefully, this new NEP (2020), which is premised upon pragmatic suggestions, emanating from wide range consultations with the people at the grass-root⁵¹ levels, is bound to be distinctly different, both in its core objectives and methods of implementation. It is people-centric in its objective, as it is expected to fulfil the diverse societal needs, taking individuals as the basic unit of the social group of which he or she is an integral part. In its implementation, the teachers are desired to perceive the problems of their students meaningfully and impart basic knowledge to resolve those problems skilfully through the presentation of real-life situations. Thus, both in the objective of the NEP (2020) and its eventual realization we do envisage and foresee the evolving process of individualization-cum-decentralization of the whole gamut of education. Gandhi, in our understanding of him through Prithvi Singh, did visualise the evolution of such a process in the realm of education when he strongly mooted the concept of self-sufficient and self-reliant villages functioning as a little Republic.⁵² Happily, Prime Minister Modi’s emphatic statement of integrating the subject of agriculture into the curriculum at middle-school level under the NEP (2020)⁵³ recalls the vision of Gandhi.

Finally, the only question that remains to be considered is, whether Gandhi’s emphasis on living the life of austerity, simplicity, cleanliness, self-sacrifice, and self-dependence is of any relevance to us today? Prithvi Singh fully realized the value of these norms in his life as a practical exposition of the profound principle of truth and non-violence. He vouched for their validity during his sojourn in Gandhi Ashram at Wardha.

Our contemporaneous world is most conspicuously characterized by the Covid-19 phenomenon. This has caused and is still causing unabated and unprecedented hostile situation in the life-history of human existence. Surprisingly, it is pandemic

51 See, supra note 41, and the accompanying text.

52 For the exposition of this concept, See, M.K. Gandhi, “Every Village A Republic,” chapter 24, in *India of my dreams*.

53 See supra notes 43-44, and the accompanying text.

across boundaries of nations, irrespective of their respective statuses in terms of rich or poor, high or low, developed or developing, geographical location, etc. It has turned lives upside down. Since its breakout in early March this year of 2020, scientists all over the world, with all their super scientific knowledge and neo-computerised-technological-advancements, are still desperately trying to meet the menace of Covid-19. However, what have they discovered till date? They have found the concept of LOCKDOWN, which is “one of the very few concepts” having “unanimous scientific backing.”⁵⁴

Lockdown, in its functional realistic terms, means to stay put within the confines of your ‘home and hearth’! This has led us into a very strange situation, for that instantly impacted almost all the facets of our life. All the educational institutions, schools, colleges and universities, for instance, stood shut. Movements of all goods and services stood suspended likewise. Any national or international travel is sanctioned most grudgingly. This, indeed, in itself is the biggest shocking jolt in the wake of national Lockdown!

Way has to be found to come out of this turmoil. Tentative solution has been found, as if by common concurrence unreservedly and universally, in the form of evolving the rule of ‘social distancing’ backed by the mandatory norm of wearing ‘mask’ by individuals.⁵⁵ This has resulted into relaxing the inexorable rule of national Lockdown. Such a relaxation has hitherto come to us in successive phases of Lockdown, permitting relatively more freedom and lesser restrictions on movement of people and ‘goods and services. But still by scrupulously observing the norms of social distancing and wearing mask.⁵⁶ Such relaxation, by no means, should be construed as freedom from the fearsome Covid-19! It is still with us and,

54 See, the lead editorial, “India’s true Covid-19 test,” Hindustan Times, September 7, 2020.

55 See, The Indian EXPRESS, September 17, 2020: “Protections like Wearing Masks, which proved divisive in the United States, are now widespread on the Continent.” Even the USA is falling in line, see The Indian EXPRESS, September 18, 2020: “Masks protect better than a vaccine would: CDC director (USA).”

56 See the editorial, “Lonely in the crowd – India is reopening after half a year in confinement, but social distancing is taking half of the joy out of it,” The Indian EXPRESS, September 12, 2020.

with all scientific predictions, it is likely to stay with us for indeterminate time to come.⁵⁷

The continuing Covid-19 phenomenon has prompted us to realize the mantra of 'Stay home, and stay safe,' almost as an integral part of our social living. With indefinite prolongation of coronavirus, now for months together since its outbreak in early March 2020 and showing no signs of retrieval or abating, the world is "learning to live with coronavirus," else we are destined to be mowed down by the sheer weight of "crippled economies."⁵⁸ The glooming prospect of Covid-19 has, thus, led us to discover new normative rules of social living. We are now cooking our own meals, washing our own clothes, cleaning our own toilets and bathrooms without the availability of part-time services of maids residing in close-by colonies. We are, per force, required to maintain our own lawns and kitchen garden without seeking the assistance of a regular or part-time professional and not-so-professional gardeners. With the lurking fear, turning out increasingly to be more real than imaginary, of being caught by coronavirus, we are learning afresh to forego the pleasure of going to theatres, restaurants, excursions, et al. All this is significantly and substantially changing the pattern of our living in the matters of consumption.⁵⁹

Aren't the new emerging patterns of life leading us to be self-contained and self-reliant to the best possible extent? Aren't we learning to live the life of simplicity by critically differentiating the essentials of life from the non-essential ones? May be, we might be motivated to move towards re-establishing the social order, whose foundational values are rested on the genuine welfare concern for 'others', as passionately pursued by Gandhi. May be, with the stamp of Gandhi-

57 With all cautious estimates, the WHO chief Tendros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, on the analogy of 1918 Spanish flue, has surmised that Covid-19 pandemic "will last less than 2 years." However, he added that "in our situation now with more technology and of course with more connectedness, the virus has a better chance of spreading: it can move fast because we are more connected now." See, The Indian EXPRESS, August 23, 2020.

58 See, The Indian EXPRESS, September 17, 2020: "Even as cases are on the rise, Europe is learning to live with coronavirus." "In the early days of the pandemic, President Emmanuel exhorted the French to wage 'war' against the coronavirus. Today, his message is to 'learn how to live with the virus.'"

59 The most recent Reserve Bank of India Report has made the headline in the national press on August 26, 2020 indicating the impact of Covid-19: "Consumption shock severe, economic recovery will take longer, poorest hit the hardest: RBI" See, The Indian EXPRESS, August 26, 2020

Prithvi Singh's first-hand pragmatic experience, at least with respect to some of the new emerging norms under the shadow of Covid-19, prove to be a 'blessing in disguise'! Don't we feel motivated to willingly accept and adopt those so-called 'abnormal' norms as truly healthy 'normal' norms of life even after the impending danger of coronavirus is over?⁶⁰

In sum, in all the policy programmes moving towards making India atmanirbhar (self-dependent) with all such small initiatives as Swatchhbharat abhiyan, movement to have clean closed toilets in villages (from satyagrah to swatchhagrah), etc., aren't we re-visiting Gandhi? Gandhi's experiment with Prithvi Singh in the exposition of the complex concept of truth and non-violence, thus, continues to be inspirational, inasmuch as it teaches us how to make our social living simple, self-contained and self-sufficient.⁶¹ As a pragmatic example of teacher-taught relationship, we, the teachers, also need to learn and imbibe from Gandhi-Prithvi Singh's experience, how the mutuality of trust is perhaps the most critical element in the whole process of learning and imparting education.

Besides, happily, the very name and association of Gandhi still evokes admiration and respect for him and his philosophy of truth and non-violence the world over. How else we should explain that a simple pair of spectacles once worn by Gandhi while being in South Africa would fetch 260,000 pounds in an online auction!⁶² Herein lies the value of Gandhi not only THEN, but even NOW!

60 See. The Indian EXPRESS, August 28, 2020: "New NORMAL" by a veteran, Commander NK Singla. He has candidly stated that the public is restricting itself to the purchase of only the essentials, the utility stuff, and getting used to making do with whatever available, the demand of luxury items like jewellery, expansive clothing, watches, shoes, etc. has evaporated. It is concluded by saying that "Corona is changing our behaviour about shopping and purpose of movement. The technological interventions may make many of these changes last."

61 The writer had the privilege of being the son-in-law of Baba Prithvi Singh. He got married to his distinguished daughter Dr. Pragya Prabha Prithvi Singh, who joined Punjab Civil Medical Service [PCMS] after her selection through Punjab Public Service Commission. This proximity gave him an exquisite opportunity of observing the impact of Gandhi on Prithvi Singh. To wit, Prithvi Singh was the first one to start in his native village gobar gas plant, providing gas for cooking and lighting, manure for organic farming, and closed clean toilets, maintenance of a water tank for providing clean water for animals, and procuring a healthy Bull for improving progeny of cows and bullocks!

62 See, The Indian Express, August 23, 2020: "Spectacles 'worn by Gandhi' sets auction record."