

MAHATMA GANDHI – AN INDIAN MODEL OF SERVANT LEADERSHIP

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This study explores the leadership qualities of Mahatma Gandhi in relation to six behavioral dimensions of the Servant Leadership Behaviour Scale (SLBS) model of servant leadership, proposed by Sendjaya, Sarros and Santora (2008), and highlights the importance of servant leadership qualities like service, self-sacrificial love, spirituality, integrity, simplicity, emphasizing follower needs, and modelling. It is a literary investigation of the life and leadership qualities of Gandhi, based on various books, personal correspondence, and statements including the autobiography of Mahatma Gandhi—*The Story of My Experiments with the Truth*—by using the model of SLBS. This research study demonstrates that Mahatma Gandhi personified the Servant Leadership Behaviour Scale model and illustrates the Indian contribution to servant leadership. It elucidates the need to include the concept of servant leadership in the curriculum of business schools and advocates the practice of servant leadership in different leadership positions.

Leadership is an important area of study and research in business schools for decades now. There have been numerous research findings too in the Western countries on leadership (Jain & Mukherji, 2009, p. 435). But there is a scarcity of research on indigenous models of leadership in India, even though there are many excellent business schools in India along with skilled human talent (Jain & Mukherji, 2009, p. 435). Shahin and Wright (2004) argue that it is necessary to exercise caution when attempting to apply Western leadership theories in non-Western countries, because all concepts may not be relevant for effective leadership in these countries.

India is a fascinating and diverse country with many languages, cultures, castes, and religions. India has been shaped by various great leaders like Mahatma Gandhi, Rabindranath Tagore, Jawaharlal Nehru, Sarojini Naidu, and Ambedkar. These leaders are role models for leadership, and their outstanding leadership qualities can be studied and practiced in these days of worldwide change and development, because of the impact that they made in India by their leadership.

An important method of leadership development is by vicarious learning, which is based on learning from role models (Popper, 2005). There is a scarcity of research in India on the type

of leadership that can be taught and practiced in leadership development programs and Business Schools based on these indigenous role models (Jain & Mukherji, 2009, p. 435). This study aims to study the servant leadership qualities of Mahatma Gandhi, the great role model of truth and non-violence in Indian history (Nair, 1994, p. 7), and the great freedom fighter and servant leader from India, so that this concept can be taught and practiced by Indian and worldwide leaders.

Gandhi is widely acknowledged as one of the greatest leaders of the non-violent movements the world has ever seen. As a pioneer of *Satyagraha* (Shridharani, 1939), which is resistance through non-violent civil disobedience, he became one of the major political leaders of his time. Many other great leaders, like Martin Luther King Jr. (McGuire & Hutchings, 2007, p. 154) and Nelson Mandela (Fawell, 2007, p. 228), were inspired by the philosophy of non-violence of Gandhi. Many writers have acknowledged that Gandhi was a servant leader (Sims, 1994; Koshal, 2005; Blanchard & Miller, 2007; Nordquist, 2008; Salleh, 2009). Albert Einstein (1939, p. 80) referred to Gandhi as ‘a beacon to the generations to come.’

The purpose of this paper is to re-examine the outstanding qualities of servant leadership that Gandhi provided and deconstruct the constituent components of his leadership to arrive at a better understanding of the qualities, characteristics, and effectiveness of servant leadership. Ford and Lawler (2007) find that the dominance of the behavioral and attitudinal dimensions in quantitative empirical studies of leadership has resulted in a relative dearth of qualitative approaches. There is hardly any study to find out whether Gandhi possessed all the characteristics of a servant leader. For this purpose, the Servant Leadership Behaviour Scale (SLBS) model of servant leadership with six dimensions proposed by Sendjaya, Sarros, and Santora (2008) is used in this study to examine the servant leadership qualities of Gandhi. This SLBS scale was developed as a result of extensive review of literature and it reflects a more comprehensive construct of servant leadership compared with existing measures.

The paper begins with a brief definition of servant leadership and the Indian origin of leadership concept. This is followed by an examination of the model of servant leadership and the investigation of the extent to which Mahatma Gandhi exemplified these qualities, as indicated by reference to excerpts from his personal life and work. The paper concludes with a discussion of how the servant leadership characteristics initiated by Gandhi can be studied and practised in India and all over the world.

Introduction to Servant Leadership

Robert K. Greenleaf coined the modern term *servant-leadership* (Spears, 1996) in 1970 in the essay entitled, *The Servant as Leader*, after reading Herman Hesse’s (1956) short novel, *Journey to the East*. After reading this story, Greenleaf concluded that the central meaning of this novel was that a great leader must first of all become a servant and get the experience as a servant, and that this is central to his or her greatness (Spears, 1996). There are many passages in the Bible which depict the servant leadership qualities of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, who lived in the first century A.D. and taught His disciples, “But he who is greatest among you shall be your servant” (Matt. 23:11; New King James Version of the Holy Bible). Jesus modelled His teaching on servant leadership by washing the feet of His disciples, including the one who was to betray Him.

Indian Origin of Servant Leadership Concept

The Mahabharata, written by Rishi Veda Vyasa, is one of the two major Sanskrit epics of ancient India, the other being the *Rāmāyana* (Hee, 2007). The *Bhagavad Gita* is part of the *Mahabharata* and is one of the most revered Hindu manuscripts. Rarick and Nickerson (2009) state that a leader as per *Gita* tradition is a humanistic leader, a person who acts without self-gain, and who has great personal concern for followers. The *Bhagavad Gita*, while enlisting the qualities of a superior person, says that “he is one who hates no creature, who is friendly and compassionate to all, who is free from attachment and egoism, balanced in pleasure and pain, and forgiving” (Sivananda, 2000: 12:13). Thus, the *Bhagavad Gita* teaches some important concepts of servant leadership.

Arthashastra, written by Kautilya, is an ancient Indian treatise in management. Kautilya was the minister and adviser of King Chandragupta Maurya, who ruled North India in the 4th century B. C. (Muniapan & Dass, 2008). In *Arthashastra*, Kautilya (1915), while listing the duties of a king, wrote, “In the happiness of his subjects lies his happiness; in their welfare his welfare; whatever pleases himself he shall not consider as good, but whatever pleases his subjects he shall consider as good.”

Journey to the East, written by Hesse, which is the book which prompted Greenleaf to propose and propagate the concept of servant leadership, is rich in ancient Eastern religious tradition, primarily the Hindu tradition (Sendjaya et al., 2008). Trompenaars and Voerman (2010), in the book *Servant Leadership across Cultures*, cite examples from Indian culture to show that servant leadership was practised in ancient India. Rabindranath Tagore, the Nobel Laureate for Literature from India, said philosophically: ‘I slept and dreamt that life was joy. I awoke and saw that life is service. I acted and behold, service was joy’ (Rude, 2003). Thus there are ample evidences in Indian literature that servant leadership was propagated and practiced in India.

Brief Profile of M. K. Gandhi

Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, known as Mahatma Gandhi and the great leader of the masses in India, is the important architect and significant leader of the Indian freedom struggle. Gandhi¹ was born on October 2, 1869. He was a below average student and very shy during his school days. Gandhi went to England to study law in 1888. After finishing law school, he returned to India in 1891. Unable to practice law in India, he left for South Africa in 1893. His joy knew no bounds when he helped to resolve and settle a difficult, out of court legal dispute that involved his firm in South Africa. About his experience and joy, Gandhi (1948a, p. 168) wrote, “My joy was boundless. I had learnt the true practice of law. I had learned to find out the better side of human nature and to enter men's hearts.” Then Gandhi's outlook changed and he looked forward to rendering service rather than making profit. In South Africa, he experienced the sufferings of the Indians due to racial tensions. This prompted him to lead the Indians to fight against racial problems by adopting the strategy of *Ahimsa* (non-violence) and *Satyagraha* (holding on to truth) (Heath, 1944). When he returned to India, he led Indians to fight the British with the same weapons. He was imprisoned many times when he practiced these principles of non-violence and underwent fasting. These servant leadership principles, applied in practice, forced the British to declare independence. At the stroke of midnight, on August 14, 1947, India became an independent nation. This was followed by a bitter struggle between the Hindus and

Muslims who lived in India and Pakistan. On January 30, 1948, Nathuram Godse assassinated Gandhi (Murphy, 2005) because Gandhi took a stand to make peace with Muslims by non-violent means and supported them even though he was a Hindu. On the day of his demise, nations all over the world paid homage to Gandhi.

The world acknowledged his special place when the United Nations flew its flag at half mast when he was assassinated. He is the only individual with no connection to any government or international organisation for whom this has been done. (Nair, 1994, p. 2) It was Rabindranath Tagore who popularized the term *Mahatma* which means great soul (Sen, 2004, p. 181). Gandhi was called Mahatma Gandhi because of his great ideals and contribution to the development of India as a nation.

The Servant Leadership Behaviour Scale Model

Sendjaya et al., (2008) identified more than 20 themes pertinent to servant leadership by extensive review of the literature and categorized them into six different dimensions of servant leadership behavior. They called it the Servant Leadership Behaviour Scale (SLBS), which consisted of six dimensions, namely Voluntary Subordination, Authentic Self, Covenantal Relationship, Responsible Morality, Transcendental Spirituality, and Transforming Influence. This SLBS model relates very well with existing empirical models of servant leadership, namely Laub's (2003) Organizational Leadership Assessment, Wong and Page's (2003) Revised Servant Leadership Profile, Barbuto and Wheeler's (2006) Servant Leadership Questionnaire, and Whittington, Frank, May, Murray and Goodwin's (2006) Servant Shepherd Leadership Scale.

The SLBS model extends the existing instruments by adding two important dimensions, namely spirituality and the morality-ethics dimension, both of which are omitted by others (Sendjaya et al., 2008). The validity and reliability of the SLBS were verified through a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods, including semi-structured interviews with 15 senior executives, content validity tested by quasi-quantitative approach, confirmatory factor analysis, and internal consistency reliability estimation (Sendjaya et al., 2008). Chathury (2008) has used SLBS model in his study and criterion validity (concurrent) is tested as part of this study by correlating servant leadership with perceptions of trust as measured by the Organizational Trust Inventory (Nyhan & Marlowe, 1997), and discriminative validity is also verified. Thus the SLBS model appears to be the most comprehensive instrument in its coverage of servant leadership characteristics and was used as part of this study.

Leadership Qualities of Mahatma Gandhi in relation to SLBS Model

The literary enquiry on the six behavioral dimensions of this model on Mahatma Gandhi is given below.

Voluntary Subordination

This quality is a revolutionary act of will to voluntarily abandon one's self to others by being a servant and by acts of service (Sendjaya, 2005). According to Nair (1994), Gandhi was a symbol of service to mankind.

While most leaders identify with symbols of power to elevate themselves above the people they lead, Gandhi symbolized the people he was trying to serve. He tried to be like

them with his loin cloth and his commitment to voluntary poverty. He symbolized service rather than power. (Nair, 1994, p. 6)

Gandhi had the two outstanding qualities of voluntary subordination namely being a servant, combined with acts of service in his life.

Being a servant. This quality makes servant leaders view themselves as servants first, not leaders first (Sendjaya, 2005). Sir. R. Radhakrishnan (1939, p. 20) states: “Gandhi is among the foremost of the servants of humanity.” Gandhi’s (1948a) following statements show how he considered serving people a pleasure and privilege.

“Service of the poor has been my heart’s desire, and it has always thrown me amongst the poor and enabled me to identify myself with them” (p. 190).

...service can have no meaning unless one takes pleasure in it. When it is done for show or for fear of public opinion, it stunts the man and crushes his spirit. Service which is rendered without joy helps neither the servant nor the served. But all other pleasures and possessions pale into nothingness before service which is rendered in a spirit of joy. (p. 215)

Acts of service. Gandhi’s service started in his days in South Africa, where he taught English to Indians without any remuneration, to improve their living conditions among racial tensions (Gandhi, 1948a, p. 157). At one point, when a leper came to his door, he gave him food, dressed his wounds, looked after him, and then sent him to the hospital (Gandhi, 1948a, p. 249). As he longed to be involved in humanitarian work, he helped as a nurse in a hospital and spent two hours daily serving the patients when he was in South Africa (Gandhi, 1948a, p. 249, 250).

When the black plague, or pneumonic plague, which was more terrible and fatal than the bubonic, struck Indians in South Africa, Gandhi (1948a, p. 354-359) volunteered to nurse the victims, disregarding infection and fully knowing the risks.

When Gandhi was in South Africa with his family, the Zulu rebellion took place and many Zulus were injured and there was no one to attend to their injuries. At that time Gandhi (1948a, p. 487), along with twenty-three Indian volunteers, formed the Indian ambulance corps with the permission of the Governor and attended to the injured and nursed them back to health.

Authentic Self

According to Sendjaya et al. (2008), servant leaders are capable of leading authentically, as manifested in their consistent display of humility, integrity, accountability, security, and vulnerability. The study reveals that Gandhi had the quality of authentic self with all its subsidiary qualities given below.

Humility. Humility is the ability to make a right estimation of one’s self (Sendjaya, 2005). Gandhi did not seek after influential posts. He was the leader of the Indian National Congress on its formation, but when young leaders like Jawaharlal Nehru rose up, he gave way to them to become leaders of the Indian National Congress. After independence, he did not hold any post in the government but remained a humble servant who sacrificed his life for the cause of India. Qadir (1939) writes about this, “One of the strong points of Gandhi’s character is his supreme indifference to what people say about any course of conduct which he has decided for himself, for good reasons that satisfy his conscience” (p. 239).

Integrity. Integrity is consistency between words and deeds (Sendjaya, 2005). A high degree of integrity and self-efficacy, which Gandhi possessed as a boy, stayed with him throughout his adult years (Schwartz, 2008, p. 4). In South Africa, when Gandhi (1948a) practiced law, he stated: “I had always heard the merchants say that truth was not possible in business. I did not think so then nor do I do now” (p. 157).

So far as I can recollect, I have already said that I never resorted to untruth in my profession, and that a large part of my legal practice was in the interest of public work, for which I charged nothing beyond out-of-pocket expenses, and these too I sometimes met myself. (p. 443)

In the middle of 1896, Gandhi returned to India from South Africa (Fischer, 1982, p. 68). He stayed in India for about six months and campaigned for the cause of ill-treated Indians in South Africa. This was reported in the South African Press with exaggeration and caused fierce resentment among the whites. In the end of December 1896, he sailed back to South Africa. On January 13, 1897, as soon as Gandhi stepped ashore, a menacing crowd surrounded him, and they threw stones, bricks, and rotten eggs at Gandhi. They tore off his turban and kicked and beat him. Several days later, the Natal authorities asked Gandhi to identify his assailants so they could be prosecuted. Gandhi knew several of his assailants but refused to prosecute. He said it was not their fault (Fischer, 1982, p. 72). Gandhi forgave his abusers. Gandhi preached forgiveness and there was consistency between his words and his actions.

S. S. Wadia (1939), founder in India and editor of *The Indian*, P. E. Z., Bombay, writes, The so called inconsistencies and impracticalities of Gandhiji are understood when we see him as a Soul, and when we take into account the fact that he is one who refuses to make compromises between his head and his heart, who declines to go against his own conscience, who views all events not from the mundane standpoint, but as avenues for Soul – learning for himself and of Soul-service of others. He practices his philosophy, he lives up to his principles. (p. 298)

Gandhi thus practiced what he preached.

Accountability. Sendjaya (2005) defines accountability as the leaders’ willingness to give the rights to a few trusted people to ask them hard questions on a regular basis, question the decisions and actions the leaders made, and make them accountable. An incident which happened in 1901, when Gandhi decided to return to India from South Africa after leading the South African Indians in their struggle for equality, demonstrates his accountability. On the eve of his departure, he was presented with gold and silver objects and diamond ornaments by the Indian community as a token of gratitude for his public service in South Africa (Fischer, 1982, p. 83). Gandhi (1948a) spent a sleepless night and about this incident he wrote in his autobiography:

The evening I was presented with the bulk of these things I had a sleepless night.... It was difficult for me to forego gifts worth hundreds, it was more difficult to keep them. And even if I could keep them, what about my children? What about my wife? They were being trained to a life of service and to an understanding that service was its own reward. I had no costly ornaments in the house. We had been fast simplifying our life. ... I decided that I could not keep these things. I drafted a letter creating a trust of them in favour of the community.... In the morning I held a consultation with my wife and children and finally got rid of the heavy incubus. (p. 270)

Gandhi thus created a community fund with the costly ornaments, which was held by trustees and the fund was used for serving the needs of South African Indians (Fischer, 1982, p. 85).

When Gandhi returned to India from South Africa, Ghanshyam Das Birla, of the famous business dynasty of Birlas, was responsible for most of the privately owned industry in India (Mehta, 1977, p. 59). Birla was a follower and benefactor of Gandhi. After Gandhi formally retired from the Indian National Congress, he lived and developed *Sevagram*, the ashram from where he became involved in the crusade against untouchability, promotion of handicrafts, organization of village rehabilitation work, and launching of a basic education movement. Business tycoon Birla financed most of Gandhi's spiritual activities during this period (1930 – 1947). Birla (Mehta, 1977) testifies about the accountability of Gandhi: "He sent me detailed accounts of everything that he spent or that was spent for him, down to the last paisa, even though I told him he could spend the money I gave him in any way he liked" (p. 62).

Security. A servant leader has an accurate understanding of his or her self-image, moral conviction, and emotional stability, and this security enables him to work behind the scenes willingly without seeking public acknowledgement (Sendjaya, 2005).

When Gandhi was in South Africa, he used to walk past the President Kruger's house in Johannesburg daily. One day, when there was a change in guard, he was pushed and kicked into the street. One of his influential friends saw the incident and asked him to go to court. But Gandhi (1948a) replied: "I have made it a rule not to go to court in respect of any personal grievance. So I do not intend to proceed against him" (p. 163). So Gandhi humbly forgave his abuser and was not hurt by the underestimation of his self by the guard.

Gandhi was a servant leader who worked behind the scenes willingly, without the need for constant acknowledgement or approval from others. Gandhi had a secure sense of self and he remained true to his self. L. Powys (1939), writes about this,

The applause of the noisy world seems to affect him as little as does its hatred. His personal dignity is of a kind so supreme that he can suffer the most mortifying physical indignities and remain unviolated and inviolable. Harried here and there, now being pulled through the window of a crowded train, now bending his spine to sweep up the dung of indentured labourers, now serving "untouchablesⁱⁱ" as though they were of his nearest kin, his perfect simplicity and perfect goodness appear utterly unaffected. (p. 234)

Vulnerability. Vulnerability is the capacity to be honest with feelings, doubts and fears, and the ability to admit mistakes openly (Sendjaya, 2005). Gandhi openly accepted his mistakes. Of this virtue Mallik (1948) writes:

There were many instances when *Bapuji* [Gandhi] openly regretted the mistakes and blunders that he made. There was no occasion when he claimed perfection for himself or an unerring comprehension of truth. (p. 3)

Similarly, Nair (1994) admits that "Gandhi was not infallible, he committed mistakes but he was not afraid to acknowledge them" (p. 7).

Covenantal Relationship

This quality refers to behaviors of the leader that foster genuine, profound, and lasting relationships with followers (Sendjaya, 2005). Collaboration, equality, availability and

acceptance are the building blocks proposed by Sendjaya et al. (2008) to build Covenantal Relationship, and Gandhi had all these qualities.

Collaboration. Servant leaders always work with others collaboratively, giving each of them opportunities to express their individual talents collectively. Gandhi went to Pretoria, South Africa in 1893 (Fischer, 1982, p. 57). He personally suffered greatly at the hands of the European colonists who treated the Indians as outcasts. He was kicked out of the first class compartment even though he had a valid ticket; he was refused a hotel room, and was not allowed to sit inside a stagecoach along with white people. Within a week after he arrived in Pretoria, he summoned the local Indians to a meeting to discuss their wretched condition. He collaborated with them to fight for their rights (Fischer, 1982, p. 60-61). He worked along with the people and made them fight for their rights.

After he returned to India, Gandhi was the congress leader, but he worked and made plans in consultation with his co-workers always (Gandhi, 1948a, p. 503). For instance, when he wanted to start a school in six villages in Bihar, a very backward state of India, he did it in consultation with his companions from Bihar (Gandhi, 1948a, p. 512, 513).

Equality. In South Africa, where indentured laborers who work under a restrictive contract of employment for a fixed period in exchange for payment of passage, accommodation, and food were ill-treated, he treated them as equals (Gandhi, 1948a, p. 192).

When an untouchable family wanted to join Gandhi's ashram, he willingly gave them admission and persuaded others in the ashram to accept them and treat them as equals (Gandhi, 1948a, p. 485; Nair, 1994, p. 25). This brought opposition, and monetary help to the ashram stopped, but Gandhi, in spite of the difficulty, persisted and received monetary help miraculously to run the ashram (Gandhi, 1948a, p. 486).

In 1931, Gandhi spent two weekends at Oxford in England. He stayed with Professor Lindsay, the Master of Balliol, who later became Lord Lindsay of Birker (Fischer, 1982). Gandhi interacted with the students and the elite of Oxford in various public meetings and discussions.

"Both my wife and I said," Lindsay wrote in 1948,

"that having him in our house was like having a saint in the house. He showed that mark of a great and simple man that he treated every one with the same courtesy and respect whether one were a distinguished statesman or an unknown student. Any one who was in earnest in wanting an answer to a question got a real one." (Fischer, 1982, p. 356)

About the way Gandhi treated all people as equal, Radhakrishnan (1939) wrote:

Gandhi started his passive resistance movement on a mass scale to protest against the oppressive restrictions. He stood out for the essential principle that men are equal and artificial distinctions based on race and colour were both unreasonable and immoral. (p. 21)

Availability. Gandhi was available to his followers and built real and genuine relationships. When he returned to India from South Africa and started the Indian National Congress, he willingly spent his time with workers and carried out clerical work at the Congress office (Gandhi, 1948a, p. 277).

Sheridan (1939), traveler and author of many travel books, who was privileged to be with Gandhi during his Round Table Conference days in England in 1931 to model his portrait, wrote about his availability to all who sought his advice, "Every morning, from ten to twelve, he was

available to all those who sought his advice or proffered appreciation. He received them with a fraternal kindness and tolerance, but never let them interrupt his spinning” (p. 271).

Heath, (1939) the Chairman of Indian Conciliation Group, London, wrote about Gandhi, “... he is also the man of much physical work, very approachable, lovable and humorous – right in the thick of the human struggle, moral and religious, social and political” (p. 92).

Acceptance - Sendjaya (2005) wrote that servant leaders relate with others with unconditional acceptance regardless of their backgrounds, limitations, characteristics, and past failures. Alexander (1939) states:

...to Gandhi each one of the ‘teeming millions’ is an individual man or woman, with a personality as sacred as his own. He knows how to make friends with the most ignorant peasant as sincerely as with a man of his own educational level. To him, no man or woman is common or unclean. This is not a beautiful theory that he preaches: it is his daily practice. (p. 45)

Responsible Morality

Sendjaya (2005) states that this fourth dimension of servant leadership is manifested in the leader’s moral reasoning and moral action.

Moral actions. As servant leaders always appeal to higher ideals, moral values, and the higher-order needs of followers, they make sure that both the ends they seek and the means they employ are morally legitimized, thoughtfully reasoned, and ethically justified (Sendjaya, 2005). Gandhi’s way of fighting with the British was using *Satyagraha*, which, when literally translated, means insistence on truth (Shridharani, 1939). Gandhi championed love, non-violence, forgiveness, and peaceful civil disobedience as a response to the unjust laws by the British, and successfully led Indian masses to a largely bloodless revolution and finally independence (Fawell, 2007, p. 228).

When Gandhi was pressured to wear the sacred thread, which is a mark of a high caste Hindu, Gandhi (1948a) firmly refused.

If the *shudras* [lowest caste] may not wear it, I argued, what right have the other *varnas* [classes of Hindu] to do so? And I saw no adequate reason for adopting what was to me an unnecessary custom. I had no objection to the thread as such, but the reasons for wearing it were lacking. (p. 479)

Moral reasoning. Gandhi was able to influence people by moral reasoning to do what is right. Britain declared war (First World War) on August 4, 1914, and Gandhi (1948a, p. 423) reached Britain on August 6, 1914. Even though India was under British Government and was fighting for independence, Gandhi, along with Indian men and women whom he mobilized, did their part in the war by treating the injured and providing for the injured. About this Gandhi (1948a) wrote,

If we would improve our status through the help and cooperation of the British, it was our duty to win their help by standing by them in their hour of need ... I thought that England’s need should not be turned into our opportunity and that it was more becoming and far-sighted not to press our demands while the war lasted. I therefore adhered to my advice and invited those who would to enlist as volunteers. There was a good response,

practically all the provinces and all the religions being represented among the volunteers. (p. 425)

Transcendental Spirituality

This quality refers to the inner conviction in a leader that something or someone beyond self and the material world exists and makes life complete and meaningful (Sendjaya, 2005), and is expressed by religiousness, interconnectedness, sense of mission, and wholeness (Sendjaya et al., 2008). Gandhi's life was driven by his religion, truth and non-violence and a life of service to others (Nair, 1994, p. 3).

Religiousness. About Gandhi's religion, Andrews (1939) stated:

Mahatma Gandhi is essentially a man of religion. He can never think of any complete release from evil apart from God's grace. Prayer is, therefore, of the essence of all his work. The very first requirement of one who is a Satyagrahi – a striver after Truth – is faith in God, whose nature is Truth and Love. I have seen the whole course of his life changed in a few moments in obedience to an inner call from God which came to him in silent prayer. There is a voice that speaks to him, at supreme moments, with an irresistible assurance; and no power on earth can shake him when this call has come home to his mind and will as the voice of God. (p. 48)

Gandhi believed the *Bhagavad Gita*, the holy book of the Hindus, and read it regularly and also memorized some verses everyday (Gandhi, 1948a, p. 322).

Sims (1994) affirms that Gandhi 'was primarily a religious leader.' Azariah (1939, p. 57) wrote about Gandhi's dependence on God, "We in India know what this spirit consists in: sensitiveness to the supernatural and a frank recognition of man's dependence upon God in all details of life..."

Interconnectedness. Sendjaya (2005) defines interconnectedness as the alignment between the self and the world which starts with an inner awareness of one's self, the knowledge of which enables the individual to fittingly contribute to the world and engage in meaningful and intrinsically motivating work.

Ismail (1939) wrote about this interconnectedness of Gandhi,

Mahatma Gandhi has immense faith in himself – a faith which has increased with his mystical confidence in the efficacy of spiritual force and which sometimes borders on inspiration.... "Plain living and high thinking" is his maxim of life, and the degree to which he has disciplined his emotions, his conduct and his very physiology is at once the admiration and despair of lesser men. (p. 152)

Gandhi believed that his search for God led to service to the world that was intrinsically motivating. He wrote about this:

If I found myself entirely absorbed in the service of the community, the reason behind it was my desire for self-realization. I had made the religion of service my own, as I felt that God could be realized only through service. (Gandhi, 1948a, p. 197)

Sense of mission. According to Sendjaya (2005), a servant leader's sense of mission is a calling to service, not merely a job or a career. The fulfillment of that calling is manifested in the

experience of making a difference in the lives of others through service, from which one derives meaning and purpose in life.

About this calling to selfless service in Gandhi's life in South Africa, Wolpert (2002) wrote:

Soon after launching his monumental *Satyagraha* movement in South Africa, Gandhi resolved, as he wrote in 1906, that "sacrifice" was the "law of life." He gave up his pleasures as a British barrister, his Saville Row suits, and sexual relations with his wife, vowing to focus all the heat of his passion toward helping India's emigrée and indentured community, living in Natal and the Transvaal, win freedom from racial prejudice and discrimination. . . . Gandhi's wife and eldest son found it impossible to understand his courting hatred and violent contempt in his selfless service to the Indian community. . . he taught his self-sacrificing yogic spirit to relish the "delicious taste" of fasting, taking pleasure in every pain he suffered for the "common good. (p. 3, 4)

Gandhi believed in his calling to free the Indians in South Africa from racial discrimination. After his return to India in 1915, his mission was to free the Indians from the British rule, and towards the end of his life his mission was to remove hatred between Hindus and Muslims and make Indians live in harmony.

Wholeness. Gandhi strived to live a holistic, integrated life which promoted values that transcended self-interest and material success (Sendjaya, 2003). Gandhi gave away his money and personal possessions, renounced his career, and moved to a communal farm in South Africa. After returning to India, Gandhi lived in a small, mud-and-bamboo hut which contained a spinning wheel, a straw mat, a low writing table, and two shelves for a few books. He traveled like the poor, by third class rail or walked long distances by bare feet. He dressed like the poor, in his simple white loincloth. He made his own clothes and ate a meager diet of fruits and vegetables (Nojeim, 2005, p. 28).

About the source of his holistic integrated life, Radhakrishnan (1939) wrote:

It is his faith in God that has created in him a new man whose power and passion and love we feel. He has the feeling of something close to him, a spiritual presence which disturbs, embarrasses and overwhelms an assurance of reality. Times without number, when doubts disturb his mind, he leaves it to God. (p. 15)

Transforming Influence

Central to the idea of servant leadership is its transforming influence on other people through trust, mentoring, modeling, vision, and empowerment (Sendjaya et al., 2008).

Trust. Servant leaders are willing to delegate responsibilities and share authority with others and trust them, even if doing so is risky (Sendjaya, 2005).

In South Africa, an ordinance called the Black Act was passed in July 1907, requiring Indians to be fingerprinted, registered, and to carry identification cards at all times, and failure to do so was to be punishable by prison, heavy fines, or deportation (Fischer, 1982, p. 104). Indians, led by Gandhi, resisted by picketing the offices at which they were supposed to register. The authorities arrested the leaders of the *satyagraha* movement, including Gandhi. Later, Gandhi was called to a conference with the Boer leader, General Jan Christian Smuts. Gandhi was offered a compromise by Smuts. Smuts asked the local Indians to register voluntarily to

prevent more immigrants from coming into South Africa and he promised to repeal the offensive Black Act. Gandhi agreed, and he and the other political prisoners were released. Indians opposed this compromise and questioned Gandhi in a public meeting on what would happen if General Smuts betrayed them. In response,

‘A Satyagrahi,’ Gandhi said, ‘bids good-bye to fear. He is therefore never afraid of trusting his opponent. Even if the opponent plays him false twenty times, the Satyagrahi is ready to trust him for the twenty-first time - for an implicit trust in human nature is the very essence of his creed’. (Fischer, 1982, p. 106)

Smuts refused to fulfill his promise. Even though Gandhi knew it was risky, he was ready to trust even his enemy.

When the black plague, or pneumonic plague, struck Indians in South Africa, Gandhi’s office workers also volunteered joyfully to help him nurse the victims, disregarding infection, fully knowing the risks of catching the disease (Gandhi, 1948a, p. 354-359). Powys (1939) wrote about this:

It is impossible not to respond to the story of Mr. Gandhi’s four Indian clerks who, when they were asked whether they would come with him to nurse men stricken with the plague, with the terrible Black Death, answered simply, “Where you go we will go also.” (p. 236)

This was a spontaneous response to his trust in the workers.

Mentoring. Gandhi was able to mentor his followers to follow *Satyagraha*. During his struggle for freedom in South Africa, an incident narrated by Sen (1945) shows how a *Pathan* (soldier) named Saiyad Ibrahim did not seek for revenge but:

...bared his back and said to Gandhiji: “Look here, how severely they have thrashed me. I have let the rascals go for your sake, as such are your orders. I am a *Pathan*, and *Pathans* don’t take but give a beating.” To him Gandhiji said: “Well done, brother, I look upon such forbearance as real bravery. We will win through people of your type,” and he was right, for, years later hundreds of *Pathans* took the pledge of non-violence, and many came to the Congress fold sheathing their swords rather than brandishing them to fight the battle of freedom. (p. 54)

Similarly, Shridharani (1939) wrote that there have been cases of *Pathans* “... after starting out as hirelings of the government, joined the ranks of the *Satyagrahis* and became ‘non-violent’ soldiers” (p. 53).

Modelling. Gandhi was a model for *Satyagraha* and non-violence. He practiced what he preached. When the Natal Indian Congress was started, Gandhi (1948a, p. 185, 186) advocated all who joined to pay subscription; he set an example by paying the subscription.

In South Africa, after Gandhi started publishing the *Indian Opinion* from Phoenix, he faced difficulty as the printing machine failed to work. During that hard time, Gandhi worked along with his carpenters who had worked all day long in the night and operated the machine to print the journal on time. About this incident Gandhi (1948a) wrote:

I woke up the carpenters and requested their cooperation. They needed no pressure. They said, “If we cannot be called upon in an emergency, what use are we? You rest yourselves and we will work the wheel. For us it is easy work.” ... I partnered the carpenters, all the rest joined turn by turn, and thus we went on till 7 a.m. (p. 370)

During the early days of the Indian National Congress formation, when the workers were unwilling to clean toilets, Gandhi set an example by taking a broom and cleaning the toilets with

his own hands (Sen, 1945, p. 49). Similarly, in the ashram he started, there was a rule that all the inmates, including Gandhi, had to do all the work—even cleaning of toilets (Nair, 1994, p. 25). Gandhi modelled simplicity by wearing a simple loin cloth around his waist and a home spun cloth or blanket round his shoulders wherever he went. Be it to France or big function in London or in the sittings of the Round Table Conference, his attire was the same simple one (Qadir, 1939, p. 239).

Vision. Gandhi was a man of vision. Ismail (1939) described Gandhi:

...as the inspiring leader of a resurgent India who has given the Indians a new spirit, a sense of self-respect and a feeling of pride in their civilization, he is something more than a mere politician. He is a great statesman, a man of vision. (p. 152)

Prior to independence, Gandhi's vision was to see India independent, and after independence and partition, his vision was to see Hindus and Muslims live in unity without looking for revenge and retaliation. He said in a speech in Delhi,

I plead with all the earnestness at my command that all the Hindus, Sikhs and Muslims in Delhi should meet together in friendly embrace and set a noble example to the rest of India, shall I say, to the world? Delhi should forget what other parts of India have done or doing. Then only will it claim the proud privilege of having broken the vicious circle of private revenge and retaliation. (Gandhi, 1948b: p. 32)

He underwent fasting before independence and also for the union of Muslims and Hindus after the partition during periods of violence (Gandhi, 1948b, p. 331).

Empowerment. Empowerment is a key characteristic of servant leadership. This characteristic enables servant leaders to possess a commitment to and derive satisfaction from the growth of others, believing that people have an intrinsic value beyond their contribution as workers (Sendjaya, 2005).

Gandhi's first Indian campaign in 1917, on behalf of the peasants of Champaran, demonstrates how Gandhi empowered the peasants (Fischer, 1982, p. 189). Deceived and oppressed by the British landlords, the peasants invited Gandhi to Champaran, a remote area at the foothills of the Himalayas. He went to investigate their complaints but was advised by the British commissioner to leave. When he did not leave, he received an official notice ordering him out of the district. As he refused, he was summoned to court. On the day of the trial, masses of peasants appeared in town in a spontaneous demonstration of unity. The officials were bewildered and perplexed when Gandhi pleaded guilty. Judgment was postponed, and in a few days the case was withdrawn.

Gandhi conferred with the representative of the landlords and bargained to refund the illegal gain of the British landlords to the peasants. The peasants realized their rights and later the British planters abandoned their estates, which reverted to the peasants. Gandhi empowered the poor peasants by restoring their lands back to them.

He stayed with the peasants for a year and started schools and improved sanitary and health conditions. Louis Fischer (1982), in his biography of Gandhi, *The Life of Mahatma Gandhi*, commented on this episode, "In everything Gandhi did, moreover, he tried to mold a new free Indian who could stand on his own feet and thus make India free" (p. 196).

In a similar way, Gandhi (1948a, p. 572) persuaded the masses in India to follow the path of non-violence and truth. Gandhi and his followers travelled the villages of India carrying their pleas for non-cooperation with the British to the people and preached his social welfare program

- weaving homespun cloth (*khadi*), attaining Hindu-Muslim unity, and ending untouchability (Mehta, 1977, p. 159). This led to the non-violent struggle against the British, forced the British to quit India, and led to the empowerment of the masses.

Holmes (1939) wrote,

To Gandhi more than to any other Indian will be attributed the independence of India when this independence is at last won. To him also will be attributed the vast achievement of making his people worthy as well as capable of independence by reviving their native culture, quickening their sense of personal dignity and self respect, disciplining their inner lives to self control – making them spiritually as well as politically free. Added to this is his great work of delivering the untouchables from their bondage to affliction. (p. 113)

Greenleaf (2007) whose writings brought the image of the servant-leader into the world says that Gandhi gave the masses of common people a great dream of their own good society and thus empowered them by self help techniques and Gandhi wanted India to develop into a village based nation.

Gilbert Murray (1939), Emeritus Professor, University of Oxford, testified about Gandhi: In a world where the rulers of nations are relying more and more upon brute force and the nations trusting their lives and hopes to systems which represent the very denial of law and brotherhood, Mr. Gandhi stands out as an isolated and most impressive figure. He is a ruler obeyed by millions, not because they fear him but because they love him. (p. 197)

Gandhi was assassinated by Nathuram Vinayak Godse, for his servant leadership qualities and his egalitarian spirit that regarded Muslims as equals to Hindus. Godse was the editor and publisher of a Hindu Mahasabha weekly in Poona. Gandhi sacrificed his life for the cause dear to his heart. His sacrifice stopped the bloody violence between Hindus and Muslims that followed partition and helped India have peace.

Implications of this Study for Management Education and Leadership

This research study proves clearly that Mahatma Gandhi personified the model of servant leadership in an Indian culture. Hay and Hodgkinson (2006) argued for a more grounded conception of leadership and, as such, puts leadership back in the grasp of ordinary people by saying a leader is an ordinary individual who is imperfect and subject to existential struggles like all of us, and not seen in the one who is a heroic figure with inspirational powers. Gandhi was a great leader, yet he practiced the characteristics of leadership which an ordinary man can follow.

The Mind of Mahatma quoted Gandhi, saying, “I have not the shadow of a doubt that any man or woman can achieve what I have, if he or she would make the same effort and cultivate the same hope and faith” (Prabhu & Rao, 1945, para. 18). All leaders, whether they are great or small, can follow the servant leadership qualities of Gandhi and make an impact in the society, country, and business.

Vicarious learning is a “natural” form of learning; it can be effectively adopted for planned learning in schools of management and various kinds of workshops on management (Popper, 2005). Thus, management educators and trainers can intentionally study the life of Mahatma Gandhi and many other servant leader models like Jesus Christ, Martin Luther King Jr., Nelson Mandela, Mother Teresa, and others all over the world who impacted the people, nation, and the society, in educational and business settings in India and across other cultures.

Conclusion

Gandhi's ideals and characteristics featured in this paper depict clearly that he practiced servant leadership throughout his life in South Africa and India. The analysis in this study on servant leadership assists our understanding of the qualities of servant leaders. This study also shows how servant leadership can be followed in the Indian context. According to Winston and Ryan (2008, p. 213), "If Gandhi was a servant leader who engaged in humane leadership activities, then the notion of servant leadership would be an Indian ideal rather than a Western ideal." India is one of the fastest-growing economies in the world and has sent thousands of management leaders all over the world now. So every Indian manager could be exposed to the basic teaching and practice of servant leadership, which truly offers hope and guidance for a new era in human development.

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ⁱ The brief profile is based on the autobiography of Gandhi (1948a) *My Experiments with the Truth*.

ⁱⁱ The caste system in India is over 3,000 years old. A caste is a group membership that has a specific rank in society. The poor and low caste people are called as Scheduled Caste (SC) people in India. They are treated as untouchables as they used to perform scavenging and menial jobs. Low caste people cannot enter into temples or the area where the high caste people live. They are not treated on par with others and are isolated from other high caste people. However, after the independence of India in 1947 the new constitution banned the practice of untouchability and made it a punishable offence. The constitution of India has also encouraged movement away from the caste system and any discrimination based on caste.