

Gandhi and the Western World

Louis Fischer (29 February 1896 – 15 January 1970) was a Jewish-American journalist. Among his works were a contribution to the ex-Communist treatise *The God that Failed, The Life of Lenin*, which won the 1965 National Book Award in History and Biography, as well as a biography of Mahatma Gandhi entitled *The Life of Mahatma Gandhi*. This book was used as the basis for the Academy Award-winning film *Gandhi*. Fischer's wife, Markoosha Fischer, was also a writer.

Louis Fisher came to India a second time in 1946 to gather some material for a biography of Mahatma Gandhi. In the author's view, Gandhian principles and values can remedy much of the ills of post-war world. Louis Fisher had remained with Mahatma Gandhi for a week in 1942. He had then found him a wise, relaxed, moderate, articulate and a communicative person who encouraged intimacy. The author was touched by his simple ways. In his view, Gandhi remained true to what he was. He did not distance himself to enhance his importance. Gandhi did not confine himself to a particular religion and accepted the finer elements of many of the religions of the time. He tried to identify himself with the people of other religions and in this way he expressed his love for all. In this respect he was Christ-like and more Christian than most Christians of the time. This made Gandhi a statesman-saint whose political deeds were marked by purity and honesty.

During his second trip to India in 1946, Louis Fisher remained eight days with Gandhi. He lived and traveled with him to many parts of India and was able to see the great adulation which people gave him wherever he went. Seeing the life of this great man from a close quarter, Fisher came to love him truly. Therefore, when Fisher heard about Gandhi's assassination on January 31st, 1948, he was shocked to the heart and realized that Gandhi couldn't have died any other way. World leaders, statesman of every rank and color, politicians and every ordinary man and women of the world deeply mourned his death. Pearl Buch called it "another crucifixion". According to former U.S. Secretary of State, George C. Marshall, "Mahatma Gandhi was the spokesman for the conscience of the world". At his death, Gandhi was praised not so much for his political achievements as for his spiritual contributions to the world. Gandhian principles, values, life-style, methods etc. have been his finest legacy to the world. Therefore, the author feels that Gandhi is India's best gift to the western world. Gandhian principles and values can cure much of the present ills of the world. The author mentions some of these ills which can be eliminated with the application of Gandhian principles.

Firstly, the author mentions the dwindling importance of the individual in many of the modern democratic and autocratic states. In these states, the power, rights and welfare of the

individual has been side-lined and various institutions of the state have stolen his former rights and privileges. Gandhi did all he could to change this emerging trend. He tried to uplift the individual from all his bondage which held him a captive. His primary concern was the individual. The state, politics or institutions were only secondary concerns to him. This was a great lesson to the world. Secondly, the present world is marked by a lack of mental health. Neurotic disorders, mental ills and lack of internal peace marked the lives of the twentieth-century man. Gandhi's life and ways offer a fine remedy for this malady-accepting and living by truth and truth alone. For Gandhi, creed, deed and word were one. Gandhi preached what he practiced and practiced what he believed. This enabled him to be serene, joyful and contented. According to Fisher, this integration of life with truth as shown by Gandhi is the best way to mental health.

According to Fisher, another quality that the west could learn from Gandhi is the way Gandhi viewed people. Gandhi never viewed people as a 'mass'. He looked at them individually and loved them individually. In the author's view, Gandhi tried to see the good aspects of individuals and tried to elevate them to freedom and truth. Another Gandhian legacy was his fight against materialism and the materialistic philosophy of the west. He himself lived an austere life and encouraged people to live with bare minimum and to enjoy the thrill of life without being attached to things. According to the author, in this respect too, Gandhi has a great deal to offer the west. Fearlessness was one of the most remarkable traits of Gandhi. He was fearless and taught the teeming millions of India the courage to stand up against the brute force and to fight for right.

According to Fisher, Gandhi's greatest contribution to the world was his own life. He demonstrated through his life that it was possible to be 'Christ' in the twentieth century. Gandhi's devotion to truth, love for humanity, greatness of the mind, nobility of character, high principles, moral values, simple life pattern and honest political methods etc. are indeed shining beacon to the entire world. Hence Louis Fisher feels that Mahatma Gandhi belongs not only to India alone but to the whole world.

A. Choose the correct option.

1. What is the central evil of the modern world?

b. materialism

2. Why was Gandhiji reluctant to preach his doctrines in the Western world?

c. the West already knew the principles, but would not follow them, being enslaved to things and not willing to take risks

3. Which of the following is true?

c. the end of Gandhiji's struggles was to develop the Indian into a free man, and the freedom of the country was a means.

4. Gandhiji said that if he was given a choice between cowardice and violence, he would opt for violence. The statement implies that—

c. Gandhiji was defending himself against the charge of cowardice.

B. Answer these questions in a sentence or two each:

1. What was the only decoration in Gandhiji's mud-walled hut?

A: A black-and-white print of Jesus Christ with the inscription 'He is Our Peace' was the only decoration in Gandhiji's mud-decorated hut.

2. What would have happened, according to Louis Fischer, if Gandhi had been born three thousand years ago?

A: If Gandhi had been born three thousand years ago, he would have been mythicized and deified.

3. How did Leon Baum, the former Premier of France, respond to the assassination of Mahatma Gandhi?

A: Leon Baum said that even though he knew neither Gandhi nor India personally, he felt the same sorrow as if he had lost someone near and dear. According to Baum, Gandhi's demise plunged the whole world into mourning.

4. How did Louis Fischer react upon hearing the news of the assassination of Gandhi?

A: Louis Fischer wept profusely after a long time and felt numb. It was his intimacy with and admiration for Gandhi that intensified his grief.

5. Why does Louis Fischer think that the way Gandhiji died was, perhaps, the best way to die?

A: Gandhi's death was a sacrifice and in a sense it was befitting of the great man because he was a fighter throughout his life. It would have been strange if he had died of a trifle like cold.

6. How did the US Secretary of State George C. Marshall describe Mahatma Gandhi?

A: Mahatma Gandhi was described as the spokesman for the conscience of mankind by the US Secretary of State George C. Marshall.

7. What, according to Louis Fischer, is the greatest drawback of dictatorship?

A: The greatest drawback of dictatorship, according to Louis Fischer, is that it makes the country powerful and the people powerless.

8. What makes Gandhiji healthy, happy and light-hearted?

A: His actions were in consonance with his principles; there was no gap between what he preached and what he did. This made him healthy, happy and light-hearted despite his many sorrows and burdens.

9. How did Gandhiji look upon the misdeeds and faults of others?

A: Gandhi criticized himself for the misdeeds and faults of others. He argued such slips would not have occurred if he had done enough to improve the morality and ethics of others.

10. What is the meaning of Nehru's assertion 'Gandhi has straightened our backs and stiffened our spines'?

A: Nehru meant Gandhi had taught Indians to be fearless in facing state oppression and brutality.

C. Answer these questions in about 100 words each.

1. What is special about Gandhiji's relationship with people?

A: Gandhiji empathized with people and did not consider them citizens of particular nations or members of religions. He did not want people to adore and admire him; on the contrary, he encouraged intimacy, banter and laughter and lived on the same level as everybody else on bare earth. Unlike many famous persons, he did not need distance to enhance his importance. He did not believe in man-made distinctions of caste and creed and regarded each human being as too holy and important to be the mere instrument of state. Gandhi always reposed unwavering and abiding faith in the common men and women. He loved people individually and in multitudes.

2. How is Gandhiji indebted to Thoreau?

A: Gandhiji borrowed his unique and effective political weapon of civil disobedience from the American writer and philosopher Henry David Thoreau. It is the large-scale deliberate flouting of the law in obedience to the higher law of conscience. It left a deep impression on him. Gandhi, like Thoreau, insisted on the individual's right to oppose governments, even governments at war, and to resist their enactments. He held that democracy was hollow without the right to dissent and that dissent withered where fear entered.

3. Describe Gandhiji's view of health.

A: Gandhi's actions were in consonance with his principles; there was no gap between what he preached and what he did. When utterances conflict with actions and actions with beliefs, the individual is split and sick. In the case of Gandhi, there was no question of such conflict and anguish. For him creed, credo and deed were one. This integration with truth and intellectual honesty made him healthy, happy and light-hearted despite his many sorrows and burdens.

4. Why is Gandhi opposed to materialism?

A: Gandhi opposed materialism because he considered it the central evil of the modern world. In his view materialism was not only wealth, but the accumulation of brute force to crush the spirit of freedom, the building of a machine whose motor fuel is hate. Gandhi never urged anyone to renounce wealth or power. He taught a set of values that might make happiness less dependent on material possessions. He believed that technological innovations were ineffective in achieving the goal of peace and harmony.

5. What impression of Gandhi did Louis Fischer get when he traveled with him?

Louis Fischer was able to gauge the genuine simplicity and real greatness of Gandhi when he traveled with him. Wherever he went, Gandhi always traveled third class and received rousing welcome everywhere. People thronged the station braving heavy monsoon rain. They hailed him

to his amusement because he knew for the crowd he was a spectacle. He always regretted that people gave him adulation when what wanted was acceptance of his way of life.

D. Answer in about 300 words

1. What are the qualities that made Gandhiji great, according to Louis Fischer?

According to Louis Fischer, Gandhiji was simple, humble, honest, cordial, accessible and conscientious. A black-and-white print of Jesus Christ with the inscription 'He is Our Peace' was the only decoration in Gandhiji's mud-decorated hut. If Gandhi had been born three thousand years ago, he would have been mythicized and deified. When he was assassinated world leaders express great regret and concern. Mahatma Gandhi was described as the spokesman for the conscience of mankind. Fischer says that Gandhi's death was a sacrifice and in a sense it was a befitting of the great man because he was a fighter throughout his life. It would have been strange if he had died of a trifle like cold.

Gandhiji was not born great but he remade himself into a lofty personality. Gandhiji empathized with people and did not consider them citizens of particular nations or members of religions. He did not want people to adore and admire him; on the contrary, he encouraged intimacy, banter and laughter and lived on the same level as everybody else on bare earth. Unlike many famous persons, he did not need distance to enhance his importance. He did not believe in man-made distinctions of caste and creed and regarded each human being as too holy and important to be the mere instrument of state. Gandhi always reposed unwavering and abiding faith in the common men and women. He loved people individually and in multitudes.

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