Power of Leadership Storytelling: The Case Of Mahatma Gandhi

Dr. Rakhi Sameer

In the recent years story telling has gained a strong position in literary theory and practice. Stories can be seen as a particular doctrine and even a philosophy of leadership. Some authors have treated stories as intentional leadership instrument, whereas some have emphasised the subconscious, or innocent, nature of organisational and leadership storytelling. In terms of leadership theory-diverging from traditional leader-centred approaches - story telling is interested in discursive resources that construct and convey leadership power. In terms of power, story-telling is not attached to power but social interaction in organisational processes, where leadership-influenced power is constructed and conveyed, or contested. Organisations are replete with a wide range of different forms of stories, myths, sagas, legends about heroes or defeated strategic projects and humorous anecdotes. Some stories are coherent, well-established and publicly expressed narratives with a clear plot, while others are fragmented, spontaneous or even hidden from public discourse. Nevertheless, stories are information-rich, full of organisational values, and beliefs containing moral position dealing with issues concerning what is good and bad. They form an apt vehicle for studying leadership and ethics.

Stories tell us about leadership styles. Contrary to hierarchical and authoritarian, storytelling is often seen as an ethical approach to leadership-promoting democracy and empowerment. A story is persuasive and latent. Among the organisational members what brings about leadership influence is the subjective and collective interpretation. The story teller aspires to influence the social reality with a view to shaping it in a desirable direction.

Plato says one who tells the story governs. The narrator, resorts to discursive exercise of power. Human beings are braided in a web of stories in all their action and social belonging. If we want to enquire about organisational and leadership traits, story-telling is embedded in a complex network of stories. To see leadership as an influence or power over followers resulting from actions performed by a real world person, is to limit it far too much.
The leader’s actions can be interpreted by his followers through storytelling, for example past actions of the leader will used to define his future policies. Some critics also feel that it is the story that leads, people follow the meaning in his story. Therefore, the stories told about leaders and their accomplishments, failures, moral choices and so on are the key to making sense of leadership influence among followers.

Leadership charisma is eventually a narrative construction. First, there is an action whether real or imaginary, with eye-witnesses. As people make sense of what has happened. So to say people give it a plot involving the protagonist (leader) and minor characters into the emerging story, they pass the consequent construction in narrative form. We will see that in Gandhi’s case a simple action of rebellion by a single leader initiated an enormous, global charismatic leadership institution. Martin Luther King is another example of a charismatic leader sharing a similar ethos as Gandhi. On the other hand Hitler can be analysed as an example of a grim yet charismatic leader.

The interpretation of a story is related to the context and point of view. There can be varied interpretations to the story. There is an ethical dimension to the story too. Stories can be used both for good or bad. In terms of leadership power, stories can be seen as a means of empowering. It should be a latent way to influence followers.

My paper is a case study of Mahatma Gandhi’s leadership within the frame work of storytelling. Looking into the story of Gandhi will provide us an understanding of how his charisma and ethics were formed and expressed through a narrative configuration. I have used the historical biography of Gandhi, to identify meaningful events and happenings in terms of leadership, this will provide insights that illustrate what has been the process of formation of a Powerful Leader.

**Episode 1**
Beginning of the story; background and origin, his mission and vision.

**Episode 2**
Genesis of the cult of Gandhi; the legend of the father of the Nation, how it emerged and developed, beginning of his charisma

**Episode 3**
The story grows

**Episode 1**
**The Young Gandhi**
Gandhi writes about his early life, that stories like King Harishchandra had a great impact on his mind. He wrote “It haunted me and I must have acted Harishchandra to myself without numbers.” Gandhi’s early self-identification with truth and love as supreme values is traceable to these epic characters.

Gandhi was deeply influenced by his mother, who was an extremely pious lady. At the age of 19, he left home to study law in London. After completion he returned to India to set up law practice in Bombay, but was not successful. He soon accepted a position with an Indian firm that sent him to its office in South Africa. Along with his wife and children, Gandhi remained in South Africa for nearly 20 years.

In South Africa, what was important, what mattered and what was new was Gandhi’s reaction to the situation. He had so far not been conspicuous for self-assertion or aggressiveness. But something happened to him as he smarted under the insults heaped upon him. In retrospect, the journey from Durban to Pretoria struck him as one of the most-creative experiences of his life, it was his moment of truth. Henceforth he would not accept injustice as part of the natural order in South Africa, he would defend his dignity as an Indian and as a man.

**Gandhi Finds His Mission And Vision**

In South Africa, in 1906, Gandhi led a campaign civil disobedience that would last for next eight years. Under his leadership Indians took to defy the ordinance to register the Indian population. It was here that satyagraha was borne new technique for redressing wrongs
through inviting rather than inflicting suffering for resisting adversaries without rancour and fighting them without violence.

During its final phase in 1913, hundreds of Indians living in South Africa, including women went to jail, and thousands of striking Indian miners were arrested. Indians living in South Africa had been living without any rights. Gandhi himself came to an awareness of the frightening force and fury of European racism. He realised how far Indians were from being considered full human beings, when he was thrown out of a first-class railway compartment, though he he’d a first-class ticket. From this political awakening Gandhi was to emerge as the leader of the Indian community in South Africa.

In his book Satyagraha in South Africa he wrote in detail the struggles of the Indians to claim their rights, and their resistance to oppressive legislation and executive measures, such as imposition of poll tax on them. In 1909, on a trip back to India, he wrote a short treatise entitled Hind Swaraj or Indian Home Rule. Where he in a way initiated the critique, of industrial civilisation, and modernity in all its aspects.

**His religious quest**

Gandhi’s religious quest dates back to his childhood, the influence of this mother and of his home life in Porbandar and Rajkot, but it received a great impetus after his arrival in South Africa. His friends there failed to convert him to Christianity, but they quickened his appetite for religious studies. He was fascinated by the writings of Tolstoy on Christianity, read the Quran in translation, and dug into Hindu scriptures and philosophy. Bhagavadgita that he had first read in London became his “spiritual dictionary” and this book perhaps exercised the greatest single influence on him. Gandhi read the Gita for the first time in England, and it made a great impact on his mind. He regarded the Gita par excellence for the knowledge of Truth. The Gita became his life-long companion and guide, guide, especially the last eighteen verses of the second chapter of The Gita. Gandhi derived the Gospel of selfless action or duty from The Gita.

**Episode 2**
Genesis Of The Cult of Gandhi And The Birth Of The Father Of The Nation

Gandhi returned to India in early 1915. He took it upon himself to acquire familiarity with India. He travelled widely for a year. Over the next few years, he was involved in several local struggles, such as Champaran in Bihar. The peasants of the area were forced by British landlord to grow indigo which was a cash crop. The farmers turned to Gandhi for help. His interactions and interventions earned him a considerable reputation, and placed him at the helm of nationalist politics. This can be seen by his leadership of the opposition to repressive legislation, Rowlatt Act.

On 13 April 1919, a British officer, General Dyer, ordered his forces to open fire on a peaceful gathering, including women and children, in Amritsar Jallianwala Bagh Massacre. There were widespread protests by Indians. Gandhi, however urged the Indians to refrain from all kinds of violence and went to fast unto death to pressure Indians to stop rioting. By this time his saintliness was known to all. At this time Rabindranath Tagore, the great poet, gave him the title of Mahatma or Great Soul.

After the massacre in Punjab, Gandhi initiated the non-cooperation movement, which called upon Indians to withdraw from British institutions, to return honours conferred by the British, and to learn self-reliance. In 1922 a score of Indian policemen were brutally killed by a large crowd at Chauri Chaura. Gandhi was arrested shortly after and tried on charges of sedition and sentenced to imprisonment for six years. At the Great Trial, Gandhi delivered a masterful indictment of British Rule.

In March 1930, he launched the Salt March, a satyagraha against the British imposed tax on salt, which affected the poorest section of community. One of the most spectacular and successful campaigns in Gandhi’s non-violent war against the British Raj, it resulted in the imprisonment of more than 60,000 people.

Gandhi’s Influences
Mahatma Gandhi was a man of faith and conviction. However, he too had his rebellious stage. He changed as a person while earning a living as a lawyer in South Africa. He came in contact with the apartheid and the future Mahatma began to emerge, one who championed the truth through non-violent resistance. It was between 1915 and his assassination in 1945 that he struggled for India’s freedom. Gandhi’s teachings of non-violent resistance, known as satyagraha, has had a lasting impact and influence on the world today.

One person who greatly influenced Gandhi was Henry David Thoreau, primarily his essay on civil disobedience. Thoreau an American who opposed United States invasion of Mexico during 1840. He demonstrated his disapproval by refusing to pay his taxes, as a protest to the Mexican War. He placed special emphasis on the responsibilities and capabilities of the individual, he urged each man to take seriously his ability to change society for better or worse in his daily life. Thoreau suggested in ‘Civil Disobedience’ that just and honest man should always question the role of government. Like Thoreau, Gandhi spent a large quantity of time in jailer protesting the causees he believed were just.

He has been the role model for people like Martin Luther King Jr. and Nelson Mandela. His continued influence can still be felt today in many non-violent peace organisations around the world bearing his name or teaching his philosophy.

Another source that greatly influenced Gandhi is the ‘New Testament’ in the Bible. A particular verse that greatly inspired Gandhi is in the book of “Matthew”, “Do not resist an evil person. If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also”.

**Episode 3**

India achieved independence but at the cost of her unity. This was not the freedom that Gandhi or Congress wanted. The task that he had taken in hand was not only achievement of political freedom but establishment of a social order based on truth and non-violence. This unfinished part of his experiment was even more difficult than the achievement of freedom. In the political struggle the fight was against a foreign power. In establishing the social order
or of his pattern there was possibility of a conflict arising between groups and classes of our own people.

**Conclusion**

Gandhi was persistent in his approach and taught us that violence is not the key to win over every battle. His leadership strategies were unique. Standing up for wrong without thinking how the society would react was one of the key traits of Mahatma.

“Your belief will become your thought, your thought will become your word, your word will become your action, your action will become your habit will again become your value, and your value will ultimately become your destiny.”

This saying by Mahatma Gandhi falls true for every individual aspiring to be a leader. A genuine hallmark of a great leader is thinking twice before taking any action and leading a style that is based on moral values and not just organisational ones. One of the best leadership strategies that can be implemented by every leader is to be motivated by the thought that he or she has the potential change.

A leader shows how things are done and does not instruct how people should work with and below him. It is then equally important that the team works as one and follows the leader as an inspiration to achieve the common goal.

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