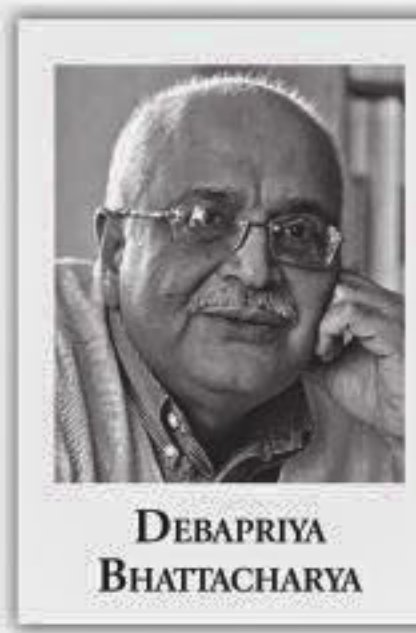


INTERNATIONAL DAY OF NON-VIOLENCE

# Mahatma Gandhi and the Sustainable Development Goals



DEBAPRIYA BHATTACHARYA

THE world today will celebrate the 150th birth anniversary of Mahatma Gandhi. Twelve years back, the United Nations voted to declare the date as the "International Day of Non-Violence." When people usually speak about this iconic persona, they often highlight him as a great spiritual leader, who conceived and pursued the ideology of *Satyagraha*; he had been a nationalist, anti-colonial leader who paved the way for the independence of this sub-continent. Great personalities such as Martin Luther King Jr, Nelson Mandela and Barack Obama were inspired by Gandhi's thoughts and deeds. Indeed, our national non-cooperation movement in March 1971, unleashed by the call of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, bears a strong imprint of Gandhi's civil disobedience philosophy.

But could the Gandhian philosophy, the thoughts that are encapsulated in *Satyagraha*, survive the test of time? To what extent currently dominant development propositions resonate with Gandhian values and principles?

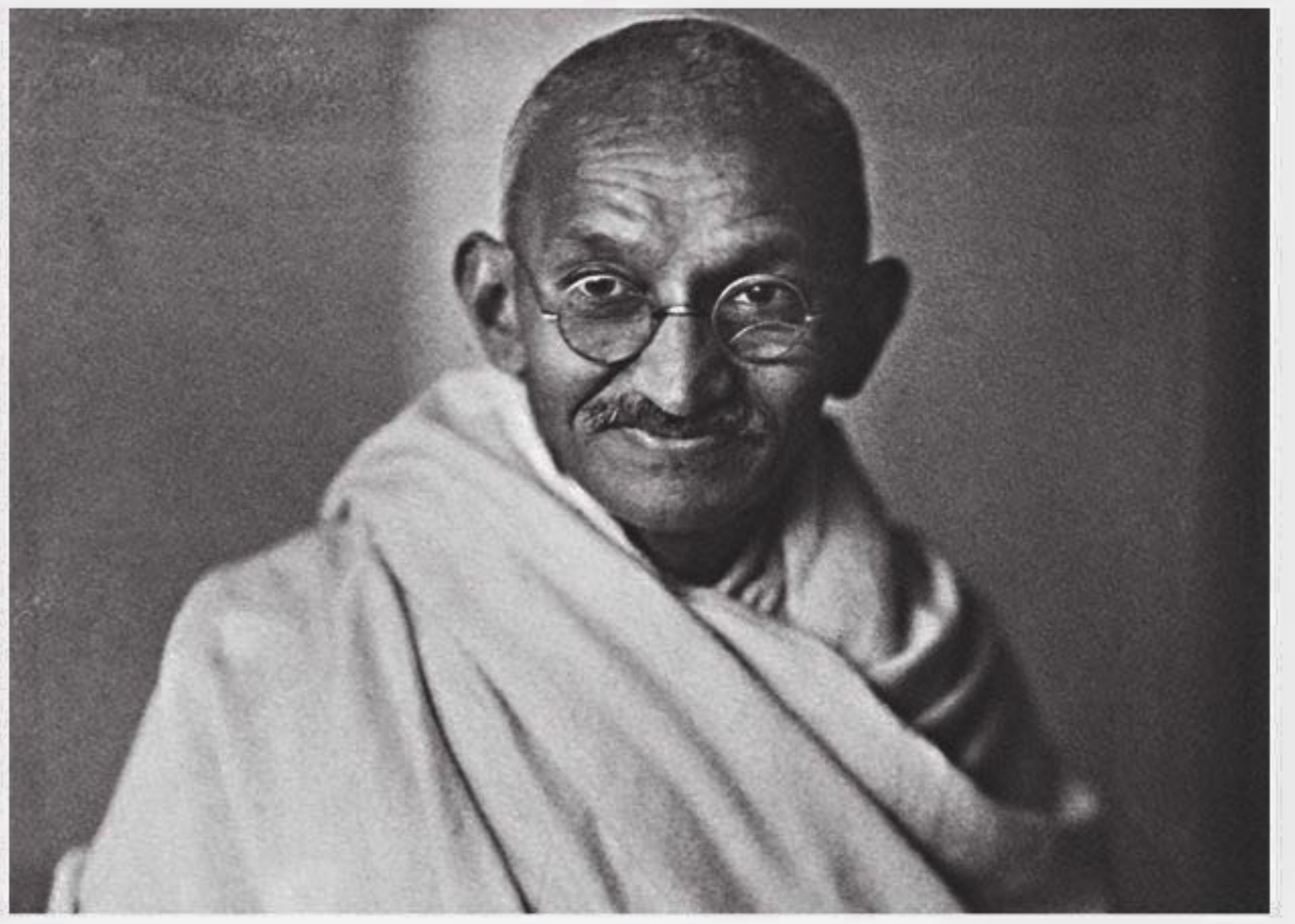
As is well known, in 2015, the global leaders assembled in New York to sign up for the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, which espouses 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The 2030 Agenda epitomised a new consensus about a vision of human kind for the next 15 years. To establish the continued relevance of Gandhian development thoughts, it will be interesting to explore how much this agenda is aligned with

Gandhian outlook and reinforce each other. The major aspiration of the 2030 Agenda is captured by the tagline "Leave No One Behind." Gandhi viewed that, "Progress of a society should be determined by the state of the most vulnerable and the weakest ones." People, who are furthest from the frontiers of development, are to be brought up to the level of the others for "real development." He spoke about "the weakest and the most vulnerable"—not only about the natural resources—water, air, land—as inheritance from our forefathers." He considered them to be the "loan given by our next generation."

The new global agenda has identified the fight against poverty as *numero uno* of the SDGs. One of Gandhi's powerful statements reflects a similar thought where he says, "Poverty is the worst form of violence." What an extraordinary perspective on poverty which surpasses time for its unique observation.

The 2030 Agenda upholds "universality" in development discourse. Gandhi expressed his adherence to universality through his attitude towards religion. According to Gandhi, religion or God has no country, no colour, no caste, no creed. When asked, he said, "Yes, I am a Hindu, but I am also a Muslim, a Christian, a Buddhist and a Jew at the same time." His universal humanism, however, did not shy away from recognising existing diversity; he said, "Diversity is there, because we are not same in all ways. But diversity should never be used to justify unacceptability or inequality."

The SDGs are distinguished by their emphasis on "sustainability". This idea of sustainability figures prominently in Gandhi's teaching



Mahatma Gandhi (1869-1948)

PHOTO COURTESY: PINTEREST

as well. He mentioned that, "What we do today, is our future." He also said, "We should not look upon the natural resources—water, air, land—as inheritance from our forefathers." He considered them to be the "loan given by our next generation."

The 2030 Agenda talks about "transformative" change—including changing the way we live, produce and consume. Gandhi was the epitome of personal practice of sustainable consumption and production. He underscored that for sustainability of the world, individual responsibility is important—as has been also anticipated in the SDGs. Gandhi in his unique way mentioned, "Be the change you wish to see in the world." He wanted human beings themselves to be the major change agent in the process. A similar idea is embedded in the SDGs' theory of change.

"Human development" has now become the cornerstone of mainstream wisdom. Gandhi reckoned health as one's "biggest

wealth, not the golds and silvers". He mentioned that to eradicate hunger, people should be ensured with nourishment, i.e. healthy food. This pronouncement predates our current realisation that as we eradicate hunger, we need to ensure nutrition, particularly for children. At the same time, Mahatma held that education is a significant driver of change. For him, education is a "lifetime phenomenon"; "doing away with illiteracy is not necessarily full education". The measure of education for him was the revealed amount of inner goodness or potentials of a person.

Nowadays, gender equality is a well-established assumption in our development discourse in general and in the SDGs in particular. The concern for gender equality was also prevalent in Gandhi's perspectives. Almost a century ago, he said, "We should not say that women are inferior to men. It would be libel and it is a sin." In fact, he spoke quite extensively about education for

women, and their social positioning. He mentioned that, "The day we will be able to say that our women are safe on the street at night—that is the day we have achieved gender equality." It only shows that how much Gandhi was ahead of his time.

Arguably, socio-economic development is fuelled by income, employment, technology and innovation. The modern concepts of "full employment" and "minimum income" were also quite noticeable in Gandhi's expressed thoughts. He said that, "I do not want employment for few, I want employment for the masses." He propagated a right-based approach, which is very much in line with the SDGs, when he said that, "We need to give people a square meal based on a good work, not necessarily based on charity."

Gandhi's explicit fascination for *charka* and small-scale industries also needs to be understood properly. For him, technology and innovation have to be deployed to the service of the people and create broader employment possibilities; not to be used as a means for laying off people from their jobs and generate profits for few. He looked upon rural employment and small-scale industries as a tool for eradicating poverty, bringing the rural areas on a par with the urban areas, and more importantly "localising the development" (another SDG requirement). Remaining sensitive to the possibility of technology and innovation, he said that, "The unlimited capacity of the nature and all society to meet or demand is yet to be fully tested through technological innovation."

Gandhi was a firm believer in the rule of law and democratic polity. He fought against colonial rule, he fought against apartheid; through that he wanted to establish human rights within its own context. For him, the rule of law was manifested

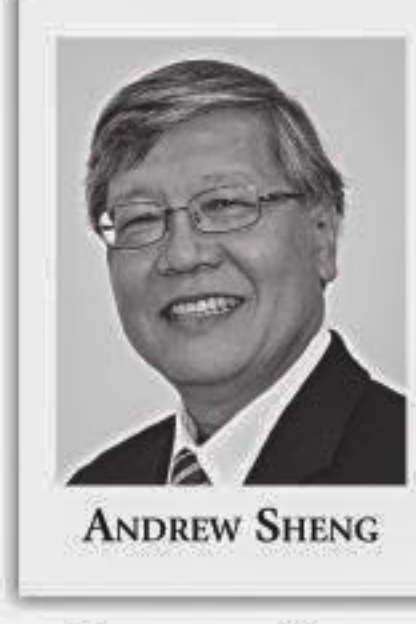
through non-violence, peaceful co-existence and tolerance. He said, "You must tolerate others' thoughts, if you really believe that your thoughts are better than the others." Interestingly, the new development theories, as reflected in the SDGs, uphold that the rule of laws and accountability, have to be established not only within the country, but amongst the countries.

Gandhi said that, "You have to look at the face of the weakest and the poorest, when you do something for them, and see whether they are taking charges of their own destiny." Essentially, he talks here about ownership, empowerment and solidarity. The Gandhian idea of solidarity and partnership is best expressed through his relationship with the colonial power in the context of joint fight against fascism during the Second World War. Under the 2030 Agenda, the world seeks to unite, irrespective of the differences in level of development and governance structure, against the common enemy of poverty, discrimination and injustice. The "bold new world", according to Mahatma, has to do away with "politics without principles" and "commerce without morality."

Celebrated author Pearl S Buck wrote, "He was right; we all knew he was right. The man who killed him knew that he was right." The question is whether this Gandhian "force of truth" can prevail in and be a solution to our present world, which remains afflicted by violence, prejudice and unilateralism. The answer to this probably will be defined by the extent to which we will be able to deliver the new global vision of sustainable development. The Gandhian force of truth will essentially be vindicated through that delivery.

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## Is the future truly Asian?



ANDREW SHENG

THIS is a question that is at the heart of the tensions across the Pacific.

To Parag Khanna, author of *The Future Is Asian*, the answer is almost self-evident.

However, if you read his book carefully, you will find that he thinks global power will be shared between Asian and Western civilisations.

For the west, the rise of Asia has been frighteningly fast, because as late as 1960, most of Asia was poor, agricultural and rural, with an average income per capita of less than USD 1,000 in 2010 prices.

But 50 years on, Asia has become more urban and industrialised, and is becoming a challenge to the west in terms of trade, income and innovation.

McKinsey has just published a study on *The Future Of Asia* that highlights many aspects about why Asia is both attractive to businessmen and yet feared as a competitor.

Conventionally, excluding the Middle East and Iran, Asia is divided into North-east Asia (China, Japan and South Korea), South-east Asia (mostly Asean), South Asia (India, Pakistan, Bangladesh) and Central Asia.

But McKinsey has identified at least four Asias that are quite complementary to each other.

First, there is Advanced Asia, comprising Australia, Japan, New Zealand, South Korea and Singapore, each with per capita incomes exceeding USD 30,000, highly urbanised and rich, with a combined GDP that is 10 percent of global GDP.

This group provides technology, capital and market for the rest of Asia, but it is ageing fast.

Second, China is the world's largest trading economy, second largest in GDP after the US, and a growing consumer powerhouse. By 2030, the Chinese consumer market will be equal to Western Europe and the US combined.

China is also an increasing capital provider to the rest of the world.

Third, the 11 countries of Emerging Asia (Asean plus Bhutan and Nepal, excluding Singapore) have young populations, fast growth and cultural diversity.

region grew from trading with the rest of the world, intra-regional trade has grown faster, to 60 percent of total trade, with intra-regional foreign direct investment (FDI) at 66 percent of total inward FDI, and 74 percent of air traffic.

Much of Asian growth will come from rapid urbanisation, amid growing connectivity with each other. The top 20 cities in Asia will be mega conglomerates that are among the largest cities in the world with the fastest-growing income.

A major finding is that America First-style protectionism is helping to intensify the localisation and regionalisation of intra-regional connectivity in terms of trade, finance, knowledge and cultural networks. Furthermore, the traditional savings surpluses in Asia basically went to London and New York and were recycled

West' is to Europeans."

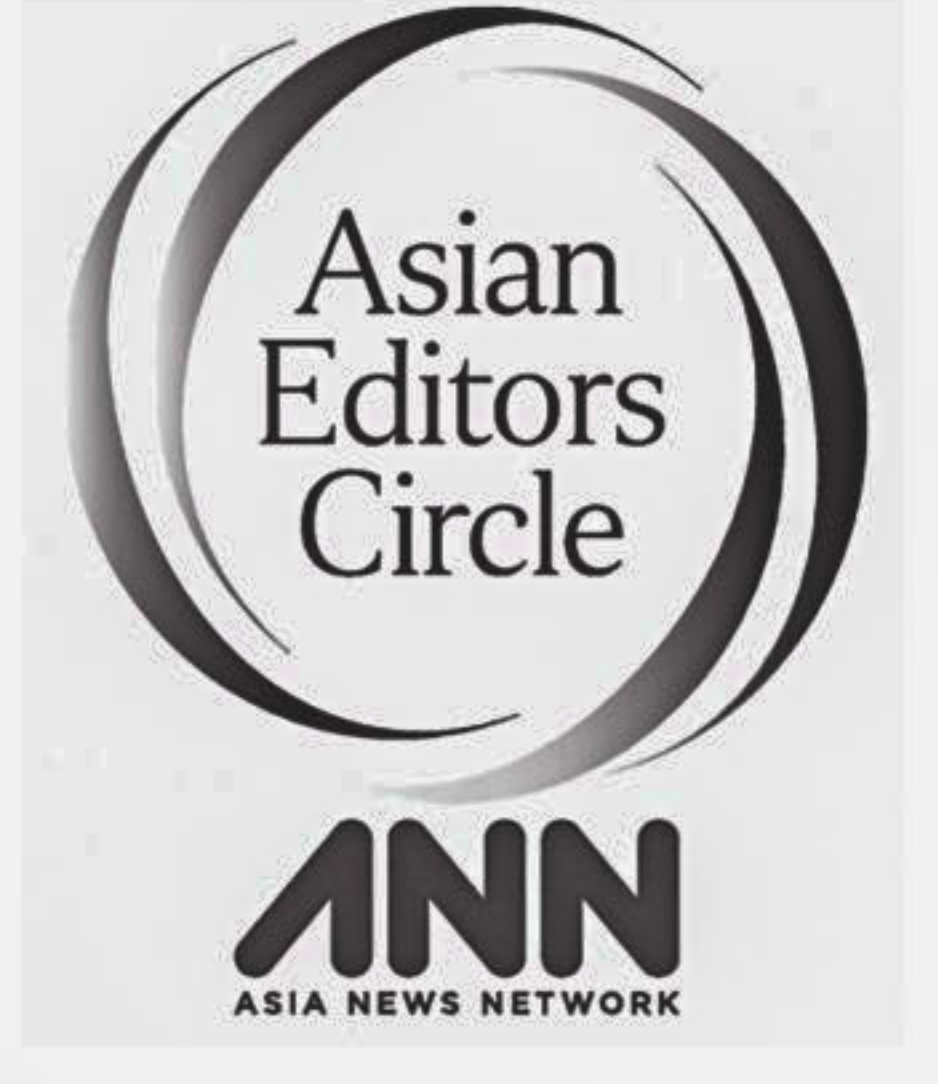
But are such rosy growth prospects in Asia predestined or ordained? Based on the trajectory of demographic growth of half the world's young population moving into middle income, the logical answer appears to be yes.

But there are at least three major bumps in that trajectory.

First, Asia, like the rest of the world, is highly vulnerable to global warming.

Large populations with faster growth mean more energy consumption, carbon emissions and natural resource degradation. Large chunks of Asia will be vulnerable to more water, food and energy stresses, as well as natural disasters (rising seas, forest fires, pandemics, typhoons etc).

Second, even though more Asians



of focusing on alleviating poverty and addressing the common threat of climate change.

Two generational leaders from the west have approached these threats from very different angles.

Addressing the United Nations, Swedish schoolgirl Greta Thunberg dramatically shamed the older generation for its lack of action on climate change. "People are suffering. People are dying. Entire ecosystems are collapsing. We are at the beginning of a mass extinction and all you can talk about is money and fairy tales of eternal economic growth. How dare you," she said.

The young are idealistically appealing for unity in action against common fate.

In contrast, addressing the UN Security Council, US President Donald Trump was arguing the case for patriotism as a solution to global issues. Climate change was not mentioned at all.

Since the older generation created most of the carbon emissions in the first place, no wonder the young are asking why they are inheriting all the problems that the old deny.

This then is the difference in passion between generations.

Globalisation occurred because of increasing flows of trade, finance, data and people. That is not stoppable by patriot-protected borders.

A multi-polar Asia within a multi-polar world means that even America First, however strong, will have to work with everyone, despite differences in worldviews.

All patriots will have to remember that it is the richness of diversity that keeps the world in balance.

Andrew Sheng is an honorary adviser with the CIMB Asean Research Institute and a distinguished fellow with the Asia Global Institute at the University of Hong Kong. He writes on global issues for the Asia News Network (ANN), an alliance of 24 news media titles across the region.

This article is part of the latest series of the Asian Editors Circle, a weekly commentary by ANN editors published by members of the regional media group.



Mahathir Mohamad

PHOTO: AFP

back in terms of foreign direct investment and portfolio flows.

But no longer.

Increasingly, Asian financial centres are emerging to compete to re-pump surplus capital from Advanced Asia and China to fund the growth in Emerging and Frontier Asia.

In short, intra-regional finance is following intra-regional trade.

In a multi-polar world, no one wants to be completely dependent on any single player but prefers network connectivity to other cities and centres of activity and creativity.

As Khanna puts it: "The phrase 'China-led Asia' is thus no more acceptable to most Asians than the notion of a 'US-led

have been lifted out of poverty, domestic inequality of income and wealth has increased in the last 20 years.

Part of this is caused by rural-urban disparities, and widening gaps in high-value knowledge and skills. Without adequate social safety nets, healthcare and social security, dissatisfaction over youth unemployment, access to housing, and deafness to problems by bureaucracies has erupted in protests everywhere.

Third, geopolitical rivalry has meant that there will be tensions in diverse Asia over territorial, cultural and religious differences that can rapidly escalate into conflict. The region is beginning to spend more on armaments and defence, instead

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH. Includes crossword grid and clues for Across and Down.

BEETLE BAILEY by Mort Walker. A comic strip featuring Beetle Bailey.

BABY BLUES by Kirkman & Scott. A comic strip featuring Baby Blues.

QUOTABLE Quote. A section featuring a quote from Walt Disney.

WALT DISNEY (1901-1966). American entrepreneur, animator, voice actor and film producer. Includes a portrait and a quote: 'The way to get started is to quit talking and begin doing.'