

Cultural Heritage and Contemporary Change  
Series IIB, South Asian Philosophical Studies, Volume 5

# **Gandhi: The Meaning of Mahatma for the Millennium**

**Indian Philosophical Studies, II**

Edited by  
Kuruvilla Pandikattu

The Council for Research in Values and Philosophy

**Copyright © 2001 by  
The Council for Research in Values and Philosophy**

Gibbons Hall B-20  
620 Michigan Avenue, NE  
Washington, D.C. 20064

All rights reserved

Printed in the United States of America

**Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication**

Gandhi : the meaning of Mahatma for he millennium / edited by Kuruvilla Pandikattu.

p.cm.—(Cultural heritage and contemporary change. Series IIIB, South Asia ; vol. 5) (Indian Philosophical Studies ; II)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

1. Gandha, Mahatma, 1869-1948—Political and social views. I. Pandikattu, Kuruvilla. II. Series.

DS481.G3 G264 2000  
302—dc21

00-066029  
CIP

ISBN 1-56518-156-5 (pbk.)

# Table of Contents

Introduction: A Critical, Contextual and Creative Approach to Gandhi <i>K. Pandikattu</i>	1
<b>Part I. Conceptual Clarifications</b>	
Chapter I. <i>Hind Swaraj</i> and Gandhi's Search for the Conquest of Power <i>D. George</i>	19
Chapter II. An Inquiry into the Origins of <i>Satyagraha</i> and Its Contemporary Relevance <i>G. Pattery</i>	35
Chapter III. Gandhi on Religion in Public Life <i>G. Karuvelil</i>	53
<b>Part II. Contextual Cases</b>	
Chapter IV. Gandhian Thought vis-à-vis Indigenous Ideology: Some Reflections for an Integral Humanism for the Third Millennium <i>J.M. Kujur</i>	83
Chapter V. Relevance of Gandhian Praxis to Empowering Women <i>S. Vazhapilly</i>	95
<b>Part III. Civilizational Critiques</b>	
Chapter VI. Technology in the Third Millennium: A Gandhian Perspective <i>J.I. Fernando</i>	119
Chapter VII. Gandhian Prospective Paradigm for Culture <i>G. Joseph M.</i>	137
Chapter VIII. Global Village vs. Gandhian Villages: A Viable Vision <i>K. Pandikattu</i>	172
<b>Part IV. Cultic Consequences</b>	
Chapter IX. <i>Sevagram</i> and <i>Sarvodaya</i> : the Relevance of Gandhian Symbols <i>K. Pandikattu</i>	199
Chapter X. Symbol of Peace: Religion through the Prism of Gandhi's Life and Vision <i>G. Lazar</i>	215

Chapter XI. The Mythic Relevance of Gandhi for Today <i>K. Pandikattu</i>	235
Milestones in Gandhi's Life	272
List of Contributors	275
Index	277

## Introduction

# A Critical, Contextual and Creative Approach to Gandhi

*Kuruville Pandikattu*

Recall the face of the poorest and weakest man you have seen and ask yourself if the step you contemplate is going to be of any use to him. Will he gain by it?--*M.K. Gandhi*

The world today is confronted with challenging prospects from the political, religious, economic and cultural spheres. The increase in political fanaticism, religious fundamentalism, economic deprivation and cultural homogenization cannot be wished away. They pose serious threats to the world at the beginning of this new millennium. Mahatma Gandhi offers an exceptionally valiant and outstanding ray of hope in such a situation. He confronted the political, religious, economic and cultural problems of his day and offers us today concrete suggestions and rays of hope. Here, scholars from different fields have come together to study the relevance of Gandhi for our world civilization.

### Critical, Contextual and Creative Approach

Why another book on Gandhi? Not because enough is not written on and by Gandhi, but because the present authors are convinced that Gandhi's relevance shines forth in new splendor when we are faced with the challenges of the new millennium. So this book does not claim to be a study on Gandhian thoughts, but an application of his vision and values for the changed circumstances of today. The authors take into special consideration the changed subaltern context where tribals and women are taken seriously. Economic globalization, technological domination and their symbolic significance are also considered. From these perspectives, the authors attempt to rediscover the significance of Gandhi for the contemporary world.

Three characteristics that run as a web all through these studies are critical, contextual and creative approaches to Gandhi. While drawing inspiration from Gandhi, the authors go beyond and reflect on the current situation of both India and the world. While admiring both the person and the message of Gandhi, they perceive how his relevance shines in the contemporary world.

Some of the authors take a critical stand against Gandhi. Pointing out some of the drawbacks of Gandhi does not belittle his person or message. For example, Kujur sees Gandhi's forgetfulness of tribals as mysterious; Karuvelil looks into the Gandhian failure in ignoring the theoretical division between religions. In another way, almost all the articles are critical of the larger society in which we live: a culturally globalized and economically liberalized society where the individual person is not respected.

The articles are also contextual. Two deal from the context of the tribals and women. They view Gandhi's contributions from these contexts. Other articles perceive Gandhi from the wider economic, political and religious contexts of India and of the world. One article that looks from the perspective of economic globalization, another from the view point of cultural homogenization, a third article draws inspiration from Gandhi based on the context of increasing communal tensions and religious fundamentalism.

All the articles try to create responses to the dilemma facing today's world. These responses are based on the Gandhian principles of truth, simplicity and *ahimsa*. Radically new solutions are

attempted, alternate visions are fostered, sustainable technology encouraged and viable life style nurtured. The dangers the world faces today are taken into account and radical answers are tried from a Gandhian spiritual perspective. While the difficulties confronting us are not ignored, the solutions proposed are seen also as extremely tedious, but not impossible. There is a general consensus that what is at stake is the very survival of the human family, and it is acknowledged that Gandhi with his spiritual basis and human vision does have something significant to contribute to fostering life for all.

This makes Gandhi a new symbol, metaphor or myth for humanity. These philosophical categories are used in an affirmative sense to denote Gandhi as a relevant and meaningful personality for the third millennium. He has a message to give us, a vision to guide us. He has already lived that message and it sparkles through his life.

Within the above background a brief account of each Part and chapter will enable us to grasp the total meaning of the book: to discover the relevance of Gandhi for the new millennium. For a logical classification, in Part I first chapters clarify some basic concepts in Gandhi: Truth (*Satyagraha*), Power (*Hind Swaraj*) and Religion. Part II deals specifically with two particular contemporary contexts (tribals and women) and Gandhi's responses. Part III turns to a Gandhian critique of the technology, culture and religion of modern civilization and suggests a prospective paradigm in his spirit. Finally, Part IV elaborates on the symbolic significance of Gandhi as a myth for us we enter the new millennium. These aspects and more are developed in the overview that follows.

## **Part I. Conceptual Clarifications**

Part I deals primarily with Gandhi's vision of truth, power and religion. This forms the basis for better understanding and appreciating him in the later chapters. Gandhi's vision and method are intimately linked with the movement of *Satyagraha*, a term he has coined, a movement he has started and a vision he has fostered. These early experiments with truth continued through his London days and till his death. Professor George Pattery first traces the movement's roots in South Africa and Gandhi's experience there of this oppression of both of Indians and native Africans. Inspired by Tolstoy's *The Kingdom of God Is within You*, this exploitation challenged his personal, social and economic outlook. Gandhi condensed these early experiences in these words: "Suffice to say, that all these experiences sank in me. I had gone there only for a single case, prompted by self-interest and curiosity. During the first year, therefore, I was merely the witness and the victim of these wrongs. I then woke to a sense of duty."

At the same time Gandhi's phenomenal strength was never to despise anyone, including his enemies, in his quest for *Satya*. According to Gandhi, his war services taught him not to despise anyone however insignificant that person may be, and that every human being is capable of the loftiest heroism. Ruskin's *Unto This Last* influenced his thinking. The pedagogy of *satyagraha* unfolded itself through the social struggles and through the personal quest and philosophy of Gandhi. At the formative level of *satyagraha* in South Africa, all means of protest were employed, mobilization was effected through religious faith, and action was taken with voluntary consent and a willingness to suffer.

The choice of the term is also crucial for our understanding. Originally '*sadagraha*' meaning 'firmness in good cause,' was suggested to Gandhi as the name for the movement. Gandhi himself modified it into '*satyagraha*': *satya* meaning truth, *agraha* meaning 'force or holding firm'. The Indian South African movement thus meant to rely on 'force born of truth,' (the non-violent part

of the movement would eventually gain much prominence) and gave up the phrase, ‘passive resistance’.

For Gandhi *satyagraha* and cowardice could not coexist. “A *satyagrahi* bids goodbye to fear. He is, therefore, never afraid of trusting the opponent. Even if the opponent plays him false twenty times, the *satyagrahi* is ready to trust him for the 21st time, for an implicit trust in human nature is the very essence of his creed.” No matter how often a *satyagraha* is betrayed, he will repose his trust in the adversary, so long as there are not cogent grounds for mistrust. Pain to a *satyagrahi* is the same as pleasure. He will not, therefore, be misled by the mere fear of suffering into groundless distrust. Pattery goes on to describe some salient features and limitations of *satyagraha*.

*Satyagraha* is primarily a pedagogy of life, and its pertinence depends on one’s way and vision of life. In its inception, *satyagraha* was experimental in nature and visionary in outlook. *Satyagraha* both as a philosophy and as a method of conflict-resolution was perfected and personalized by Gandhi. It seeks an integral approach to life and the issues of conflicts. The utopian dimension of *satyagraha* is not its weakness. Rather, it enjoins the humans to work for a new and creative order in life without belittling the “other” and demonizing the oppressor. It stands out as a unique method for conflict resolution, as an integrated vision of life even for today’s civilization.

Friedrich Nietzsche asserted that will is power. Nietzsche holds that this power, bringing one’s potentialities into birth is the central dynamic and need of life. He was of the opinion that humans strive not so much for pleasure as they do for power. A society that tries to cater to the needs of its citizens cannot just ignore the fundamental aspect of power in human and social relations. Gandhi’s *Hind Swaraj* deals with the sharing of power from social and political perspectives. *Hind Swaraj*, the earliest of Gandhi’s books, termed his manifesto, has a pivotal position in the writings of Gandhi. Though a small booklet, it contained Gandhi’s seminal ideas and had a ‘chequered career’. Originally written in Gujarati in 1890 on his return voyage from London to South Africa, it was serialized in two installments in December 1890 in the Gujarati edition of *Indian Opinion*, the weekly published by Gandhi in South Africa. In January 1910, it was issued as a booklet in Gujarati and on 24 March 1910, the Government of India proscribed it along with other publications because they “contain matter declared to be seditious.” The book soon attracted the attention of the European friends of Gandhi, one of whom, Mr. Kallenbach, wanted it to be translated into English. However, the proscription of the book ‘hastened’ its publication in 1910. Gandhi characterized it as a whole theory of life and defended it till death. T.K. Mahadevan said that one should read *Hind Swaraj* if one loves the human family and this earth which is our home. Scholar Davis George deals with this exciting and relevant topic in his chapter.

The book is a fundamental critique of the modern society characterized by the cult of violence and materialism. Gandhi’s alternative model for the society is studied by Davis in terms of: decentralization, structures not of hierarchical pyramid but oceanic circle; *charkha* as the hope for the rural masses; *swadeshi* as the antidote to modernization; soul force as the secret to success; and *swaraj* as the perennial challenge. Finally the author speaks of the perennial relevance of this small book for our contemporary culture.

Speaking of *Hind Swaraj*, Professor Frederick Soddy, a well-known chemist and economist, felt that “any one who wishes to change the world would do well to study it.” J.M. Murry, though not fully agreeing with *Hind Swaraj*, came to the conclusion that “the ultimate social goal of the spiritual leader in the modern world should be not to withdraw backwards to the pre-machine community, but to advance forward to the creation of a society capable of using machines without incurring material and spiritual self-devastation.” He described the book as one of the “spiritual classics of the world” and “the greatest that has been written in modern times.” Gandhi’s

preoccupation was to provide the common people with the best possible tools to enable them to work with the maximum efficiency and thereby improve their material well-being and spiritual fulfillment. Exactly therein lies the relevance of the book for modern people.

Gandhi destroyed the dichotomy that existed between professional life and personal life, between precept and practice, and ushered in an era where greed for power and wealth should be replaced by the selfless desire for love and service, a liberative praxis of power. *Hind Swaraj* is still a Manifesto for the weaker section of society, so that India and her *Praja* may once again emerge as a great nation.

The philosopher George Karuvelil studies another crucial concept in Gandhi: his vision and praxis of religion in public life. Religion, for Gandhi, is so absolute that he would not hesitate to assert that he “could not live for a single second without religion.” It is an insoluble aspect of his life which cannot be separated from other spheres of life. Gandhi is emphatic that one’s religion commands one’s absolute allegiance in every sphere of one’s activity. “I do not conceive religion as one of the many activities of mankind. For me even the tiniest activity is governed by what I consider to be my religion.” It follows that his life and politics are extensions of his religion; which he goes on to affirm: “Many of my political friends despair of me because they say even my politics are derived from religion. And they are right. My politics and all other activities of mine are derived from my religion. I go further and say that every activity of a man of religion must be derived from his religion, because religion means being bound to God, that is to say God rules your every breath.”

Although he is faced with a plurality of religions, most of his views on religion are not concerned primarily with such socio-cultural entities. For him, religion is a personal affair, entirely “a matter of the heart. It is between a man and his God.” Gandhi adds: “I swear by my religion. I will die for it. But it is my personal affair” He would even go to the extent of saying that religions could be “as many as there are individuals.” Since religion is a personal matter “if we succeeded in confining it to the personal plane, all would be well in our political life.” Individual people are free to profess any religion, but the state is to be guided by its own laws and norms, and should treat all equally without any religious bias.

Put in terms of the Gandhian distinction between truth and Truth, we might say that a small fraction of true religion (a relative truth that is practiced in one’s life) is of greater worth than the whole of True religion that is believed but does not affect one’s life. Although Gandhi put it in terms of the Jain philosophy of *syadavada*, this insight seems more the result of the intensity of his personal life than that of any philosophy. This makes Gandhi capable of criticizing tradition without ceasing to be intensely religious. Even while being a great devotee of God Rama, it matters little to him if Rama is a historical person.

Karuvelil goes on to consider two cases of Gandhi’s praxis, the Khilafat and the Civil Disobedience Movements, two of his most prominent attempts to achieve Hindu-Muslim unity. The Khilafat movement was a failure; the Civil Disobedience Movement, launched after the Lahore Congress, offers a contrast to this. By then the communal problem had become acute on issues like cow slaughter and music before the mosques. But Gandhi did not attempt to deal directly with these divisive issues. He had come to realize, it would seem, that unity – like happiness – is not something that can be directly attained; rather it is a by-product of shared struggles. Therefore, Gandhi launched the campaign against the British to “take the attention of the nation off the communal problem and to rivet it on the things that are common to all Indians, no matter to what creed or sect they may belong.” Unlike the Khilafat, the appeal to participate in the movement was not on the basis of religion; the attempt was to unite the people on the basis of



a common concern, the salt tax. Many Muslims participated in it, and, to that extent, some sense of unity was achieved.

Karuvellil suggests that the problem lay in Gandhi's theoretical unification of religions. It achieved too little and too much at the same time. It achieved too little because, by paying exclusive attention to the common features of religions, he was not able to give due place to the differences between religions as socio-culturally existing realities. There is a gap between Religion and religions.

His experiments for religious collaboration teach us that no common struggle can bring about the desired unity, unless these are struggles that maintain an uncompromising stand on certain moral principles that cut across religious boundaries. Here one cannot have a 'confederation of religions' that compromises their basic principles to please different constituencies. The author affirms that, if religion is to play a creative role in public life, it requires not only the interiorized religiosity of a saint, but also a public commitment to certain shared values such that these values can grow into the common consciousness of the people beyond religious boundaries. And he warns: "Contemporary India – and any pluralistic society for that matter – can neglect this lesson of history only at its own peril."

## Part II. Contextual Cases

Anthropologist Marianus Kujur's article is critical and exploratory from the context of the tribals. He first traces the history of Gandhi's encounter with the tribals beginning with the Zulus, the Bachuanas, the Basutos and the Swazis, etc., in South Africa. He was shocked to see the plight of about five million natives politically controlled by a meager 2.5 million Europeans. To the question why Gandhi himself did not continue his interest in the tribals, his reply was: "I have entrusted that part of our work to A.V. Thakkar," who was a friend of the poor, the untouchables and the aboriginals. Still, the author finds the disinterested response of Gandhi regarding tribals as something mysterious.

Though Gandhi is said to be first one to use the term '*Adivasi*' for indigenous people, like '*Harijans*' for the untouchables, the author bemoans that we hear little about Gandhi's involvement with the aboriginal, the native and the tribals who are the indigenous people of India. Speaking historically, the author claims that "to say that Gandhi was sympathetic to the tribals will be an exaggeration." In contrast, Verrier Elwin, a foreigner who had settled in India and married a tribal, was a real friend of the tribals.

If one tries to look into the Gandhian philosophy and indigenous ideology, one cannot but be amazed by the values, ethos and spirit that are common in the two traditions. For example, *sarvodaya* means 'development of all'. Tribal society has evolved a socio-cultural mechanism to take care of the entire tribe. To take a simple example from the tribal tradition, *Gola Dhan*, for instance, is a system of 'grain-bank,' contributed by each family. In times of crises, people take loans from the 'grain-bank' and later return it, at a low interest rate. Similarly, the tribal villages have a system of *madait* or *sangat* which literally mean 'co-operation'. The Gandhian dream of decentralization is much practiced in the original village, *Panchayat*, of the tribal setup.

Gandhi's paradigm for society was in the pattern of family *vasudhaiva kutumbakam* the idea that the whole world is one big family. To be precise, in such a network of systems, every unit of society is "governed by the principle of interdependence, complementarity, co-operation and dedication towards duty, and enjoys the same respect, social status and importance." Tribal values resonate with the Gandhian thought in the process of making this world a better place in which to

live. The reverence for life, which Gandhi cherished and the tribals embody, can be seen in their myths, ritual practices and entire belief system. Similarly, the Gandhian model of reconciliation, forgiveness, hatred for the sin and not the sinner, etc., makes a lot of sense in a tribal context. Every one in the tribe is equal and treated equally. The welfare of the whole is the prime tribal concern. Further, Gandhi's idea that we should free ourselves to serve society is nothing new to the tribals. So the author asserts that we do find in the Gandhian philosophy a space for indigenous Gandhian discourse and interaction.

Another context which is significant for us is that of women. Scholar Sebastian Vazhapilly addresses the phenomenon of male domination and violence from the feminine and the Gandhian perspective. He speaks of the Gandhian metaphor of the inversion of power and shows how Gandhian praxis has enabled the empowerment of women. Gandhi refused to play the same game of domination and counter-domination and, instead, brought in new parameters of power. Thereby, Gandhi was able to invert the value system and introduce the liberating and feminine aspects to the human civilization.

Gandhi firmly believed that any strategy of countering the overpowering male domination needs to begin from the horizon of human interiority. Gandhi responded to the question of domination and violence in a complex and original manner in the context of colonialism, and such a response may be of some relevance in the feminist strategy of countering male domination. Again, it is important to note the fact that colonialism is a mental state rooted in the consciousness of both the colonizers and the colonized. The colonizer and the colonized were bound in a symbiotic relationship which Gandhi inverted. The second Gandhian inversion consisted in *Ahimsa*, or non-violence, in neutralizing violence which was at the very basis of colonial domination. In *Young India* Gandhi wrote: "The only way to conquer violence is through non-violence, pure and undefiled." Finally Gandhi reversed the dynamics of power. He inverted the colonial order which equated power with masculinity. According to Gandhi, "Power can be acquired only through ceaseless, loving service, and waiting upon God." One can discern here what are usually termed as feminine qualities: 'loving service' and 'waiting.'

The author then goes on to study the empowerment inherent in the Gandhian metaphor of power. If violence against women constitutes a negation of truth, then the recovery of truth requires a negation of negation. For this purpose *ahimsa* is the means; truth is the end. "In its positive form, *Ahimsa* means the largest love, greatest charity." And again: "The universe continues in spite of the destruction incessantly going on. Truth triumphs over untruth. Love conquers hate." This conquering does not come about by 'fighting' *himsa* with *ahimsa*, but by a new metaphor. Gandhi was keenly aware of the dimension of inferiority in the transformation of society: "All true change comes from within. Any change brought about by pressure, is worthless."

The Gandhian paradigm of non-violence or love stands as a viable alternative to the destructive side of humanity: he showed that masculine *thanatos* can be transcended by *caritas*, a feminine prerogative. Thus, the author shows the necessity of feminine power for the survival of the human race and Gandhiji's relevance in this reversal of dynamics.

### **Part III. Critique of Civilization**

Criticizing society strongly and tenderly, fearlessly and lovingly, is typically Gandhian. Professor Joseph Isidore Fernando makes a critique of today's technology based on the Gandhian paradigm and proposes an alternate and viable technology. He observes that technology today has entered every field of human activity. The immense benefits of technology have been a boon to

humanity; the use of electricity, petrol and nuclear energy has been the soul of modern industry and technology. Advanced transportation and communication have accelerated the growth of technology; jet-age travel and satellite communications have made the world shrink.

But we have also to count the cost. In other words, what are the negative impacts of technology on human beings, nature and society? Therefore, the author turns his attention to the devastating effects of technology on human beings and the cosmos. He elaborates the impact of technology on environment and on the economic foundations of society, without neglecting the psychological influence of technology.

Then he proceeds to elaborate Gandhi's views on technology: "Industrialism is, fear, going to be a curse for mankind. Industrialism depends entirely on one's capacity to exploit, on foreign markets being open to one, and on the absence of competition." But Gandhi himself admits: "That use of machinery is lawful which subserves the interest of all." The basis for Gandhi's opposition to technology is the good of the ordinary human person. "What I object to is the craze for machinery as such. The craze is for what they call labor-saving machinery. Men go on 'saving labor' till thousands are without work and thrown on the open streets to die of starvation. I want to save time and labor, not for a fraction of mankind, but for all; I want the concentration of wealth, not in the hands of a few, but in the hands of all. Today machinery merely helps a few to ride on the backs of millions. The impetus behind it all is not the philanthropy to save labor, but greed."

Resonating with Gandhian views and going beyond them, Fernando affirms that alternative technology cannot be dismissed as a mere fad or an impractical and impossible venture. Small is beautiful, especially when the local communities can look after and manage their needs on a co-operative basis rather than being recipients of consumer goods and services from a centralized body. This demands a new set of values. "Love is the ultimate force that makes for the saving choice of life and good against the damning choice of death and evil. Therefore, the first hope in our inventory must be the hope that love is going to have the last word."

Today, there is a tremendous sense of urgency for humanity to choose before it is too late between non-violent co-existence and violent co-annihilation. This may be humanity's last chance to make a choice between destruction and community, because we know only too well what would happen to us in the event of human violence gaining the upper hand. This leads to the need for technology to be imbued by non-violence. Only in a non-violent culture can technology be at the service of humans. In such a culture, technological enterprise has to recognize fundamental human rights and respect the dignity of the human person. Such is a viable culture, a culture where technology is for the good of the humans.

Doctor George Joseph in his "a Gandhian Prospective Paradigm for Culture," critiques the present culture and proposes another one based on the Gandhian model. First he tries to understand the meaning of culture. It may be considered as an equivalent of *samskara* in many of the Indian languages. It is regarded as a moral quality to be achieved through a process of purification. According to Gandhi, the members of a morally oriented society should consciously eliminate the evils and bring the society closer to goodness.

This calls for an understanding of the dynamics of cultural change. Gandhi understood human history and change as a movement from *himsa* to *ahimsa*. He referred to it as the great law of history. But it was considered not as a natural law, but as moral and spiritual law. The historical role of human beings, according to Gandhi, was to participate in the creation of a non-violent society with non-violent love.

*Satyagraha* is a method aimed at the elimination of violence from the society. The intention of *satyagraha* is to annihilate the evil only, and not the evil doer. Therefore, we should not use evil

means to eliminate evil, otherwise evil would accumulate. *Satyagraha* could transform the society by gaining the evil doer as an activist of *ahimsa*. He goes on to study the basic principles of non-violent cultural order, like *satya*, celibacy.

Finally, he regards the village as the bedrock of Indian culture. Gandhi learned the possibility of a moral and happy life from the villagers' way leading a contented life. His experience with the villagers helped him to derive the idea of simplicity as the essential feature of a contented life, which was an element of village life. Most of the villages, even in their poverty, try to be self-satisfied and self-dependent.

Then the author critiques today's dominant culture of competition and exploitation, unemployment, centralization and concentration. Here urbanization leads to crises of values. This helps the author to posit an alternative way of life in terms of Gandhian *swaraj*. But such a social structure could be achieved only if we had perfect individuals in the society who would volunteer to work for the general welfare of the community. In this sense, *swaraj* is a process towards perfection for both individuals as well as the society. It seeks to build a non-violent social, economic and political order. As an alternative to a complex industrial culture, Gandhi proposed a simplified social structure wherein individuals could lead a simple life. From the present context, both a simplified social structure as well as a simple life are goals which are difficult to attain – but not impossible.

Scientist philosopher Kuruvilla Pandikattu's article goes further with a critique of society. His article on Gandhian villages delves deeper into the theme of viability. Basically he compares and contrasts the Gandhian villages with the globalized village and proposes that the villages as proposed by Gandhi are far more viable and humane than the global village brought about by today's economic development.

Borrowing insights from Daniel Quinn's *Ishmael*, the writer compares the 'Takers' civilization of the globalized economy to the 'Leavers' civilization of the Gandhian vision. According to him, the way of the globalized homogenous village is both vicious and venal. It also brings the other cultures into its powerful grasp, whereas another community or culture that does not fit in with its goals is wiped out. Either one swims with it or one is forced to drown. To that extent it is also venal for it perpetuates a corrupt and self-destructive system on the assumption that if it does not work now, it will work later. The phenomenon of unlimited growth through which it attempts to achieve a harmonious society is based on a false or even sinister attempt to refuse to see the consequences of one's way of life.

On the other hand, the Gandhian village is not that convenient and comfortable. Although vulnerable, it is obviously viable. The village set up where diversity and co-operation are stressed may not be able to provide all facilities. To that extent it is vulnerable to the temptations offered by the technological conveniences. But the village community as envisaged by Gandhi is life supporting, self-sustaining and community-fostering, and so is viable.

The writer argues that we simply cannot go back to the village or tribal culture advocated by Gandhi. But without giving serious thought to the concerns introduced by Gandhi for the poor, underprivileged "Leavers," no viable civilization can be created and sustained. The simple symbols of common salt, *charkha* and *Sevagram* may not evoke the profound impact today which they once did. But what they stand for can be ignored only at the risk of losing our human nature. The global village has to take a radically different turn in keeping with the Gandhian concerns of village life if it is to have any future existence.

Some of the cherished concerns of Gandhi that the author points out are: identification with the "least, lost and lowest," interest for the individual's needs, priority to the basic needs of the

people, respect for persons in the system even when opposing the system, simplicity of life, significance of symbols, need-based technology versus need-creating technology and realistic assessment of the human situation, without giving up hope. Further, he stressed socialistic economy, meeting the basic necessities of all, spontaneous, creative interaction and transforming village life, welfare for all, a religious basis for life, a holistic outlook on life and co-operation through networking. We further observe in Gandhian vision openness to change, joy in life, the conviction that truth is freedom and the integration of politics with religion. Only a village based on these concerns can be Gandhian and viable.

#### **Part IV. Cultic Consequence**

The symbolic significance of Gandhi is studied in the Part IV. The chapter of Indologist, Lazar G., is “only an incomplete attempt” to come to terms with the religious philosophy of Gandhi and to see further how this philosophy continues to serve as a symbol of peace. As is well known, Gandhi aimed at much more than winning political independence; he fought for the betterment of the people in every respect – ethically, economically and spiritually. Hence, one of our main concerns in this discussion is to view the relevance of the Gandhian vision for modern society. In this article the author has adopted a rather critical and “somewhat irreverent” attitude to Gandhi, in order to demystify him and enable him to shine forth as a symbol for contemporary India. It is evident that Gandhi tested and judged every aspect of human activity on a scale of certain values and ethical norms.

For the Mahatma, concepts and values became co-terminus through a dialectical process. Briefly, Gandhian concepts may be said to have the following characteristics: they are normative, they are dialectical, they are dynamic and evolutionary, they are relative, as well as correlative, and they are scientific. But the primary quest of Gandhi is truth. Gandhi affirmed: “I cannot consider anything dearer to me than *Moksha*. Yet even that *Moksha* I would renounce if it were to conflict with truth and non-violence. In all these three things, I only followed truth.” Gandhi’s principal aim was to place humans at the center of all schemes of things, all values, all actions and all philosophies.

Gandhi’s actual significance for the political independence of India is ambiguous, but certainly he became a national symbol. The author studies Gandhi’s support to the Khilafat movement and Hindu response to it. Though Gandhi failed in bringing about a reconciliation between the Hindus and Muslims, his approach is praiseworthy.

Like the many symbols that unify Indians (e.g., Shivaji and Ganesh in Maharashtra), Gandhi himself could be regarded as a symbol for peace. His attempts to bring about unity between Hindus and Muslims stand out as a clarion call and a prophetic symbol for today’s India. One can aver that Gandhi’s religion transcended Hinduism, Islam or Christianity. The physical and the metaphysical benignly blended in his erudite expositions. “To see the all-pervading spirit of truth face to face, one must be able to love the meanest of creatures as oneself.” That is exactly what Gandhi lived! And so he shines forth as a living symbol for peace for us today.

The symbolic dimension is extended to myths by scholar Pandikattu. After analyzing the person of Mahatma, the author goes on to study the modern creative and positive understanding of myth as a “spiritual metaphor.” Myths create meaning for a community. Then he studies how Gandhi’s very life, based on fearlessness and inner peace is a critique of the prevalent civilization. Here Gandhi is viewed as a creator of a counter culture where the means is *ahimsa* and the goal is *satyagraha*. The author goes on to elaborate the positive and mythic dimension in Gandhi’s own

life. With Gandhi's personal charisma, he became a myth during his own life. At the same time he became too inconvenient for many of his companions. Still they respected his genuineness and sincerity. It is true that one can find inconsistencies in Gandhi's life. But Gandhi's mythic greatness lies in his consistent orientation to truth and to his vision even in its inconsistencies. He was open to criticism, self-inspection and to change. Gandhi assumed responsibility for his life and for his actions till the very end.

So Gandhi offers Indians a utopia. The indomitable will of the Indians, depicted and captured by the charisma of Gandhi, is still nurtured by the long-forgotten vision of Gandhi. His utopia will always motivate the millions of (even illiterate) Indians. He awakens even today a sense of wonder; Gandhi's life both transparent and enigmatic, fills all corners or niches of the Indian life with an awareness of Mystery. Gandhi's vision helps to validate the Indian social order. As a person Gandhi gives us some general guidelines to conduct ourselves during the stages of India's growing political process. Further, the vision of Gandhi enables us to live the reality of the contradictions that is India and to be enriched by it. These factors make Gandhi a myth – a modern myth for the millennium!

Finally, my sense of gratitude has to be expressed. I thank the professors of the Jnana-Deepa Vidyapeeth who have made this volume possible. I am also grateful to Professor George F. McLean of *The Council for Research in Values and Philosophy*, Washington, for sponsoring this venture and Professor Anthony da Silva, then Principal of the *Jnana-Deepa Vidyapeeth* for actively supporting this project. I am especially grateful to C. McKee, *World-Life-Web*, and D. Antao for their stylistic correction and publication helps. We also remember gratefully, Dr. M. Gnanapragasam, who was part of our initial group and whom The Truth has called to Itself.

**Part I**  
**Conceptual Clarifications**





## 1.

# ***Hind Swaraj* and Gandhi's Search for the Conquest of Power**

*Davis George*

Generations to come, it may be, will scarce believe that such a one as this ever in flesh and blood walked upon this earth.--*Albert Einstein*<sup>1</sup>

Like a colossus he stands astride half a century of India's history, a colossus not of the body but of the mind and earth.--*Jawaharlal Nehru*<sup>2</sup>

This chapter is a study of Mahatma Gandhi's search for the conquest of power as given in *Hind Swaraj*. It is a conquest greater than the conquest of Mount Everest. It is an ongoing process where each individual and each nation shall look within to find the real source of power. In this study, we shall explore in detail how Gandhi, through his life experiments, showed us the way to make power not the master but the servant. In the zenith of our technological and scientific achievements, we need wisdom to comprehend the mystery of power. As Charles E. Merriam says, in the "new world into which we are madly rushing, no single factor in life will be more important than the composition and incidence of political power, and no task more urgent than the understanding and utilization of a force whose mastery may mean light or darkness for individuals and for civilization."<sup>3</sup> We have the option to choose life or death, peace or strife.

"The world has achieved brilliance without wisdom, power without conscience, ours is a world of nuclear giants and ethical infants. We know more about war than we know about peace, more about killing than we know about living."<sup>4</sup> Let Mahatma Gandhi speak to us and help us to look within and regenerate our soul-force.

### **Power: Master or Servant**

Power has motivated people to do good and to do harm. Power has intoxicated people to indulge in manipulative politics and to work for selfish motives. "Some have deified and worshipped power. Others have defied it, or torn it from the lexicon of life."<sup>5</sup> Thomas Hobbes considered desire for power as the well-spring of human behavior. In his own words: "I put for general inclination of all mankind, a perpetual and restless desire of power that ceaseth only in death."<sup>6</sup> And yet those who have tamed power, succeeded in making it a means to an end.

What is the source of power? "There is an elusiveness about power that endows it with an almost ghostly quality....We 'know' what it is, yet we encounter endless difficulties in trying to define it. We can 'tell' whether one person or group is more powerful than another, yet we cannot

---

<sup>1</sup> William L. Shirer, *Gandhi: A Memoir* (Great Britain: Abacus, 1981), p. 11.

<sup>2</sup> Jawaharlal Nehru, *Freedom from Fear: Reflections on the Personality and Teachings of Gandhi*, ed. T.K. Mahadevan (New Delhi: Gandhi Smarak Nidhi; Bombay: Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, 1960), pp. 7-8.

<sup>3</sup> Charles E. Merriam, *Political Power* (London: Collier-Machillan Limited, 1934), p. 27.

<sup>4</sup> Statement of General Omar N. Bradley. Chief of Staff, United States Army, on 10 November, 1948. Quoted by Louis Fisher, *The Life of Mahatma Gandhi* (Great Britain: Granada Publishing Limited, 1982), p. 437.

<sup>5</sup> Merriam, p. 17

<sup>6</sup> Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* (New York: Penguin, 1977), p. 161.

measure power.”<sup>7</sup> Max Weber defines power as “the chance of a man or of a number of men to realize their own will in a communal action even against the resistance of others who are participating in the action.”<sup>8</sup>

As we walk down the corridors of power we find,

Power does not lie in the guns, or the ships, or the walls of stone, or the lines of steel. Important as they are, the real political power lies in a definite common pattern of impulse. If the soldiers choose to disobey or even shoot their officers, if the guns are turned against the government, if the citizenry connives at disobedience of the law, makes of it even a virtue, then authority is impotent and may drag its bearer down to doom.<sup>9</sup>

Friedrich Nietzsche said that will is power. It is the courageous living out of the individual’s potentialities in his own particular existence. The human task is not to let one’s existence be a ‘thoughtless accident.’ Nietzsche holds that this power, bringing one’s potentialities into birth, is the central dynamic and need of life. He was of the opinion that humans strive not so much for pleasure as they do for power.

The book soon attracted the attention of the European friends of Gandhi, one of whom, Mr. Kallenbach, wanted it to be translated into English. However, the proscription of the book ‘hastened’ its publication in 1910. Gandhi characterized it as a whole theory of life and defended it till death. T.K. Mahadevan, in his “Preface” to *Dvija: A Prophet Unheard*, said that one should read *Hind Swaraj* if one loves the human family and this earth which is our home. We must read it if we wish to do our little bit to halt our mad race towards self-extinction.<sup>10</sup>

### ***Hind Swaraj: A Critique of Modern Civilization***

*Cult of Violence.* The immediate context of writing the booklet, *Hind Swaraj*,<sup>11</sup> was Gandhi’s encounter with the Indian anarchists in England and their cult of violence. Gandhi himself said that he wrote it “in answer to the Indian school of violence and its prototype in South Africa. Their bravery impressed me, but I felt that their zeal was misguided. I feel that violence was no remedy for India’s ills, and that her civilization required the use of a different and higher weapon for self-protection.”<sup>12</sup> Gandhi felt that violence was the inevitable result of the values that underlie modern civilization. As long as modern civilization continues to shape human destiny, violence will be the natural consequence.

*Cult of Materialism.* For Gandhi, the propelling force of modern civilization is the greed for wealth and worldly pleasures. This craving for material aggrandizement makes one think only of amassing wealth and selfish pleasure. Rousseau was of the opinion that the human being finds his or her profit in the misfortune of his or her neighbors. Modern civilization, in Gandhi’s opinion, places the pursuit of self-interest at the center of our existence. This results in unhealthy

---

<sup>7</sup> “The Mystery of Power,” *Public Administration Quarterly*, 14 (Summer, 1954), p. 205.

<sup>8</sup> Max Weber, *Essays in Sociology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1946), p. 180.

<sup>9</sup> Merriam, p. 21.

<sup>10</sup> Mahadev Desai’s, “Preface,” *Hind Swaraj*, by M. K. Gandhi (Ahmedabad: N.J. Press, 1962), p. 14.

<sup>11</sup> *The Collected Work of Mahatma Gandhi* (hereafter cited as *CW*), Vol. 10 (New Delhi: Publications Divisions, Govt. of India, 1963), p. 245.

<sup>12</sup> “Hind Swaraj” in Shrinam Narayan, ed., *Selected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, Vol. 71 (Ahmedabad: Navjivan Publishing House, 1969), p. 95.

competition, exploitation and alienation. We not only fail to seek the things that are above, but also ignore ethics and morality. Violence becomes the dominant factor to achieve one's own selfish end. Hence, Gandhi says that modern civilization advocates the maxims "might is right" and "survival of the fittest."<sup>13</sup>

## Gandhi's Way

### *Decentralization*

According to Gandhi, modern civilization was responsible for impoverishing the Indian villages, which occupied a pivotal position in the Indian situation. Gandhi has always been a critic of the centralization of economic and political power. Large scale production inevitably led to concentration of economic and political power. Labor and material, production and distribution became the monopoly of the few rich. Such a concentration of economic power resulted in corresponding centralization of political power.

Aldous Huxley, in his *Science, Liberty and Peace*, drew attention to this universal tendency of modern technology: "The centralizing of industrial capacity in big, mass-producing factories has resulted in the centralization of a large part of the population in cities and the reduction of ever-increasing numbers of individuals to complete dependence upon a few private capitalists and their managers, or upon the public capitalist, the state, represented by politicians and working through civil servants. So far as liberty is concerned, there is little to choose between the two types of bosses."<sup>14</sup>

One of the recurring themes in the writings and pronouncements of Gandhi is this centralizing tendency of technology: "I want the concentration of wealth, not in the hands of few but in the hands of all. Today machinery merely helps a few to ride on the backs of millions."<sup>15</sup> Again he said, "What is industrialism but a control of the majority by the small minority?"<sup>16</sup>

The solution to the problem of centralization consists in decentralization of political and economic power. Small-scale, manageable techniques, capable of being handled by individual producers, the co-operatives in the villages or the region should be given priority and promoted on a mass scale for the benefit of the masses. Gandhi, though judged wrongly by many, was not advocating a return to medieval techniques. He vehemently opposed the indiscriminate multiplication of large-scale industries which obstructed village development. He wanted technological research to be village-oriented, perfecting the cottage and village industries. When every village should be able to own its own technology, economic power will be diffused and the village will emerge in the Gandhian scheme as the nucleus of social life. Decentralization of economic power will result in the decentralization of political power. Modern technology will no more be in a position to exploit the village. A proper balance between agriculture and industry will be established and, in due course, the village will exert a transformative influence. Production will be regulated by the needs of the village. Pyarelal has very lucidly described this relationship:

Agriculture in this set-up will go hand in hand with industry. Such products of the village, as they enter into the daily consumption of the villagers or as they are needed for their cottage crafts, will

---

<sup>13</sup> "Ahimsa in Practice," *Ibid.*, Vol. 71, p. 130.

<sup>14</sup> Aldous Huxley, *Science, Liberty and Peace* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1950), p. 14 (Emphasis added).

<sup>15</sup> *Young India*, 13 November, 1924, p. 378.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, August 1925, p. 273.

be processed in the village itself; the surplus alone being sent out to the cities in exchange for services and goods on a fair and equitable basis. Cities will serve as emporia for village products instead of the villages being used as a dumping ground for the manufactured goods of the cities. Machines will not be abolished. On the contrary, the people will have many more of them. But these machines will be simple machines which the people can themselves operate and own individually or collectively.<sup>17</sup>

This relationship between agriculture and industry, village and city, will stop exploitation and bring self-sufficiency. For him it was imperative that sufficiency should start from below, i.e., from the village and then upward to the regional level. In Gandhi's own words:

My idea of village *Swaraj* is that it is a complete republic, independent of its neighbors for its own vital wants, and yet interdependent for many others which dependence is a necessity. Thus, every village's first concern will be to grow its own food and cotton for its cloth. It should have a reserve for its cattle. Then, if there is more land available, it will grow useful money crops, thus excluding ganja, tobacco, opium and the like.<sup>18</sup>

His village is self-sufficient in vital wants, but interdependent in many other spheres. Interdependence, while maintaining the independence of the village, is the keynote of Gandhi's approach to village life.

*Society: Not a Pyramid, but an Oceanic Circle*

Gandhi described the organization of the society in the form of an 'oceanic circle'.

In this structure composed of innumerable villages, there will be ever-widening but never-ascending circles. Life will not be a pyramid with the apex sustained by the bottom. But it will be an oceanic circle whose center will be the individual always ready to perish for the village, the latter ready to perish for the circle of villages, till at last the whole becomes one life composed of individuals, never aggressive but ever humble, sharing the majesty of the oceanic circle of which they are integral units. Therefore, the outmost circumference will not wield power to crush the inner circle, but will give strength to all within and derive its own strength from it.<sup>19</sup>

He believed that all power resided in the people and that it should also originate from the people. The dynamo of power in a country like India should be the village. The village was to be a knot in a system of oceanic circles in which the remotest circle derived its strength from the center, i.e., the individual. This would mean that sovereignty was not to remain concentrated at any one level. It was to be diffused among units rising horizontally till they reached the national level. In terms of political science, the residuary power remained with the village and the center was there to co-ordinate the work. Gandhi believed in Thoreau's saying, "that government is the best which governs the least."<sup>20</sup>

---

<sup>17</sup> Pyarelal, *Mahatma Gandhi: The Last Phase* (Ahmedabad: Navajivan Press, 1958), p. 585.

<sup>18</sup> *Harijan*, 26 July, 1942, p. 238.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 28 July, 1946, p. 236.

<sup>20</sup> *Young India*, 2 July, 1931, p. 163.

### *Charkha (Spinning-Wheel): Hope of Rural Masses*

The message of the spinning-wheel is to “replace the spirit of exploitation by the spirit of service. The dominant note in the West is the note of exploitation. I have no desire that our country should copy that spirit or that note.”<sup>21</sup>

Gandhi again maintains: “I do feel that it [*Charkha*] has a message for the U.S.A. and the whole world. But it cannot be until India has demonstrated to the world that it has made the spinning-wheel its own, which it has not done today. The fault is not of the wheel. I have not the slightest doubt that the saving of India and of the world lies in the wheel. If India becomes the slave of the machine, then, I say, heaven save the world.”<sup>22</sup>

Hence, the message of the spinning-wheel is “much wider than its circumference. Its message is one of simplicity, service of mankind, living so as not to hurt others, creating an indissoluble bond between the rich and the poor, capital and labor, the prince and the peasant. That larger message is naturally for all.”<sup>23</sup>

Gandhi felt convinced that “the revival of hand-spinning and hand-weaving would make the largest contribution to the economic and the moral regeneration of India. The millions must have a simple industry to supplement agriculture. Spinning was the cottage industry years ago, and if the millions are to be saved from starvation, they must be enabled to introduce spinning in their homes, and every village must repossess its own weaver.”<sup>24</sup> He wanted to make the spinning-wheel the center of all handicrafts. The spinning-wheel was a symbol of hope to the masses. The masses lost their freedom, such as it was, with the loss of the *charkha*. The *charkha* supplemented the agriculture of the villagers and gave it dignity. It was the friend and solace of the widow. It kept the villagers from idleness. For the *charkha* included all the anterior and posterior industries – ginning, carding, wrapping, sizing, dyeing and weaving. These in their turn kept the village carpenter and blacksmith busy.

The *charkha* enabled the seven hundred thousand villages to become self-contained. With the exit of the *charkha* went the other village industries, such as the oil press. Nothing took the place of these industries. Therefore, the villages were drained of their varied occupations and their creative talent which brought them meager income to supplement their limited source of income. Hence, it was suggested that the revival of *charkha* would result in making the villages economically self-sufficient. Gandhi had no doubt in his mind that the wheel could serve as the instrument of earning one’s livelihood and, at the same time, enable the worker to render useful service to his neighbors. In order to ply the wheel intelligently, he should know all the processes that precede and succeed spinning. This conviction dawned upon Gandhi even before he came to India, that the revival of hand-spinning alone could restore India to its pristine glory. He compared the spinning-wheel to the sun around which the solar system of the village economy revolved. It provided the golden bridge between the rich and the poor.

### *Swadeshi: Antidote to Modernization*

Gandhi said that *Swadeshi* would mean that one should not serve one’s distant neighbor at the expense of the nearest. It is never vindictive or punitive. It is in no sense narrow, because it buys

---

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 2 Feb., 1928, p. 34.

<sup>22</sup> *Harijan*, 17 Nov., 1946, p. 404.

<sup>23</sup> *Young India*, 17 Sept., 1925, p. 321.

<sup>24</sup> *Harijan*, 19 Feb., 1938, p. 11.

from every part of the world what is needed for our growth. We must refuse to buy from anyone anything, however nice or beautiful, if it interferes with our growth.

Gandhi bought useful and thought provoking literature from every part of the world. One could buy surgical instruments from England, pins and pencils from Austria and watches from Switzerland. But one should not buy an inch of the finest cotton fabric from England or Japan or any other part of the world, because it could be easily made in India and to buy it from elsewhere would hurt the sentiments of those who work for their livelihood. Hence, Gandhi held it to be sinful for anyone to refuse to buy the cloth spun and woven by the needy millions of India's paupers and to buy foreign cloth, although it may be superior in quality to the Indian hand-spun. "My *Swadeshi*, therefore, chiefly centers round the hand *Khaddar* and extends to everything that can be and is produced in India."<sup>25</sup>

### *Soul-Force: The Secret of Success*

Gandhi wanted to popularize the use of soul-force, which is but another name for the force of love, in place of brute-force. "Having flung aside the sword, there is nothing except the cup of love which I can offer to those who oppose me. It is by offering that cup that I expect to draw them close to me. I cannot think of permanent enmity between man and man, and believing as I do in the theory of rebirth, I live in the hope that, if not in this birth, in some other birth, I shall be able to hug all humanity in friendly embrace."<sup>26</sup>

Chapter 17, the most important chapter in the whole book of *Hind Swaraj* starts with the question whether there is any historical evidence of "any nation having risen through soul-force."<sup>27</sup> According to Gandhi, Tulsidas is a better guide here than are the Indian princes. Tulsidas and such other Acharyas taught that *daya* (compassion) is the true ultimate basis of *Dharma* (duty) and, therefore, also of the *Dharma* that should govern the *Praja* (the ordinary people). However widespread the use of brute-force may have been in history, it is no reason to doubt the validity of the counter thesis.

If the story of the universe had commenced with wars, not a man would have been found alive today....Therefore, the greatest and the most unimpeachable evidence of the success of this force is to be found in the fact that, in spite of the wars of the world, it still lives on....Hundreds of nations live in peace....History is really a record of every interruption of the even working of the force of love or the soul.<sup>28</sup>

Gandhi believed that Indian civilization had the potential to give to the world a way to achieve freedom without bloodshed and violence.

To achieve this we have to develop the right relationship between *daya* (compassion) and national interest. The error of modern nationalism had been to take for granted that national interest divorced from *daya* is the ultimate principle of national conduct. He sees the distinct possibility of the national elite: the doctors, the lawyers, and the modern professional class taken as a whole acting in their own interest, and exploiting, deceiving and oppressing the people at large in the name of the nation. They would be able to act in the interest of the *Praja* only if their nationalism

---

<sup>25</sup> *Young India*, 12 March, 1925, p. 88.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 2 April, 1931, p. 54.

<sup>27</sup> *Hind Swaraj*, ch.17, p. 69.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 89.

is founded on the principle of *daya*. For this one has to undergo a process of inner liberation (*chhutkara*). Gandhi shows how one can achieve this inner liberation. He now identifies the nation with the elite who are eager to have Home Rule. He insists that the elite have to undergo genuine moral transformation. For this they have to be imbued with a deep sense of real nationalism which is different from what the modern nationalism depicts. He wants them to be imbued with real love and to experience the soul-force within themselves. Only those who have undergone such interior transformation can speak to the English without fear or hatred. Only such transformed Indian nationals can really understand the threat posed by modern civilization and the promise held by Indian civilization.

### *Swaraj: An Eternal Quest and Perennial Challenge*

One has to understand the true meaning of *Swaraj*. In the first place, *Swaraj* is a mental condition of: (i) inner liberation from the temptations of greed and power offered by modern civilization, (ii) freedom from hatred towards the national ‘enemy,’ the British, and (iii) active love for the Indian *Praja*, a love that can conquer the temptations of greed and power. Secondly, *Swaraj* is an external condition of: (i) political independence from alien domination, and (ii) life-long dedication to the task of improving the material conditions of poverty and caste oppression of the Indian *Praja*. In concrete terms, *Swaraj* requires one to take a stand on brute-force and soul-force. “If there be only one such Indian,” Gandhi affirms, “the English will have to listen to him.”<sup>29</sup>

Attaining national liberation is not so much a matter of getting rid of the British as getting rid of the fascination for modern civilization which teaches the Indian elite to exploit and oppress the Indian *Praja* and establish their superiority. We have to liberate ourselves from the evils of modern civilization and fill our hearts with *daya*, *satya* (truth) and *ahimsa* (non-violence). Only then would we become morally fit to deal both with the British and with the Indian people. Unless and until we are healed of the chronic sickness of imitating the West, ignoring our own age old tradition and cultural heritage, we will not be able to face any one else.

### **Is Hind Swaraj Relevant Today?**

In the introduction to the English translation on 20 March 1910, Gandhi wrote that the British Government in India constitutes a struggle between modern civilization and the self-contained villages which are the kingdom of God.<sup>30</sup> In the same year he wrote to Gokhale that the ideas contained in this book “have been matured in the course of the struggle.”<sup>31</sup> Writing to Maganlal, Gandhi said, “My present state of mind is such that even if the whole world is against what I have written, I would not be depressed.”<sup>32</sup> In answer to the criticism of his views on modern civilization, Gandhi categorically stated that he was totally convinced of the irreparable harm done by the so-called modern civilization, making it devoid of ethical and spiritual values. In 1914, he wrote that his convictions had grown stronger. Further, “The key to an understanding of *Hind Swaraj* lies in the idea that worldly pursuits should give way to ethical living.”<sup>33</sup> Writing to Maganlal in 1919,

---

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, ch. 16, p. 89.

<sup>30</sup> “Letter to G.K. Gokhale,” *Ibid.*, p. 239.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 239.

<sup>32</sup> “Letter to Maganlal Gandhi,” *CW*, Vol. 10, p. 139.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 412.

Gandhi said; “Besides, the more experience I gain, the more I realize that machinery will keep us in personal slavery and I find what I said about it in *Hind Swaraj* is literally true.”<sup>34</sup>

In his foreword to the book in 1921, he sounded a note of caution to the reader:

But I must warn the reader against thinking that I am today aiming at the *Swaraj* described therein. I know that India is not ripe for it. It may seem an impertinence to say so. But such is the conviction. I am individually working for the self-rule pictured therein. But today my corporate activity is undoubtedly devoted to the attainment of parliamentary *Swaraj* in accordance with the wishes of the people of India. I am not aiming at destroying railways or hospitals, though I would certainly welcome their natural destruction. Neither railways nor hospitals are a test of a high and pure civilization. At best they are a necessary evil. Neither adds one inch to the moral stature of a nation. Nor am I aiming at a permanent destruction of law courts, much as I regard it as a consummation devoutly to be wished. Still less am I trying to destroy all machinery, all mills. It requires a higher simplicity and renunciation than the people are today prepared for.<sup>35</sup>

In 1929, he wrote to Satish Chandra Dasgupta, “There is not one word in *Hind Swaraj* that cannot be substantiated. If I have to rewrite it today, I may change the language, but never the thought.”<sup>36</sup> In 1939, giving a message to *The Aryan Path*, on the eve of the publication of its special number devoted to *Hind Swaraj*, Gandhi categorically stated: “I may change the language here and there, if I had to rewrite the booklet. But after the stormy thirty years through which I have passed, I have seen nothing to alter the views expounded therein.”<sup>37</sup> In October 1939, Gandhi told the members of the Executive of *Gandhi Seva Sangh*: “I would ask you to read *Hind Swaraj* with my eyes and see therein the chapter on how to make India non-violent. You cannot build non-violence on factory civilization, but it can be built on self-contained villages.”<sup>38</sup>

The last letter he wrote to Jawaharlal Nehru explicitly referred to *Hind Swaraj*:

I fully stand by the kind of governance I have described in *Hind Swaraj*. My experience has confirmed the truth of what I wrote in 1909. It is better that I redraw the picture today in my own language....What is worth knowing is only what I have to say today. I believe that if India, and through India the world, is to achieve freedom, then sooner or later we shall have to go and live in the village – in huts, not in palaces. Millions of people can never live in cities and palaces, in comfort and peace....We can have the vision of that truth and non-violence only in the simplicity of the villages. That simplicity resides in the spinning wheel....The sum and substance of what I want to say is that the individual person should have control over the things that are necessary for the sustenance.<sup>39</sup>

He proceeded further to draw the ideal picture of the village that he had in mind:

My ideal village still exists only in my imagination. After all every human being lives in the world of his own imagination. In this village of my dreams, the villager will not be dull...he will be all

---

<sup>34</sup> “Letter to Maganlal Gandhi,” *CW*, Vol. 15, p. 340.

<sup>35</sup> “*Hind Swaraj* or the Indian Home Rule,” *ibid.*, vol. 19, pp. 277-278.

<sup>36</sup> “Letter to Satish Chandra Dasgupta,” *ibid.*, vol. 42, p. 125.

<sup>37</sup> “A Message to the Aryan Path,” *ibid.*, vol. 67, pp. 169-170.

<sup>38</sup> “Discussions with Executive Members of Gandhi Seva Sangh,” *ibid.*, vol. 70, p. 296.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 319-320.



awareness. He will not live like an animal in filth and darkness. Men and women will live in freedom, prepared to face the whole world. There will be no plague, no cholera and no small-pox. Nobody will be allowed to be idle or to wallow in luxury. Everyone will have to do body labor. Granting all this, I can still envisage a number of things that will have to be organized on a large scale. Perhaps there will even be railways and also post and telegraph offices. I do not know what things there will be or will not be. Nor am I bothered about it. If I can make sure of the essential things, other things will follow in due course. But if I give up the essential things, I give up everything.<sup>40</sup>

Speaking of *Hind Swaraj*, Professor Frederick Soddy, a well known chemist and economist, felt that “any one who wishes to change the world would do well to study it.”<sup>41</sup> John Middleton Murry, a Christian and socialist, did not agree with all that Gandhi wrote in *Hind Swaraj*. But he came to the conclusion that “the ultimate social goal of the spiritual leader in the modern world should be not to withdraw backwards to the pre-machine community, but to advance forward to the creation of a society capable of using machines without incurring material and spiritual self-devastation.”<sup>42</sup> He claimed the book as one of the “spiritual classics of the world” and “the greatest that has been written in modern times.”<sup>43</sup> Gandhi was not against science and technology but against losing mastery over them. Machinery was welcome only if it did not lead to concentrate wealth in a few hands. Gandhi’s preoccupation was to provide common persons with the best possible tools to enable them to work with the maximum efficiency and thereby improve their material well-being.

## Conclusion

We have seen that *Hind Swaraj* propounds the thesis that India as a nation, *praja*, power and modern civilization, based on materialism, cannot be led to achieve *Swaraj* from within and without.

The most important corollary to the Gandhian theorem is that the fate of India as a ‘*praja*’ depends on the moral character of the Indian professional classes – the character of its lawyers, doctors, and wealthy. Professional classes who did exert tremendous influence on the general masses, were often transfixed by greed and were victims of caste, creed and status considerations which affected the unity and integrity of the nation. Gandhi’s thought here is similar to that of Plato. There is a link between the health of the soul and the health of the city, and the maintenance of the health of the city depends in practical terms on the moral character of the ‘guardian’ class. It is the ‘guardians’ who must undergo a moral transformation and serve others. Thus, Gandhi destroyed the dichotomy that existed between professional life and personal life, between precept and practice, and ushered in an era where liberation of the nation and greed for power and wealth should be replaced by the selfless desire to love and serve others, particularly the weaker sections of the society, so that India and her *praja* may once again emerge as a great nation.

---

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 320.

<sup>41</sup> *The Aryan Path*, September 1938, p. 438.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 440-41.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*



2.

## **An Inquiry into the Origins of *Satyagraha* and Its Contemporary Relevance**

*George Pattery*

The utopian dimension of *satyagraha* is not its weakness. Rather it embodies the humans to work for a new and creative order in life.

In the formation of *satyagraha* as a means of personal search for truth and as a method of conflict resolution, the South African period of Gandhi's life is very significant. An inquiry is undertaken into this phase to highlight the inner dynamism of this method and also to evaluate its relevance in this post-modernist and millennial periods. From an analytical description of the events in their sequence, we reflect on the features of *satyagraha* and conclude to its relevance today.

### **Background**

#### *The Early Moorings*

To understand the origins of *satyagraha*, it is vital to remember the personal life-journey of Gandhi. His search for truth was rooted in him from his early childhood. School days marked the beginnings of 'experiments' with meat-eating and smoking which in turn led to 'stealing.' His courage to confess his wrongs to his father and the willingness to undergo reparation manifest a desire to hold to truth at any cost. The classical incident at the school where he did not oblige his teacher to copy from his companion's slate in order to deceive the school inspector, reflects another incident of 'a resolute desire to follow' one's own path. The story of Harischandra captured his heart and confirmed his desire to be truthful. The repetition of *Ramanama* as a remedy against all fears became a practice from early childhood.<sup>1</sup>

These early beginnings of experiments with truth continued all through his London days, thanks to his contacts with the Theosophical society. He undertook a serious study of various scriptures, especially *The Gita* and the *Bible*. By the time Gandhi left London, he had developed certain convictions of life based on his religious belief as well as in the study of other religious traditions. It was this religious quest for truth that found novel and creative expression and explication in the South African context.

### **Situating the South African Problem**

*The Original Africans.* The original inhabitants of South Africa were Negroes of various tribes like the Zulus, the Swazis, the Basutos, the Bachuanas, etc. In the early part of this century, the Negroes amounted to five million and the Europeans around one million and a quarter. The Dutch were the first Europeans to arrive in South Africa. From the early decades of white settlement in the middle of the 17th century, the white Dutch settlers maintained a white aristocracy in South Africa in which all whites – irrespective of origin, religion and accomplishment, were entitled to

---

<sup>1</sup> M.K. Gandhi, *An Autobiography* (London: Penguin, 1985), pp. 20-45.

settle and from which all non-whites were virtually excluded.<sup>2</sup> The Dutch erected a sort of ‘caste system’ based on color, considering all ‘hardwork’ as ‘*kaffir* work’ and socially degrading, creating ‘black servants’ and ‘white masters.’ The white Dutch were known as the Boers or the Afrikaners.

With the arrival of the English as the new masters in 1836, this master-servant relationship was threatened, and the Boers (the Afrikaners) trekked into the interior, fighting the tribals and forcing them into smaller, segregated land units, and established the Orange Free State and the Transvaal Republics. But the expansive policies of these two European powers clashed and they fought each other in South Africa. The white immigrants defended the white aristocracy established by the Boers (Afrikaners). The eventual defeat of the Dutch gave the British supremacy in South Africa. Taal (South African form of Dutch) and English became the official languages.

From the early years, the Boers kept themselves away from Europe and sought to establish Afrikaner nationhood. However they retained from Europe their Calvinist religion which was more of the Old than of the New Testament. The Transvaal Constitution declared that “the people are determined to permit no equality between white and black, in Church or State.”<sup>3</sup>

*The Arrival of the Indians.* The unwillingness of the natives to work in the tea, coffee and sugar plantations, and the dislike of the white aristocracy for hard labor occasioned the arrival of the ‘indentured laborers’ from India, on request from the British Africans to the British Government in India. Thus, the first Indians, in Gandhi’s reckoning, came on November 16, 1860. Gandhi held that the supply of the indentured laborers by the British to their fellowmen in South Africa is a partial and indirect form of semi-slavery.<sup>4</sup> Another group of Indians arrived 15 years later from Mauritius as traders. They were originally Porbandar Muslims. Hindus came directly from India as ‘passengers,’ with substantial capital for trade following them. Thus there were two classes of Indians in South Africa; free traders and their clerks, and the indentured and ex-indentured laborers. Some of the indentured laborers who sought to stay in South Africa did not enjoy the full rights of free Indians. They had to pay special taxes, carry special passes and follow marriage restrictions, etc. The traders moved about freely and conducted business with the Negroes, the Indians and the Boers. They spread themselves in small pockets through the four colonies.

The Indians, at the time of Gandhi, amounted to 50,000 free Indians and 100,000 so called non-free Indians, composed of the indentured laborers. The indentured laborers were called ‘coolies’ and the traders and lawyers came to be known as ‘coolie traders and lawyers.’<sup>5</sup> The four main colonies of South Africa were Natal with its port at Durban and its capital at Pietermaritzburg; Transvaal, (including the gold mine city of Johannesburg) with its capital at Pretoria; the Orange Free State with its capital at Bloemfontein; and Cape Colony with its capital at Cape Town and a large port at the Cape of Good Hope. Besides these four principal colonies, there were other territories under British protection.

---

<sup>2</sup> Colin Legum, ed., *The Republic of South Africa, in Africa: A Handbook to the Continent* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1996), p. 327.

<sup>3</sup> Colin Legum, 1966, p. 330.

<sup>4</sup> M.K. Gandhi, *Satyagraha in South Africa* (Ahmedabad: Navjivan Pub, 1950), p. 21.

<sup>5</sup> H.S.L. Polak, *The Indians of South Africa*, Part II (Madras: G.A. Natesan and Co; 1909), pp. 10-15.

## *The Issues at Stake*

The European planters were in need of 'Indian labor' for their plantations, but they did not want them to settle in South Africa after their term of labor. The indentured laborers were offered a five-year term of indenture and five years of free labor with a free pass back to India. Until 1890, an ex-indenture had the choice of exchanging his return passage for a plot of land. Due to the unfavorable conditions at home and due to the availability of labor in Natal, about 52 percent of the migrants remained in the colony after their term had expired.<sup>6</sup> Thus they formed a permanent group of ex-indentured laborers and their descendants. The whites started an agitation demanding an obligatory return of the Indians on the expiration of the term. In order to effect this policy the colonial governments introduced a heavy annual capitation tax on the laborers who did not re-indenture themselves. When Natal obtained a responsible government in 1893, it imposed a tax amounting to six months' earnings of an indentured person. There was also an agitation against the Indian traders, pressuring the government of Natal to defranchise all Asians except those who were already on the voter list. The Transvaal eventually passed a law that required every Indian to register himself at the cost of three pounds. Indians were then segregated and sent to a dirty, remote locality assigned to them by the Government. In the Orange Free State, Indian trading was forbidden and the traders were forced to work as laborers. Cape Town remained comparatively peaceful, although the Immigration Restriction Act and the Dealers' License Act were in force in the Cape colony, as well.<sup>7</sup>

### **Gandhi's Intervention and *Satyagraha* Movement**

Gandhi arrived on the scene in 1893 as a lawyer, invited by a merchant who wished to settle his dispute with another merchant. According to Gandhi's version, at that time there was hardly any educated Indian who could represent the Indian cause. However, Maureen Shaw in her study has claimed that there had been a preliminary political association and representations made by the members of a 'privileged strata' of the Indian community prior to the arrival of Gandhi.<sup>8</sup> Gandhi's own submission can be sustained because the merchants relied mainly on hired British lawyers for drawing up their petitions and cases. What is important to recognize is that there had been some sort of political awakening, even if for vested economic interests, among the merchants before Gandhi appeared on the scene.

Between his arrival in 1893 and his direct public involvement in the South African Indian issue in 1894, one notices that Gandhi was not confined to any private work for his employer. His experience of racial prejudice on trains opened his eyes to the hardships of the Indians in South Africa. His own religious quest continued with the increasing contacts with the Christians and his dialogue with Raichandbhai, his religious mentor in India and during this time, Tolstoy's *Kingdom of God within You* challenged his personal, social and economic outlook.<sup>9</sup> Gandhi condensed these early experiences in these words: "Suffice to say, that all these experiences sank in me. I had gone there only for a single case prompted by self-interest and curiosity. During the first year, therefore, I was merely the witness and the victim of these wrongs. I then woke to a sense of duty."<sup>10</sup>

---

<sup>6</sup> Moureen Swan, *Gandhi: The South African Experience* (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1985), p. 1.

<sup>7</sup> Gandhi, *Satyagraha*, pp. 28-35.

<sup>8</sup> Maureen Shaw, pp. 38-43.

<sup>9</sup> M.K. Gandhi, *An Autobiography*, pp. 110-114.

<sup>10</sup> Gandhi, *Satyagraha*, p. 42.

### *Standing for a Just Cause*

In 1894, the Natal Government introduced a bill to amend the Asiatic Franchise. The Indian community decided to protest and Gandhi decided to stay back in South Africa instead of returning to India. There were three major components in the first phase of the protest that spread over the next two years; the formation of the Natal Indian Congress, the publication of a pamphlet on the 'Indian Franchise' appealing to every Briton in South Africa, and a mass petition to the Viceroy. Regarding the formation of the Natal Indian Congress, Swan is critical of its elitist nature and interest in protecting the economic interest of the wealthy Gujarati merchant class. However one should not read too much into this criticism as we know that there were more than 10,000 signatories to this appeal to the Viceroy of India. The pamphlet directly appealed to every Briton to support them in their fight for full rights as citizens of the British Empire. Noteworthy at this stage of the evolution of the pedagogy of *satyagraha* is the attempt of the Congress to involve the people in the struggle and to undertake sanitation work among the poorer sections. They educated the masses regarding the truthfulness of their protest and cautioned them not to exaggerate their demands or to disrespect the opponents.<sup>11</sup> Eventually, London disallowed the defranchising Bill. On his return to India, Gandhi continued to educate the Indian public on the South African cause and elicited support from various agencies through the columns of the newspapers.

*Cooperating with the Opponent.* An interesting turn of events took place in the development of *satyagraha*. As war broke out between the English and the Boers in the Transvaal, Gandhi urged his people to help Britain in the war. His rationale was that all the while they had been fighting for the rights of British citizenship. Truthfulness is the essential ingredient of *satyagraha*. That one should appear to be as one really is and should act accordingly is not the last, but the first step to practical religion.<sup>12</sup> Though their appeal was initially refused, and they knew that they would be treated as coolies, the Ambulance Corps of 1100 Indians of all creeds and classes was formed. According to Gandhi, the war services taught them not to despise anyone, however insignificant he may be and that every human being is capable of the loftiest heroism.

The scene of Gandhi's activity now moved to the Transvaal region with the formation of the British Indian Association (The Transvaal), *The Indian Opinion* (periodical), and the Phoenix Settlement near Durban. During the plague, he organized the Indian Volunteer Corps (1904). In the Zulu revolt he joined the Stretcher-bearer Corps (though his sympathies were with the Zulus). It was during this period that Gandhi struggled with questions of poverty and chastity and embraced them both for life. These two steps went counter to the philosophy of the merchant class. Ruskin's *Unto This Last* influenced his thinking. The pedagogy of *satyagraha* was unfolding itself through the social struggles and through the personal quest and philosophy of the life of Gandhi.

The Transvaal Government introduced the Indentured Labor Draft Ordinance (1904) and the Asiatic Law Amendment Ordinance (1906) restricting the movements of indentured laborers and insisting that they carry their identity card everywhere. The Indian opinion was that it was virtual slavery. It is significant to note that in this phase of the struggle, the merchant class was rather disinterested in the struggle, as the philosophy of the struggle went beyond their class interests and required more 'personal transformation.' However Swan attributes this apathy to the lack of political mechanism for active participation in the British Indian Association and the absence of a

---

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 44-45.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 74.

strategy capable of effecting political mobilization among the masses.<sup>13</sup> While these reasons could well be present, the real issue was the struggle and search in Gandhi to find an adequate way of protest that would integrate the larger moral and political insights which were emerging as part of *satyagraha*. In fact, Swan himself acknowledges this when he quotes Gandhi to affirm that the active pursuit of truth through moral autonomy, manifested in service to community (suffering for one's convictions), offers equilibrium, self-respect and self-realization.<sup>14</sup>

### *Conscientizing the People*

The rationale of the protest against the unjust moves of the Government had to be explained to the people; they had to be mobilized towards a protest and to act effectively. Through pamphlets and meetings, people were educated that the Government's move was inhuman and an insult to their self-respect. Secondly, Gandhi appealed to their conscience and asked them to take a personal voluntary oath against the Government's ordinances, with readiness to suffer for the act. God is invoked as witness and as support.<sup>15</sup> The appeal to their religious faith in order to mobilize both the Hindus and the Muslims is understood in Gandhian terms as 'faith influencing the entire spectrum of life.' Faith should have social implications, and this struggle is part of a 'religious quest and realization.' As the protests were not effective enough to impress London, a delegation was sent to England and it yielded fruit. The Crown disallowed the ordinance, but assured the Transvaal Government that they were free to introduce the ordinance once they were given self-government. The Transvaal Government eventually enacted the ordinance, severely affecting the life and freedom of the Indians there. As the protest grew stronger, another bill (Immigrants Restriction Act) was introduced (1907). The movement, then known as 'Passive Resistance Association,' decided not to obey the law and not to register themselves as it was "degrading to their humanness and offensive to their religion, and such defiance of the law was in obedience to the law of God."<sup>16</sup> At this stage Gandhi insisted upon avoiding any secrecy and cunningness. All these led to Gandhi's arrest. But the refusal to register gained momentum. Thus, at the formative level of *satyagraha*, all means of protest were employed, mobilization was effected through religious faith, and action was taken with voluntary consent and a willingness to suffer.

*In Search of a Name.* The dynamics of the movement was evolving at a pace and in a manner that called for further articulation of the philosophy of the struggle. The name of the movement as 'Passive Resistance' was found unsatisfactory. Through the columns of *The Indian Opinion*, a contest was announced to find a suitable word for the movement. "*Sadagraha*" meaning "firmness in good cause" was suggested. Gandhi modified it into "*satyagraha*": *satya* meaning truth, *agraha* meaning "force or holding firm." The Indian South Africa movement thus meant to rely on force born of truth. The non-violent part of the movement would eventually gain much prominence and gave up the phrase 'Passive Resistance'.

In English, the passive resistance referred to the resistance offered against a law by a minority who was weak, few in number and who had no hope of succeeding with the use of arms. The typical example was the Women Suffragist Movement in Britain. *Satyagraha*, on the contrary,

---

<sup>13</sup> Swan, p. 109.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 116.

<sup>15</sup> Gandhi, *Satyagraha*, p. 99-108; *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi* (92 vols.) (New Delhi: Publications Divisions, Govt. of India, 1958) (Abridged as *CW*), V. 401-17; VI, p. 385.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, VII, pp. 148 and 211.

stood neither for the weak nor did it reflect the minority. “*Satyagraha* is the soul force pure and simple, and wherever and to whatever extent there is room for the use of arms, physical or brute force, there and to that extent is there so much less possibility for soul force. These are purely antagonistic forces in my view, and I had full realization of this antagonism even at the time of the advent of *satyagraha*.”<sup>17</sup> Explaining further the difference of *satyagraha* from passive resistance, Gandhi said: “*Satyagraha* postulates the conquest of the adversary by suffering in one’s own person.”<sup>18</sup> The passive resisters claimed Jesus Christ as their prince; to which Gandhi added: “Jesus Christ, indeed, has been acclaimed the prince of passive resisters, but I submit in that case passive resistance must mean *satyagraha* and *satyagraha* alone.”<sup>19</sup>

### *The Test of a Satyagrahi*

Gandhi was imprisoned on 10 January, 1908; he pleaded guilty and asked for the severest punishment. He considered the prison as ‘His Majesty’s hotel’ and relished the bliss of sacrifice. During imprisonment, Gandhi wrote to his ailing wife Kasturba:

I have received West’s telegram about your illness. I feel heart-broken, but I cannot come to look after you. I have sacrificed all in the *satyagraha* struggle....I love you so much that even if you are dead, you will always be alive in me. I repeat what I have told you that I shall never marry again. You should depart with faith in God....My struggle is not merely political; it is also a righteous struggle and is, therefore, entirely pure.<sup>20</sup>

Eventually, a settlement was reached between Gandhi and General Smuts (January, 1908) whereby it was agreed that the Indians would voluntarily re-register themselves and that the Government would repeal the ‘Black Act’. To allay the fears that General Smuts might not keep his word, Gandhi wrote: “A *satyagrahi* bids goodbye to fear. He is therefore never afraid of trusting the 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.”<sup>21</sup>

Conflict followed. During a public gathering, one of the Pathans swore with Allah as witness to kill the person who would take the lead to register, as he felt that Gandhi had betrayed the Indian community. Gandhi challenged him and offered to be the first one to register. On 10th February, 1908 while on his way to the Registration Office, the same Pathan attacked Gandhi and he fell. Gandhi refused to prosecute the assailant; instead he prayed that the blood shed that day might cement the two communities of the Muslims and the Hindus. Reverend Doke’s daughter sang for him ‘Lead Kindly Light.’ Once he recovered, Gandhi undertook writing a series of articles on Socrates, illustrating his life of witness to truth to the end. Further on, elaborating on the philosophy of Socrates and Ruskin, Gandhi formulated his theory of *sarvodaya*.<sup>22</sup> This was a period of intense struggle, at the personal and social levels, to shape an integral method of ‘conflict

---

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 113.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 114.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 114-115.

<sup>20</sup> D.G. Tendulkar, *Mahatma*, I (New Delhi: Pub. Divisions, Govt. of India, 1951), p. 97.

<sup>21</sup> Gandhi, *Satyagraha*, p. 159.

<sup>22</sup> *CW*, VIII, pp. 229-258.



resolution'. *Satyagraha* was inching forward, in and through various experiments towards such a pedagogy.

### *Uneasy Phase of Satyagraha*

As feared, the Government did not respect the terms of the agreement; on the other hand it carried through the legislation validating the Asiatic Registration Act. There followed a direct path of confrontation. Registration certificates were burnt, Gandhi along with many more were arrested, many crossed the Transvaal border without certificates in protest and the Government resorted to forceful deportation. Another delegation to London did not yield much result. The arrests, deportation, and other harassment disheartened *satyagrahis*.<sup>23</sup>

As far as Gandhi was concerned, the London trip helped him in many ways. He met with the anarchists in London who were working for India's freedom and exchanged his own perspectives with them. He renewed his correspondence with Tolstoy, and to further advance the cause of 'passive resistance,' he read Edward Carpenter's *Civilizations: Its Cause and Curse*, and was reconfirmed in his resolution in the strength of the soul-force.<sup>24</sup> The net result of these contacts and reflections was *Hind Swaraj*, a booklet on his philosophy of 'self-rule and culture' against the spirit of modern civilization. Tolstoy's reply to Gandhi evidences the support that the latter received: "That same struggle (as in the Transvaal) of the tender against the harsh, of meekness and love against pride and violence, is every year making itself more and more felt among us also."<sup>25</sup>

Tolstoy farm which Gandhi established with the generous support of Hermann Kallenbach (1910), would gradually become the center of schooling in *satyagraha* (in Transvaal) with self-reliance (all work done by the members), self-sacrifice, tolerance, appreciation of nature and religious prayer as the features of its life. All along, Gandhi insisted on the rationale of *satyagraha* as seeking first the kingdom of God and his righteousness and said that "if through this struggle, we learn better to depend on Him (God) alone, that is sufficient gain in itself, and all else will follow as a matter of course."<sup>26</sup>

Meanwhile another round of negotiations was undertaken between Gandhi and the government. Gokhale's visit to South Africa (October, 1912) to acquaint himself with the problems of the Indians there paved the way for another assurance from the government that the unfavorable Asiatic Act would be abolished.

### *The Provocative Phase of Satyagraha*

According to Gandhi, the ingredient for the final *satyagraha* was prepared by God in the form of a judgement by the Supreme Court in Cape Colony to the effect that all marriages, excepting the Christian and registered ones, were outside the pale of legal marriage.<sup>27</sup> This automatically made null and void all marriages of the Hindus, the Muslims and the Zoroastrians. The *satyagraha* movement resumed on the three key issues: the removal of the annual tax on the indentured laborers; the amendment of the Marriage Law of the union and the removal of the color bar in the

---

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, IX, pp. 96-150.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, IX, pp. 444-46.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, IX, p. 593.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, XI, p. 104.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, XI, pp. 496-97.

Immigration Act.<sup>28</sup> Phoenix farm in the Natal province and the Tolstoy farm in the Transvaal became nerve centers of the *satyagraha* struggle. The *satyagrahis* decided to cross the borders without registration. Hundreds of people, including women and children, trekked their way (October, 1913) with courage and determination across the border to go to the Tolstoy farm, thereby courting arrest. Their intention was not to seek domicile in the Transvaal by crossing over from Natal, but only to demonstrate against the loss of self-respect. All along the march, the government authorities were contacted with a desire to negotiate. It was of no avail. It is to be noted that Gandhi's leadership was questioned more than once during this phase of the struggle.<sup>29</sup> However Gandhi survived these challenges.

Gandhi was arrested and released several times during this march. The government resorted to repression. There was by then a mass agitation in India supporting the cause of the Indians in South Africa.<sup>30</sup> Meanwhile the European employees of the Union Railways decided to strike at this opportunity to pressure the government for these demands. At this juncture, instead of harassing the government by continued marches and agitations, Gandhi postponed the struggle until the railway strike was over. This marked the qualitative difference for the *satyagraha* struggle from all other opportunistic struggles. As one of the secretaries of General Smuts remarked: "I often wish you took to violence like in English strikes, and then we would know at once how to dispose of you. But you will not injure even the enemy. You desire victory by self-suffering alone and never transgress your self-imposed limits of courtesy and chivalry. And that is what reduces us to sheer helplessness."<sup>31</sup> Meanwhile a commission of inquiry was instituted which was rejected by Gandhi on the grounds that there was no Indian representation in it and that the arrested laborers were not released. After protracted meetings with General Smuts, a provisional agreement was reached and *satyagraha* was suspended. Many Indians, recalling the fiasco in 1908, were reluctant to endorse the agreement as they suspected the intentions of General Smuts. Gandhi's response enunciates the inner logic of *satyagraha* that is so different from other means of conflict resolution.

No matter how often a *satyagraha* is betrayed, he will repose his trust in the adversary so long as there are not cogent grounds for mistrust. Pain to a *satyagrahi* is the same as pleasure. He will not therefore be misled by the mere fear of suffering into groundless distrust.<sup>32</sup>

### **The Emerging Features of *Satyagraha***

In this essay, we are limiting ourselves on the origins of *satyagraha* as it was initiated in South Africa. The full development of the philosophy of *satyagraha* will occur gradually through the many *satyagraha* struggles in India.

#### *Basic Features of Satyagraha*

The features of *satyagraha* that we enumerate below are mostly confined to the South African period when the basic ingredients of *satyagraha* were already present.

---

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, XII, p. 240.

<sup>29</sup> Swan, p. 244; Parliamentary Papers, C.59, 1914 (London: India Office Library Records, 1914), p. 308.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 253.

<sup>31</sup> Gandhi, *Satyagraha*, pp. 325-326.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 322.

- *Satyagraha* is born out of the ceaseless search after truth and from the readiness to pay any price for it. *Satyagraha* depends a lot on the *satyagrahi*.
- *Satyagraha* is, in that sense, primarily a way of life born out of one's commitment to truth and relies fundamentally on soul-force.
- It is at the same time a means of 'conflict-resolution,' both at the personal level and at the social level.
- At both levels, *satyagraha* emerges out of the psycho-political context and grows through social dynamics.
- It believes in the ultimacy of truth and the ultimate goodness of the human being. It firmly believes in the final victory of truth. To that extent one can say that it epitomizes the wisdom of the *Vedas* and *Upanishads*.
- Along with this faith in the absolute trust in truth, a *satyagrahi* is a fearless person. His faith in the final victory of truth is such that he fears nothing or rather he grows into fearlessness. The basic teaching of *TheGita* regarding 'fearless fight for truth' is incorporated into *satyagraha* pedagogy.
- *Satyagraha* identifies social issues and unjust social situations and structures, and articulates an indignation against it.
- This indignation is articulated in the larger social context as well as in the long-term personal goal of self-realization.
- Response to social issues includes 'humanitarian works' that are in tune with the personal and social vision of a *satyagrahi*.
- *Satyagraha* insists on conscientizing the people on the real issues and the rationale of indignation. There has to be personal as well as a social consent to the mode of response or protest, after listening to the 'still small voice within.'
- *Satyagraha* believes in giving full trust to the 'offenders' to present their cases and to go along with them to the full extent possible, believing in them and trusting in the final victory of truth. The binding rules of *satyagraha* endorse this attitude: i) never to exaggerate the case or minimize the viewpoint of the adversary; ii) never to agree to any program without consciously responding to the inner voice; iii) never to use angry or intimidating words or insults; iv) never to resist arrest or any kind of suffering; v) never to demand privileges in prison; vi) never to have undue attachment to one's own things and people.
- *Satyagraha* holds on to the truth firmly and protests against the injustice unequivocally. Any violation of 'public law' will be in obedience to a 'higher law.'
- This reference to a transcendent *satyagraha* does not degenerate into 'self-inflicting pain' but self-transcending joy. In this, *satyagraha* differs from all other means of conflict resolution, and because of this *satyagraha* has so few takers.
- *Satyagraha* means and demands great creativity and imagination. In the short history of *satyagraha* in South Africa one can notice varieties of means and symbols employed.

#### *Limitations of Satyagraha*

- In the origin and growth of *satyagraha*, the person of Gandhi plays a very central role. This is its strength as well as its weakness. It is over-dependant on Gandhi. It is in fact his charisma that gives birth to *satyagraha*. Once the charismatic figure was removed from the scene, *satyagraha* lost its cutting edge.

- In locating the social issues, often the movement relied on the personal intuitive power of Gandhi and in the general knowledge of the people. Valid as they are, serious psycho-cultural analysis was missing in the dynamics of *satyagraha*.

- The ‘holistic ideology’ of *satyagraha* was not able to integrate the contributions of different branches of knowledge, including science and technology.

### **Relevance of *Satyagraha* in the Post-Modernist, Millennial Context**

Satyagraha is primarily a pedagogy of life, and its pertinence depends on one’s way and vision of life. In its inception, *satyagraha* was experimental in nature and visionary in outlook. Both these derived from a certain conception of life as a commitment to truth. Life is best lived when committed to truth. At the turn of the third millennium, can we speak of ‘commitment to truth’ as an important component of life. The answer does not seem to be quite simple or clear, if we take the following critique of modernity seriously.

Our age is characterized by impermanence and provisionality. We find it difficult to stay with anything, and be really alive and passionate about anything, day after day, week by week, year by year. Diversion is what is constant. We move on when there are no immediate results. We resist going back to the book every single day, listening long and lovingly to that Word beneath and beyond all the words, staying with it long enough to hear the beating of the heart of God beneath and beyond the cacophony and clutter of our own making, staying still long enough to find ourselves in God and there to rest even and especially when such staying does not ‘work for me?’ or ‘do’ any good whatsoever.<sup>33</sup>

Perhaps we need to resurrect a passionate holding on to truth at any cost as a counter-philosophy that can be corrective of modernity’s fast-forwarding culture.

Gandhi was an expert at symbolism, and my father (Martin Luther King) became an apt pupil. Like Gandhi, my father knew that human compassion is universal. A single act of one could quickly ignite the action of many if it appealed to what is just and right within the human spirit. Upon reaching the Arabian Sea, Gandhi waded into the water and picked up a handful of salt, an unlawful act. This act of civil disobedience – one frail hand ‘mining’ salt – sparked the revolution for freedom from British rule in India....The tactics of Gandhi and King are as viable today as they were when these great men walked our midst.<sup>34</sup>

This comment by the grandson of Martin Luther King manifests that there is an abiding interest in Gandhi’s *satyagraha*. It appeals to the best and highest in the human spirit. The relativism of post-modernism may not succeed in replacing the noblest aspirations of the humans for the highest.

The differentiating factor and the qualitative strength of *satyagraha* is the cultivation of soul-force. It is available to one and all; it is the most democratic instrument of power. Gandhi believed that women had easy access to the force within. ‘In the measure one has strength and nobility of soul one can promote one’s own and other’s good.’ Relying on the latent power of soul-force, one

---

<sup>33</sup> Michael Downey, “Luminous Traces: The Inbreaking Spirit and Cultural Fragmentation,” *Review for Religious* (March-April, 1999), pp. 199 and 129.

<sup>34</sup> Martin Luther King III, “Mohandas Gandhi,” *Time*, Aug 23-30, 1999, p. 56.

can empower oneself against the will of the tyrant. It frames the individual within the cultural ethos of self-reliance and renunciation. Is it quite out of fashion to advocate such a perspective today. In the changed global market-oriented, consumerist way of living, the ways and means of *satyagraha* many look outdated. However, the vast divide that such a form of life brings in the society, and the emerging social conflicts at the local and inter-national levels call for protests of immense depth and courage. *Satyagraha*, both as a philosophy and as a method of conflict-resolution, is entering the stage through the back door as it were. The ecological crisis challenges us to respect life and to revere the inter-relatedness of creation.

Of late, Ken Wilber has been arguing for an integral approach to human life. The various sciences and philosophies, according to him, should lead to a certain orientating perspective that would assist humans to achieve higher consciousness.<sup>35</sup> Gandhi's pedagogy of relying on soul-force anticipated such a perspective and confirmed the best of Indian traditions and the core of the *Sermon on the Mount*.

As *satyagraha* evolved into a viable means of protest, Gandhi wrote *Hind Swaraj*. It contained an appeal to the best in Indian tradition as one's own and a severe critique of Western culture as representative of the worst form of modernity. It was not, in fact, a duel between the Eastern and Western cultures; rather it envisaged the reduction of wants and demands as a precondition for self-sufficiency in life, both at the personal and social levels. This in fact is a larger and wider plan to reconstruct society through the medium of *satyagraha*. It is a form of counter-culture.

Both at the initial stages of *satyagraha* and all through his life, Gandhi has been accused of being an utopian visionary. Gandhi has taken pains to defend the 'experimental nature' of his endeavors. However, one needs to emphasize the epistemological value of utopias. Utopias help in giving a frame of reference to thinking and acting. Utopian thought is a dynamic element in the historical becoming of humanity. It has the quality of being subversive to and a driving force of history. It is the imaginative dimension of politics.<sup>36</sup> The utopian dimension of *satyagraha* is not its weakness; rather it emboldens humans to work for a new and creative order in life. As we move into the third millennium, it will not be a mistake to envision a world that is more humane.

---

<sup>35</sup> Ken Wilber, *The Eye of the Spirit: An Integral Vision for a World Gone Slightly Mad* (Boston: Shambala, 1997), Introduction.

<sup>36</sup> Landauer distinguishes between "topia and utopia": "topia" is stabilizing and even reactionary factor, a broad, general conglomeration of common life in a state of relative stability; and "utopia" is revolutionary, "a conglomeration of aspirations and tendencies of the will" "which overturns the "topia" the established order. Utopia, in Thomas Moore, has three features: Relationship to historical reality, its verification in praxis and its rational nature. For a detailed discussion of these, and of the difference between utopia and ideology, see Gustavo Guitierrez, *A Theology of Liberation* (London: SCM press, 1993), pp. 135-9; also Karl Manheim, *Ideology and Utopia* (New York: Jarcourt, Brace and World, 1966).



### 3. **Gandhi on Religion in Public Life**

*George Karuvelil*

The State would look after secular welfare, health, communications, foreign relations, currency, and so on, but not your or my religion. That is everybody's personal concern.--*M.K. Gandhi*

Does religion have a role to play in public life, say, politics, social organization and public conduct? There are two different answers given to this question. "No! Religion must be kept out of the public sphere," so goes the secular view. The public sphere, according to them, must be governed on secular lines and not by religion. "Yes! Religion must play an active role in public life," goes the other view, which may be termed as the religious view of public life. Both views are supported by pragmatic as well as theoretical reasons, though with differing emphasis.

The pragmatic justification offered by the secularists goes like this: for pluri-religious countries like India, bringing religion into the public realm, especially politics, will be suicidal since it would divide the society along religious lines. This seems a compelling reason. The theoretical justifications vary depending on their understanding and evaluation of 'religion' and 'secularism.' But the basic contention is that religion is a strictly personal affair which has nothing to do with such public realms like politics and economics; these are governed by autonomous principles.

The rationality of the religious view is based on an existential understanding of religion as a total outlook on human life in the world. As such, they argue, religion cannot be excluded from any area of human activity including politics. On the contrary, one's religion must guide all of one's activities. The advocates of this view also might give a pragmatic justification to the effect that religion, being the most potent force in our society, must be utilized for social change and the building of the new, egalitarian India envisaged in its constitution.<sup>1</sup>

The secular view has prevailed in India till recently, and remains the official line till now. But times have changed. India has witnessed separatist movements mobilized on religious lines. The Hindutva forces, with their view that matters of faith are non-negotiable irrespective of their consequences to the public at large, are on the rise and even running the government. At the global level too, the once dominant secular view has taken a severe beating at the hands of Islamic revolutionaries, Bible-belt politicians and fundamentalists of different hues. The secular view, however, continues to have a dominant say both in India and elsewhere; it may have taken a beating but it is still alive and active. Both views seem to have an uneasy co-existence at the moment. Moreover, the dangers pointed out by the secularists remain as strong as ever.

It is in this context that we ask: Which view shall we take of this relationship in the coming millennium? Is there some way of reconciling the two views, such that religion can make a positive contribution to public life without bringing about the dangers of which the secularists warn us? Obviously the answer will depend on our understanding of religion. And here lies the importance of Mahatma Gandhi. Here is a person who lived these issues and, hence, might be able to help us find an appropriate answer. Deeply interested in maintaining inter-religious harmony, Gandhi

---

<sup>1</sup> See F. Wilfred, "Dialogue Gasping for Breath? Towards New Frontiers in Interreligious Dialogue" in *Vidyajyoti Journal of Theological Reflections* (October, 1987), p. 453.

wanted independent India to be secular; and yet he did not hesitate to use religion for political mobilization. Rather than confining his religiosity to the private realm, he gave it a prominent place in all his political, social, economic and inter-religious activities. Indeed, he seems to be an unique figure who achieved the impossible. How did he manage this feat of hunting with the hound and running with the hare? Was he merely a bundle of contradictions, or does he have something to say to the present situation? What was his understanding of religion which enabled him to do this? This is what I propose to study in this paper.

The focus of the paper will be on Gandhi's understanding of religion and its relation to social and political issues. The paper is divided into three parts. In the first part of the paper we shall focus on his understanding of religion and secularism which enabled him to hold on to both at the same time. Some of the contemporary relevance of Gandhi's approach to religion is brought out in the second part. Then, in the third part we examine his theory in practice so as to draw the relevant conclusions. If the second part can be considered as positive lessons to be learned from Gandhi, the third part focuses on the dangers to be avoided in the light of Gandhian practice.

### **Gandhi's Understanding of Secularism, Religion and Pluralism**

Religion, for Gandhi, is so absolute that he would go to the extent of saying that he "could not live for a single second without religion."<sup>2</sup> It is an indissoluble whole which cannot be separated from other spheres of life. On the contrary, one's religion commands one's absolute allegiance in every sphere of one's activity. "I do not conceive religion as one of the many activities of mankind....For me every, [even] the tiniest, activity is governed by what I consider to be my religion."<sup>3</sup> It follows that his politics is an extension of his religion; and he goes on to say that it must be so:

Many of my political friends despair of me because they say even my politics are derived from religion. And they are right. My politics and all other activities of mine are derived from my religion. I go further and say that every activity of a man of religion must be derived from his religion, because religion means being bound to God, that is to say God rules your every breath.<sup>4</sup>

With such views one would expect him to advocate a theocratic state. On the contrary, he wanted the state to be secular. "If officers of the Government as well as members of the public undertook the responsibility and worked wholeheartedly for the creation of a secular state, we could build a new India that would be the glory of the world."<sup>5</sup> Gandhi goes to the extent of saying, "If I were a dictator, religion and State would be separate." He continues: "The State would look after secular welfare, health, communications, foreign relations, currency, and so on, but not your or my religion. That is everybody's personal concern."<sup>6</sup>

How does Gandhi reconcile such a separation between religion and state with the all embracing character of religion? How could there be such a separation if all of one's activities are

---

<sup>2</sup> *Harijan*, March 21, 1934, Mahatma Gandhi, *All Men Are Brothers: Autobiographical Reflections*, compiled and ed. by Krishna Kripalani (New York: Continuum, 1980; first published 1958), p. 62. Hereafter, abbreviated as *AMB*.

<sup>3</sup> *The Diary of Mahadeva Desai* (Ahmedabad: Navajivan Karyalaya), *AMB*, p. 58.

<sup>4</sup> *Harijan*, March 21, 1934, *AMB*, p. 62.

<sup>5</sup> *Harijan*, Aug. 31, 1947, *Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi* (hereafter *CW*) (New Delhi: The Publications Division, Ministry of I & B, Govt. of India), vol. 89, p. 79.

<sup>6</sup> D.G. Tendulkar, *Mahatma: Life of Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi*, Vol. 7 October, 1946 (Bombay: Vithalbhai K. Jhaveri and D.G. Tendulkar, 1953), p. 264.



guided by one's religion? Is there a contradiction? The answer lies in Gandhi's understanding of secularism and religion.

### *Secularism*

Gandhi's advocacy of secularism needs to be seen in the context of religious pluralism. 'Religion' in this context is a socio-cultural entity: a community with its distinct set of doctrines, code of conduct, and manner of worship. Understood in this sense, religion is invariably pluralistic: there are Hindus, Muslims, Christians, etc. When Gandhi talks about secularism in this context, his concern is with the relationship between members of different religions and the political status of minorities in Independent India. For him secularism meant:

All subjects would thus be equal in the eyes of the law. But every single individual would be free to pursue his own religion without let or hindrance so long as it did not transgress the common law....What [Gandhi] wished India to do, was to assure liberty of religious profession to every single individual.<sup>7</sup>

It also means political equality. Once addressing Christians, he said:

Whatever their religion, all born in India and proud of their birth were equal in the eye of the law. On the strength of merit, i.e., intellectual capacity, self-sacrifice, courage and incorruptibility, a Christian could be the Chief Minister without exhibiting greater merit than a Hindu or Muslim.<sup>8</sup>

It is abundantly clear that secularism for him is a matter of equality before the law, such that the adherents of all religions are free to pursue their own religion and it would pose no hindrance to their political life. In the context of the communal tensions between religious communities, his concern for secularism is meant to ensure that followers of all religions or of no religion are given equal treatment before the law of the state. In 1947, responding to complaints about a police official being partial to the Hindus, he tells all officers to be impartial. "[In] their work they were neither Muslims, nor Hindus, nor Sikhs. They were Indians bound by oath to give full protection to the afflicted without regard to their religion. Thereby they did not cease to be Muslims, Hindus, or Sikhs, but became better."<sup>9</sup>

It may be noted that this understanding of secularism is quite different from the Western understanding. Secularism as it developed in the West is not primarily equality before the law; such equality can be considered merely as a by-product of secularism. Secularism, as it developed in the West, especially in France, is primarily an affirmation of the autonomy of the moral and the political from the religious, which meant primarily the Christian church. Similarly, the Western view is based on a distinction between faith, and reason. Religion is the realm of faith and the secular is the realm of science and reason. Thus, *Webster's Collegiate Dictionary* can define secularism as 'indifference to or rejection or exclusion of religion and religious considerations.' Gandhi's secularism, in contrast, involves neither indifference nor rejection of religion, nor the autonomy of reason or morality. While Gandhi agrees that religion is in the realm of faith, it is not a faith that is opposed to reason, but a faith that is supra-rational. He talks about faith not to give

---

<sup>7</sup> Speech at Narkeldanga, August 17, 1947, *CW*, 89, pp. 56-7.

<sup>8</sup> Speech at Prayer Meeting, August 29, 1947, *CW*, 89, p. 112.

<sup>9</sup> *Harijan*, Aug. 31, 1947, *CW*, 89, p. 79.

autonomy to reason, but for showing the limits of reason. Since Gandhi was keenly aware of the limits of reason, he does not seek to base morality on it. Morality, rather than being an autonomous realm, is based on religion. He goes even to the extent of identifying the two. Morality is, for him, the very core of religion, as we shall see.

### *Religion*

Gandhi's understanding of religion too has its own flavor. Although he is faced with a plurality of religions, most of his views on religion are not concerned primarily with such socio-cultural entities. For him, religion is a personal affair, entirely "a matter of the heart. It is between a man and his God."<sup>10</sup> "I swear by my religion. I will die for it. But it is my personal affair."<sup>11</sup> He would even go to the extent of saying that religions would be "as many as there are individuals."<sup>12</sup> Since religion is a personal matter, "If we succeeded in confining it to the personal plane, all would be well in our political life."<sup>13</sup>

Individual persons are free to profess any religion, but the state and the government are to be guided by their own laws and norms that treat all equally without any consideration of the religion of its citizens. But it raises the question: what about the men in the government? In as much as all of one's activities are governed by what one considers to be one's religion, how can this privilege be denied to those in the government?

This problem can be resolved either by acknowledging that morality and the public realm are autonomous from religion or by holding that all religions are on par as far as morality and the public realm are concerned. Either way, we would have a common law that is applicable to the adherents of different religions. Thus, if we assume that morality is the basis of law, we can have two types of secularism: one that makes the moral and the religious realms autonomous and the other that denies such autonomy, but holds that the differences between religions are irrelevant to morality. Gandhi would not countenance the first. For him, "No work done by man, however great, will really prosper unless it has a distinct religious backing."<sup>14</sup> His solution is clearly the second. He says, "The same activity may be governed by the spirit either of religion or of irreligion. There is no such thing for me, therefore, as leaving politics for religion."<sup>15</sup> From this it is clear that for him the opposition is entirely between religion and irreligion and not between religions. Since all religions are on a par, he can proceed to say that all of one's activities are to be guided by one's religion. Since this is crucial in his philosophy, let us examine his views on religious pluralism in more detail.

### *Pluralism*

After contending that religion should pervade every one of our actions, Gandhi goes on to say: "Here religion does not mean sectarianism....This religion transcends Hinduism, Islam, Christianity, etc. It does not supersede them. It harmonizes them and gives them reality."<sup>16</sup> Clearly,

---

<sup>10</sup> Speech at Prayer Meeting, October 11, 1947, *CW*, 89, p. 322.

<sup>11</sup> Tendulkar, *Mahatma*, vol. 7, October 1946, p. 264.

<sup>12</sup> Speech at Narkeldanga, August 17, 1947, *CW*, 89, p. 57.

<sup>13</sup> Speech at Prayer Meeting, Calcutta, August 22, 1947, *CW*, 89, p. 79.

<sup>14</sup> C.F. Andrews, *Mahatma Gandhi's Ideas* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1929), p. 101.

<sup>15</sup> *The Diary of Mahadeva Desai*, *AMB*, p. 58.

<sup>16</sup> *Harijan*, February 10, 1940, *AMB*, p. 54.

he is not speaking of religions as distinct socio-cultural entities, but of religion in the singular, which is contrasted with irreligion.

Let me explain what I mean by religion. It is not the Hindu religion which I certainly prize above all other religions, but the religion which transcends Hinduism, which enlarges one's very nature, which binds one indissolubly to the truth within and which ever purifies.<sup>17</sup>

He does not deny that there are different religions to be found in the world, with their different scriptures and symbols, but believed that "they were at the bottom all one and were all helpful to one another."<sup>18</sup> "Religions are different roads converging upon one point. What does it matter that we take different roads, so long as reach the same goal? In reality, there are as many religions as there are individuals."<sup>19</sup> Another favorite imagery of his is that of the tree and its branches. He believed that "if a man reaches the heart of his own religion, he has reached the heart of others, too."<sup>20</sup>

A number of questions arise here: what is the status of this claim itself? How does he arrive at it? And what is the goal or the trunk of religions? What is the place of the different religions as socio-cultural entities, the different branches or roads? Although the first two questions may be the most important from a philosophical perspective, an examination of the last two will suffice for our present purpose.

### *The Essence of Religions*

What is this heart of religions which he has found? This question finds a twofold answer in Gandhi: interiority and morality. First of all, religion is an instinct within the human heart:

Religion is a thing not alien to us. It has to be developed out of us. It is always within us; with some, consciously so; with others, quite unconsciously. But it is always there. And whether we wake up this religious instinct in us through assistance or by inward growth, no matter how it is done, it has got to be there.<sup>21</sup>

He describes this instinct thus: "All religions teach us that two opposite forces act upon us and that the human endeavor consists in a series of eternal rejections and acceptances."<sup>22</sup> So he would say:

I am but a poor struggling soul yearning to be wholly good – wholly truthful and non-violent in thought, word and deed; but ever failing to reach the ideal which I know to be true. It is a painful climb, but the pain of it is a positive pleasure to me. Each step upward makes me feel stronger and fit for the next.<sup>23</sup>

---

<sup>17</sup> *Young India*, May 12, 1920, *AMB*, p. 51.

<sup>18</sup> J.B. Kripalani, *Gandhi: His Life and Thought* (New Delhi: Publications Division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, 1970), p. 339.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> *Indian Home Rule*, 1909, *AMB*, p. 54.

<sup>21</sup> C.F. Andrews, *Mahatma Gandhi's Ideas*, p. 101.

<sup>22</sup> Tendulkar, *Mahatma*, vol.2, 1951, p. 61.

<sup>23</sup> *Young India*, April 19, *AMB*, p. 54.

Clearly, religion for him is a solitary spiritual journey of “self-realization or knowledge of self.”<sup>24</sup> Obviously, such a journey cannot be a part-time occupation restricted to some activities; it demands the whole of one’s attention, the total allegiance of one’s heart, and at all times; there can be no walk of life, including politics, that is exempt from it. Kierkegaard, I think, would have understood this well.

In this journey it is the ‘still small voice’ from within that acts as the guide. “My firm belief is that He reveals Himself daily to every human being, but we shut our ears to the ‘still small voice’.”<sup>25</sup> In order to be able to listen to this voice, strict discipline is necessary.<sup>26</sup> He speaks of the several vows that one must keep in the process. The core of different religions is to provide this discipline. “All the great religions of the world, however much they may differ, are absolutely one on this fundamental thing, that no man or woman with impure heart can possibly appear before the Great White Throne.”<sup>27</sup> Such purity of heart involves the whole person – one’s thoughts, words and deeds.<sup>28</sup> Since for Gandhi, means and ends are interchangeable terms, attaining such wholeness is the goal of religions. Other times he would speak of humility and making oneself absolutely zero, or losing the self as the goal of religions.

Having found that the essence of religions consists in this journey, it becomes possible for him to deal with the relationship between Religion and religions, between truth and Truth, between Religion and public life. Different religions offer external assistance in awakening the inner religious instinct within us and help us to listen constantly to the inner voice as we journey along. Of all the numerous names given to God, Gandhi’s own favorite is Truth. Truth, for him, is one, but seen differently by different people, just as in the story of the blind men and the elephant. These differently grasped truths form truths for the moment. By clinging to it, one can reach Absolute Truth, provided one is serious about the grasped truth, i.e., one tries to live accordingly.<sup>29</sup> Therefore, “There is nothing wrong in every man following Truth according to his lights. Indeed, it is his duty to do so. Then, if there is a mistake on the part of anyone so following Truth, it will be automatically set right....In such selfless search for Truth, nobody can lose his bearings for long. Directly he takes to the wrong path, he stumbles, and is thus redirected to the right path.”<sup>30</sup> This makes Gandhi’s religion one lifelong *satyagraha*, a continual search for Truth. The focus is on the process and not on attainment.

This has a distinct advantage: he can bypass the creeds and dogmas which give differing accounts of the goal, and concentrate on the one thing necessary, the interior journey. In other words, religions as socio-cultural formations become secondary, and one’s intense commitment to the interior journey is made primary. Both these aspects are clearly brought out in the following incident. It is narrated by Nirmal Kumar Bose who did not care much for belief in God, but had a vague commitment to truth. It is vague in the sense that although he was not sure if he was prepared

---

<sup>24</sup> *Autobiography, AMB*, p. 9.

<sup>25</sup> *Young India*, May 25, 1921, *AMB*, p. 61.

<sup>26</sup> “Just as for conducting scientific experiments there is an indispensable scientific course of instruction, in the same way strict preliminary discipline is necessary to qualify a person to make experiments in the spiritual realm. Everyone should, therefore, realize his limitations before he speaks of his Inner Voice.” *Young India*, Dec. 31, 1931. Anand T. Hingorani (ed.), *The Supreme Power* (Bombay: Pearl Publications, 1963), p. 61. (Hereafter, *SP*.)

<sup>27</sup> *Young India*, Sept. 8, 1927. *SP*, p. 51.

<sup>28</sup> “But the path of self purification is hard and steep. To attain perfect purity one has to become absolutely passion-free in thought, speech and action; to rise above the opposing currents of love and hatred, attachment and repulsion.” *An Autobiography, AMB*, p. 53.

<sup>29</sup> “What is perceived by a pure heart and intellect is truth for the moment. Cling to it, and it enables one to reach pure Truth. There is no question of any divided duty.” *Harijan*, Feb. 22, 1942. *SP*, p. 55.

<sup>30</sup> *Conversations of Gandhiji*, p. 35, in *SP*, p. 57.

to suffer for truth, he did realize that one should be prepared to suffer for what one holds to be true. On this basis he began to live together with Gandhi. Then he narrates:

I attended all his prayer meetings except one or two missed, and quite apart from that after two or three months' time, one day I asked him: "Bapu, why don't you talk to me about God? You ought to try and convince me that God exists." And he smiled and said: "Do you know, I think I have a firm faith in God, I am not quite sure about it but I try to live accordingly and if my life doesn't carry that message to you, the word of my mouth will never succeed, so I don't try."<sup>31</sup>

Clearly, for Gandhi, it was not important that Bose did not have any explicit belief in God; he was committed to living what he believed. And that sufficed. Almost like the Buddha, Gandhi attached little importance to metaphysical issues. He "has no use for definitions and concepts, but wants to live out, or try out, certain tentatively held beliefs or instinctively felt urges."<sup>32</sup> This is what makes *Experiments with Truth* the most appropriate title for his autobiography. Here, then, is the basis of Gandhi's respect for all religions: relegating the differences, including belief in God, to a secondary position and making personal integrity the only primary matter in religion. For Gandhi, it is living that has primacy in religion, not believing. With such an ordering, it is easy to tolerate and even respect differences as long as the religious pursuit is taken seriously. Since his secularism is not opposed to religion, we can also appreciate how this understanding of religion becomes also the core of his secularism.

Secularism, however, requires more than personal integrity; even the Gandhian concept of secularism, we have seen, requires a common morality and law if the different truths are not to lead to conflicts. And there comes his second characterization of the essence of religion: morality. In as much as Gandhi insists on personal integrity, living one's beliefs, his religion is also morality. "True religion and true morality are inseparably bound up with each other. Religion is to morality what water is to the seed that is sown in the soil."<sup>33</sup> However, morality in this personal sense would fall far short of the common laws and norms which the officials of a secular government are expected to follow. How does Gandhi bridge this gap? It is here that Gandhi's concept of religion as moral law which is binding on everyone comes to the fore.

In spite of his distaste for theorizing about religion, he cannot escape it since he wants to relate it to public life. Therefore, religion is not just an individual's striving after good, but a striving that is based on an Eternal Law.

There can be no manner of doubt that this Universe of sentient beings is governed by a Law. If you cannot think of Law without its Giver, I would say that the Law is the Law-giver, that is God. When we pray to the Law, we simply yearn after knowing the Law and obeying it. We become what we yearn after.<sup>34</sup>

Indeed it may even be said that the Law which holds together the Universe is indistinguishable from the Law Maker. Speaking in human language, one might even go so far as to say that God

---

<sup>31</sup> B.D. Bedekar, *Towards Understanding Gandhi*, R. Gawande, ed. (Bombay: Popular Prakashan, 1975), p. 126.

<sup>32</sup> Bedekar, p. 119.

<sup>33</sup> *Ethical Religion*, 1930, *AMB*, p. 69.

<sup>34</sup> *The Diary of Mahadeva Desai*, p. 227. *SP*, p. 14

Himself is subject to the Wheel of the Law....There is no scope for even the least little blade of grass to be free from the operation of God's laws.<sup>35</sup>

This Law or God is the underlying unity of everything; it is *dharma*. "I do dimly perceive that whilst everything around me is ever-changing, ever-dying, there is underlying all that change a Living Power that is changeless, that holds all together, that creates, dissolves, and re-creates. That informing Power or Spirit is God. And since nothing I see merely through the senses can or will persist, He alone is."<sup>36</sup> This links up Gandhian religion with *Advaita Vedanta*:

The forms are many, but the informing spirit is one. How can there be room for distinctions of high and low where there is this all-embracing unity underlying the outward diversity? For that is a fact meeting you at every step in daily life. The final goal of all religions is to realize this essential oneness.<sup>37</sup>

I believe in the absolute oneness of God and, therefore, of humanity. What, though we are many bodies, we have but one soul. The rays of the sun are many through refraction, but they have the same source.<sup>38</sup>

But Gandhiji does not think that any of these can be found by reason. Like Kierkegaard, he distrusted reason. For him, men are ultimately guided not by the intellect, but by the heart.<sup>39</sup> Our belief in God has to be based on faith which transcends reason.<sup>40</sup>

He is no God who merely satisfies the intellect, if He ever does. God to be God must rule the heart and transform it. He must express himself in every smallest act of His votary....It is proved not by extraneous evidence but in the transformed conduct and character of those who have felt the real presence of God within. Such testimony is to be found in the experiences of an unbroken line of prophets and sages in all countries and climes. To reject this evidence is to deny oneself.<sup>41</sup>

Having established his link with an *advaitic* metaphysics, Gandhi can proceed to morality. Gandhi's religion becomes "a belief in ordered moral government of the universe."<sup>42</sup> This religion or morality transcends and harmonizes different religions. Such Religion involves an "identification with everything that lives."<sup>43</sup> Hence his insistence on *ahimsa*, the cardinal principle of his moral theory and practice. This *ahimsa* is not merely a matter of forgoing manifest violence,

---

<sup>35</sup> *Harijan*, March 30, 1947. *SP*, p. 14. This does not mean there is no free will. "Man has got a choice, but much of it is like a passenger on board a ship. It is just enough for him. If we don't use it, then we are practically dead." He has just enough freedom to make his own destiny. *Conversations of Gandhiji*, p. 28. See also *Harijan*, March 23, 1940, *SP*, p. 15.

<sup>36</sup> *Young India*, October 11, 1925, *AMB*, p. 52.

<sup>37</sup> *Harijan*, December 15, 1933, *AMB*, p. 63.

<sup>38</sup> *Young India*, Sept. 25, 1924. *AMB*, p. 72.

<sup>39</sup> "The heart accepts a conclusion for which the intellect subsequently finds the reasoning. Argument follows conviction. Man often finds reasons in support of whatever he does or wants to do." *Young India*, November, 1925, cited in Raghvan Iyer, *The Moral and Political Thought of Mahatma Gandhi* (London: Oxford University Press, 1973), p. 18.

<sup>40</sup> *Harijan*, June 13, 1936, *AMB*, p. 52.

<sup>41</sup> *Young India*, October 11, 1928, *AMB*, pp. 52-53.

<sup>42</sup> *Harijan*, Feb.10, 1940, *AMB*, p. 54.

<sup>43</sup> *An Autobiography*, *AMB*, p. 53.

but perfect non-injury to all living beings, in thought, word and deed. Even impatience would be characterized by him as violence.<sup>44</sup>

At the heart of Gandhi's metaphysics lies the human community. It becomes so important to him that he can say: "If we are all sons of the same God and partake of the same divine essence, we must partake of the sin of every person."<sup>45</sup> Therefore, he would undertake fasts to atone for sins, not only his own, but also of others. In keeping with his emphasis on process we can see his treatment of morality at two levels, both of which are fused into his concept of *satyagraha*. At one level *satyagraha* involves the traditional notion of *tapasya* and self-suffering. A *satyagrahi* is one who has "tried to vindicate his particular view of truth by self-suffering instead of inflicting suffering upon others."<sup>46</sup> Everyone has a right to hold firmly onto what she or he believes to be true, but has no right to impose it on others. It is not a passivity where everything is allowed; one must insist upon one's view of truth. The manner of this insistence is through self-suffering and the willingness to pay the price. Traditional *tapasya* is meant for attaining personal spiritual powers and has nothing to do with secular goals.

At a second, and more positive level, *satyagraha* is suffering love. It is an experiment in making *tapasya* into an instrument of moral force in society. Service of fellow humans lies at its core.

The immediate service of all human beings becomes a necessary part of the endeavor [of God-realization] simply because the only way to find God is to see Him in His creation and be one with it. And this can only be done by service of all....I am part and parcel of the whole, and I cannot find Him apart from the rest of humanity....If I could persuade myself that I should find Him in a Himalayan cave I would proceed there immediately. But I know that I cannot find Him apart from humanity.<sup>47</sup>

At this point he can truly say that "the essence of religion is morality."<sup>48</sup> And a follower of such religion "cannot afford to keep out of any field of life. That is why my devotion to truth has drawn me into the field of politics; and I can say without the slightest hesitation, and yet in all humility, that those who say that religion has nothing to do with politics do not know what religion means."<sup>49</sup> Further, "I could not be leading a religious life unless I identified myself with the whole of mankind, and that I could not do unless I took part in politics."<sup>50</sup> "The whole gamut of man's activities today constitutes an indivisible whole. You cannot divide social, economic, political and purely religious work into watertight compartments. I do not know any religion apart from human activity. It provides a moral basis to all other activities which they would otherwise lack, reducing life to a maze of 'sound and fury signifying nothing'."<sup>51</sup> However, this understanding of religion and its relation to public life provides only half of the picture, as we shall see in the third part.

---

<sup>44</sup> *Gita Bodh and Mangal Prabhat* (Varanasi: Sarva Seva Sangh, 1969), p. 75. cited in S.K. Saxena, *Ever Unto God: Essays on Gandhi and Religion* (New Delhi: Indian Council of Philosophical Research, 1988), p. 3.

<sup>45</sup> *Young India*, Oct. 29, 1931, *AMB*, p. 76.

<sup>46</sup> N.K. Bose, *Studies in Gandhism* (Ahmedabad: Navajivan, 1972), p. 84.

<sup>47</sup> *Mahatma*, Vol. 6, *AMB*, p. 57.

<sup>48</sup> *An Autobiography*, Introduction, p. xiv.

<sup>49</sup> *An Autobiography*, *AMB*, p. 53.

<sup>50</sup> Politics for him "concerns nations, and that which concerns the welfare of nations must be one of the concerns of a man who is religiously inclined." *Young India*, June 18, 1925.

<sup>51</sup> *Harijan*, Dec. 24, 1935, *AMB*, p. 63.

Before moving into that, let us consider some of the specific ways in which Gandhi's life and teachings on religion can contribute to the present-day world.

### **The Contemporary Relevance of Gandhi's Approach to Religion**

*The Personal Nature of Religion.* When we think of the relevance of Gandhi's views on religion for the third millennium, the first thing that comes to mind is his insistence on the personal nature of religion. Although he called himself a *sanatani* Hindu, his religion is not just what he got from tradition, but a very personal one arrived at through a life-time of searching, experimenting and praying. Thus he would not hold on to anything that he had not found true in his life. This explains his intense aversion to religious dogmas and ultimate truths in religious matters. A religion is only as true as it is lived in the lives of its followers. In Kierkegaard's terminology, religious truth is an appropriation process and not an approximation process. Put in terms of the Gandhian distinction between truth and Truth, we might say that a small fraction of true religion (a relative truth that is practiced in one's life) is of greater worth than the whole of True religion that is believed but does not affect one's life. Although Gandhi put it in terms of the Jain philosophy of *syadavada*, this insight – like that of Kierkegaard – seems more the result of the intensity of his personal life than that of any philosophy.

This makes Gandhi capable of criticizing tradition without ceasing to be intensely religious. Even while being a great devotee of Rama, it matters little to him if Rama is a historical person. He can reinterpret traditional stories like that of Draupadi in keeping with his personal religion. For him, even scriptures are no exception. He says, "My belief in Hindu scriptures does not require me to accept every word and every verse as divinely inspired...I decline to be bound by any interpretation, however learned it may be, if it is repugnant to reason or moral sense."<sup>52</sup> Needless to say that his criticisms and re-interpretations are more intuitive than scholarly. Similarly, no creed or doctrine is supreme. "I reject any religious doctrine that does not appeal to reason and is in conflict with morality. I tolerate unreasonable religious sentiment when it is not immoral."<sup>53</sup>

This approach contrasts greatly with many Christian exegetes, who, having undertaken various types of scholarly criticisms of the Bible, find nothing more to believe in, and with Islam, which is yet to make a critical study of *The Koran*. These revealed religions have objectified religious truth to an extent that orthodoxy – right belief – becomes the criterion of true faith. What is forgotten is that orthodoxy devoid of orthopraxies may be an excellent philosophical system, but it would not be religion. No truth that is not personally appropriated can have any religious significance. The Mahatma will ever remain a constant reminder of this perennial truth.

*Religion and the Indian Ethos.* Gandhi's approach to religion is also an immense contribution to the Indian ethos. In order to understand this we must have some understanding of the place occupied by religion in the Indian tradition. The role of religion in the traditional Indian society is paradoxical to say the least. On the one hand, religion has been elevated as the most characteristic mark of Indian culture. On the other hand, religion so elevated is either an extremely privatized affair that drives one to the Himalayas in search of liberation from *samsara*, or mostly a ritualistic affair, which again has little to do with behavior in public life. The prophetic dimension of religion which links the other-world to this-world is practically non-existent in this country (with very rare

---

<sup>52</sup> *Young India*, October 6, 1921. *AMB*, p. 56. See also, *Young India*, Jan. 19, 1921.

<sup>53</sup> *Young India*, July 12, 1920, *AMB*, p. 69. The Christian belief in Jesus as the only son of God, if taken literally, is one such belief he found unreasonable, but perhaps not immoral.



exceptions like Kabir). Gandhi's greatest contribution is, perhaps, that of giving this prophetic dimension to the Indian understanding of religion. Whether it is derived from Hinduism and/or from Christianity and the Indian Renaissance is a debatable issue. The important point is that Gandhi's religion did have a strong social component which enabled him to fight evil practices in society, no matter how ancient.

I do not advocate surrender of God-given reasoning faculty in the face of ancient tradition. Any tradition, however, ancient, if inconsistent with morality, is fit to be banished from the land. Untouchability may be considered to be an ancient tradition, the institution of child widowhood and child marriage may be considered ancient tradition, and even so many an ancient horrible belief and superstitious practice. I would sweep them out of existence if I had the power.<sup>54</sup>

He would not spare even the ancient law-giver Manu in this matter. Accordingly, he spent a great deal of his energy fighting such evils and trying to bring about a regeneration of society. That makes him the prophet *par excellence* of Indian culture, the only possible comparison being Gautama Buddha. Thus, the Gandhian approach to religion – that of personal appropriation – enables one to be deeply religious without falling prey to fundamentalist forces. Having said that, however, we must return to our basic question and ask whether this approach is adequate to deal with public issues in a pluri-religious situation. The best way to answer this question is by examining the Gandhian praxis since he was operating in a pluri-religious situation. How did his idea of secularism and relationship between religions work out during his lifetime? What are its implications for our understanding of the relationship between religion and public life? We shall examine these questions in the next section.

### **Dangers in the Gandhian Vision**

We should begin with the preliminary observation that, although all his political activities were grounded in his religion, his engagement in politics was limited to the task of gaining freedom for his beloved motherland. He had no interest in the actual governance of the country, which he left to others. Although he had quite a detailed plan for the economic and social regeneration of the country, and even when his vision of economics, political organization, defence, etc. of the country did not find a place in Independent India, he made no attempts to get his vision implemented by the government. He even chided those who questioned him on this score. The reason for this remains a mystery. Did he lack confidence in the workability of the plan? Or, it may be that he felt other issues like the then communal situation required his total attention. The most likely reason is that he was fully aware that his long term vision called for a total revolution in the way people think and act, which is best accomplished in other ways than by being in the government. In any case, the fact remains that while advocating religion in politics, he had no inclination to join the government and use that power to create an India of his dreams. We must also keep in mind that Gandhi did not live long enough to see through the fruitification of his vision. It is within these limits that we enquire into the relationship between his theory and praxis.

#### *Gandhi's Religious Theory*

In discussing this issue we need to distinguish Gandhi's personal life – his spiritual search and moral integrity – from the larger issue of the socio-political implications of his theory and practice

---

<sup>54</sup> *Young India*, Sept. 22 1927, *AMB*, p. 69.

in a pluralistic context. At the personal level, there can be little doubt about his intense religiosity and moral integrity. But it is the larger socio-political issue that we need to focus upon. Perhaps this distinction between personal integrity and the socio-political integrity of a theory in practice is something which Gandhi himself would not have approved of. But then, our inquiry into the relationship between Gandhian theory and practice is not an academic question raised in a vacuum; it is a question raised in the light of Independent India's experience of the role religion has played in public life. Just consider a few instances. Take the experience of 1947 first. Gandhi, the apostle of *ahimsa*, the one who managed to throw off the mighty foreign yoke through non-violent means, found to his great mortification that his doctrine had no takers in his own country. He who sought no conflict between religions and advocated a secularism based on respect for all religions, had to witness not only the partition of the country along religious lines, but also the biggest blood bath in Indian history in the name of religion. These events pierced his heart to an extent that he who had desired to live a 125 years had to say, "I would prefer to die rather than live in an India where such brutalities are practiced."<sup>55</sup> Gandhi's theory of secularism had clearly failed to cope with the communal problem.

He attributed his failure primarily to the imperfect grasp of *ahimsa* by the masses and the Congress and the pent-up fury manifesting itself after the British left.<sup>56</sup> Gandhi finds it an "all-sufficing and convincing" explanation. While there can be no doubt about the imperfect following of *ahimsa* by the masses, can it all be put on the pent-up fury against the British? How to explain the fact that the communal conflict that was restricted to Hindu-Muslim clashes in Gandhi's time has grown over the years, enveloping Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs and Christians? Is it a creation of later day politicians? Take two such instances: the Shah Bano case of the 80s and the Temple movement of the 90s. In the former case, the very same Prime Minister who defended the supreme court judgement as a matter of principle, makes a U-turn a few days later for political reasons. In the latter case, it was obvious from the beginning that the leaders of the movement were making use of an emotive religious symbol for gaining political power. The important question is whether these are aberrations from the Gandhian path or have their roots there. And this question cannot even be raised unless we make a distinction between the unquestionable personal integrity of Gandhi and the larger public issue. The former is a matter of Gandhi's self-understanding of his theory and practice, the latter is a subsequent scrutiny of it to see whether there is a *lacuna* there which set the trend for the subsequent communal events.

Let us consider two cases of Gandhi's praxis, the Khilafat and the Civil Disobedience Movements, two of his most successful attempts to achieve Hindu-Muslim unity. The Khilafat movement was already on when Gandhi entered the scene. Gandhi sensed the intense Muslim feelings on the issue and used the opportunity to win their good will and thus strengthen Hindu-Muslim unity. Espousing their cause made him popular with the Muslims and by the end of 1918 he had become their spokesman and hero.<sup>57</sup> He attended the meetings of the All India Muslim Conference and the All India Khilafat Conference, declared his support for the movement and appealed to the Hindus to join him. He persuaded an unwilling Congress to do it on the grounds that it would lead the Indian Muslims to withhold "all cooperation from the British

---

<sup>55</sup> A. Mellor, *India Since Partition* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1951), p. 153, cited in G. Sharp, *Gandhi Faces the Storm* (Ahmedabad: Navajivan, 1961), p. 11.

<sup>56</sup> "The peace the masses maintained during that struggle of a generation with exemplary patience, had not come from within. The pent-up fury found an outlet when the British Raj was gone. It naturally vented itself in communal violence which was never fully absent and which was kept under suppression by the British bayonet." Cited in Sharp, p. 39.

<sup>57</sup> A. Thomas, *Mahatma Gandhi and the Communal Problem* (New Delhi: Indian Social Institute, 1983), p. 5.

Government.”<sup>58</sup> Hindu-Muslim unity touched a new high in the wake of this Khilafat-cum-Non-Cooperation Movement. But this unity was very short-lived.

It must be noted that there was no common purpose that united the Hindus and Muslims in this movement, but rather different interests. The Civil Disobedience Movement launched after the Lahore Congress offers a contrast. By then the communal problem had become very acute on issues like cow slaughter and music before the mosques. But Gandhi did not attempt to deal directly with these divisive issues. He had come to realize, it would seem, that unity – like happiness – is not something that can be directly attained; rather it is a by-product of shared struggles. Therefore, Gandhi launched the campaign against the British to “take the attention of the nation off the communal problem and to rivet it on the things that are common to all Indians, no matter to what creed or sect they may belong.”<sup>59</sup> Unlike the Khilafat, the appeal to participate in the movement was not on the basis of religion; the attempt was to unite the people on the basis of a common concern, the salt tax. Many Muslims participated in it and to that extent some sense of unity was achieved.

### *A Theory Short on Pluralism; A Praxis Short on Unity*

Now let us examine these actions of Gandhi in the light of his theory. Gandhi was criticized for bringing the Muslims into the anti-imperialist struggle on a religious issue.<sup>60</sup> The liberal and Leftist view of the movement continued to consider this recognition of Hindus and Muslims as separate entities a mistake. For our purpose, the important question is whether the unity achieved in the course of the Khilafat movement can be considered an instance of the Gandhian theory in practice. And the answer seems to be clearly in the negative. This movement had little basis in the essential inner unity of religions which Gandhi propounded, except as an expression of solidarity with the Muslim brothers in need. Even then it involved a recognition of Islam and Hinduism as different social entities and not merely the recognition of one essential religion.

In contrast to the Khilafat movement, there was no recognition of religions as distinct entities at all in the second movement. This, on the one hand, increased the affinity of a large number of individual Muslims to the Congress, and, on the other hand, Muslims as a group became more alienated from it. According to Indira Rothermund “Gandhi’s second civil disobedience campaign, which begins in 1930, widens the [Hindu-Muslim] rift, and while Gandhi breaks the Salt Law, Jinnah participates in the Round Table Conference in London. In the same year the poet Iqbal announces for the first time a Pakistan plan.” It is to be kept in mind that Jinnah, the leader of the Muslim League who kept away from the Movement, was no fanatic Muslim. At first, Jinnah himself spurned the Pakistan plan.<sup>61</sup>

What was wrong then? I suggest that the problem lay in Gandhi’s theoretical unification of religions. It achieves too little and too much at the same time. It achieved too little because, by paying exclusive attention to the common feature of religions, he was not able to give due place to the differences between religions as socio-culturally existing realities. There is a gap between Religion and religions. The result is that in practice at the empirical level, he had to fall back on religions as they existed, i.e., distinct social entities, as he did during the Khilafat movement. When it was not done, as during civil disobedience, large sections of a community were left out of the

---

<sup>58</sup> Resolutions of the All-India Khilafat Conference, Nov. 24, 1919. cited in A. Thomas, p. 5.

<sup>59</sup> Cited in A. Thomas, p. 19.

<sup>60</sup> A. Thomas, p. 7.

<sup>61</sup> I. Rothermund, *The Philosophy of Restraint* (Bombay: Popular Prakashan, 1963), p. 100.

movement. Jinnah wanted some recognition for the Muslim identity within India. Moreover, this identity was not limited to Muslims, but extended to categories like the Dravidians.<sup>62</sup> He visualized a federal India of which Gandhi and the Congress were deeply suspicious. This explanation, no doubt, is rather simplistic since it neglects the complex social, cultural, psychological and political factors at work during the period. While admitting the complexity of the situation, the basic point remains that the Gandhian theory does not seem to have had enough room for pluralism.

On the other hand, his theory of religions achieves too much, to the extent that all religions are said to be equal. Being equal, there is no basis for criticizing religions across the board; any criticism is to come from within religions. The result, again, is that in practice different religions are accepted as they exist, i.e., as distinct entities, and thus the status quo is maintained. Even in tackling issues like untouchability, although Gandhi had an intuitive realization that the problem of caste iniquities is more a cultural phenomenon common to the subcontinent than a religious phenomenon of Hinduism,<sup>63</sup> in practice he saw it as a Hindu problem. During the Vaikom *satyagraha*, replying to a query whether the non-Hindu sympathizers could join the movement, Gandhi replied:

Untouchability is the sin of Hinduism. They must suffer for it, they must purify themselves, they must pay the debt they owe to suppressed brothers and sisters. Theirs is the shame and theirs must be the glory when they have purified themselves of the black sin.<sup>64</sup>

This is inexplicable when we consider that the movement was not only for gaining entry into the temple, but even for the use of public roads! If the essence of religion is a morality that cuts across the boundaries of different religions, as Gandhi teaches, then it is on such issues that one would expect such inter-religious religiosity to be fully operational. But his practice was just the contrary. In other words, in spite of Gandhi's personalized and universal religion, when it came to public action he put the tag of traditional religion even on such human issues as untouchability. The problem of the Gandhian approach then lies in this: while his theory does not have enough place for pluralism, his praxis does not have enough place for unity. The result is that Gandhian secularism, in practice, is a 'confluence of several religiosities,' or better, a 'federation of religions'<sup>65</sup> where only criticism from within a religion is permitted. If there are common moral principles across religions, it is hard to see why this should be so. In the process, it is his teaching on religion as morality that becomes the casualty in the Gandhian praxis.

### *Secularism and Unity beyond Pluralism*

If we are to learn the implications of these experiences for secularism, I think it would be helpful to begin at the other end, i.e., the secularism that Gandhi envisaged. It is the concept of equality before the law, irrespective of the different religions involved. Rather than repudiate the differences between religions, it begins with the acknowledgement of different religions. It is such an acknowledgement that was involved in the Khilafat movement, and Gandhi was right in his insight that he must win the trust of the Muslim community. But to stop at plurality would be to

---

<sup>62</sup> In *India's Problem of Her Future Constitution*, which Jinnah edited in 1940, "he gives ample space to such articles as "Dravidian Region should form a separate state," etc." (p. 94ff.). See I. Rothermund, p. 106.

<sup>63</sup> See *CW*, vol. 58, p. 177.

<sup>64</sup> *Young India*, 1 May 1924. N.K. Bose, p. 88.

<sup>65</sup> Bipan Chandra, *Communalism in Modern India* (New Delhi: Vikas Publishing House, 1984), pp. 146-7.

give way to unbridled pluralism and repudiate the idea of any law that is applicable to all. Therefore, secularism demands that, along with the recognition of plurality, there be a recognition of unity, a unity that is expressed in the form of a common law and constitution which are indifferent to the religious affiliation of its subjects.

The point, however, is not the common law in the literal sense. Any law is as good as the backing it enjoys from the people. The history of independent India is a history of well meant laws, being hijacked by vested interests for lack of popular pressure to enforce them. What is important, then, is not the law itself, but the unity that the people experience and from which common law gets legitimacy in a democracy. But this is not a given unity, but something that needs to be achieved. We could also put it this way: A person in society has multiple belongings, one of which is to a religious community and another to a larger community of state; and, at a third level, there is the still larger unity of human concerns where the common moral law which Gandhi discerns at the heart of different religions comes into play. The second level of community is brought about through common struggles that address common concerns of the different smaller communities. This insight is operative in both the movements, though with differing emphasis.

In the Khilafat case, two different communities with different goals were brought together into a Khilafat-cum-Non-Cooperation Movement only on the basis that both were directed against the British. Seen thus, the basis of this unity would seem to be a policy of “my enemy’s-enemy-is-my-friend,” which has nothing to do with the morality common to religions. Such an interpretation would be contrary to the Gandhian ideals, but it remains the case that there was no common purpose motivating this movement, other than that it was directed against the alien rulers.

The second movement was an improvement on this, but even there it was meant to “take the attention of the nation off the communal problem” by focusing on the alien power. Such negative unity is easily achieved, since Indians seem to find it easier to unite *against* somebody than *for* something.<sup>66</sup> In playing upon this cultural trait Gandhi succeeded in forging a unity in plurality and bringing the alien British to their knees. Such unity, obviously, does not have any intrinsic connection to the positive long-term common concerns of the communities concerned – concerns that could become the basis of a future common law and give it legitimacy. Lacking in this long-term perspective, the temporary unity built on the extrinsic factor of a common enemy vanishes the moment that factor is out of the picture; divisive plurality re-enters the scene with a vengeance.

It is not so much this particular instance, but the Gandhian principle in action that we are concerned with. Without being judgmental on history, let us visualize an alternative scenario. Imagine that instead of uniting the people on the issue of immediate freedom from the British, Gandhi had left that matter to the Congress and focused his immense energies on a long-term goal, like the abolition of landlordism. This is not an imaginary scenario. Even before Gandhi entered the scene there were movements against the landlords by the aggrieved peasantry. As a matter of fact, Gandhi began his public life in India with a similar orientation as manifested in Champaran and Kaira. If he had remained on this course that he had begun, it would have given a completely different turn to the communal problem, because in many places the land problem had a communal dimension: the landlords were Hindus and the oppressed were Muslims.<sup>67</sup> In that context, Gandhi’s identification with the peasants would have won for him the allegiance of the Muslim masses, which he had tried to achieve through Khilafat. Unlike Khilafat, this would have been a non-

---

<sup>66</sup> See Tara Ali Baig, “Can Indians Only Protest?,” *Sunday*, 9 August, 1981.

<sup>67</sup> This was the case in East Bengal and the Northwest. This is also one of the factors that made the partition of Bengal possible. See B.R. Nanda, pp. 20, 66.

sectarian issue like that of the Civil Disobedience Movement. But unlike the Civil Disobedience Movement, which could not carry the Muslim community along, here he would have gotten the Muslim masses on his side.

Such a struggle would have brought into full play those moral principles which Gandhi saw to be common to all religions. In the process, the masses – both Muslims and Hindus – would have had a chance to recognize the common concerns that united them beyond their plurality. This would have given a chance for the Gandhian principles to become a part of the consciousness of the people and thereby to build a new national consciousness. It would have created a unity that recognized legitimate pluralism without giving way to sectarianism. It would have saved India from sectarianism, because it would have been capable of putting brakes on pluralism when it infringed upon common moral principles. This, in turn, would have paved the way for the genuine secular state of Gandhi's dreams.

Could Jinnah and the Muslim League have been brought around on such a platform? Given Jinnah's suspicion of the masses, it is hard to say. It is more likely that such a struggle would have thrown up a different Muslim leadership. The League came into being for claiming parity with the Hindus in sharing the crumbs that fell from the British table, which was the orientation of large sections in the Congress. Though founded in 1907, the League had remained a marginal player until the prospect of the transfer of power became imminent. It was then that the Muslim fear of being dominated by the Hindus became overwhelming. Such fear would not have arisen in the first place if the focus had not been so much on immediate political power as on the long-term *purpose* of power to which Gandhi's religious convictions oriented him.

But this is not the path that Gandhi chose. Here we see the conflict between Gandhi-the-politician and Gandhi-the-prophet. To sustain his political fight against the British, he enlisted the support of those very powers – the landlords and the industrialists – whose goal in attaining power was at variance with those of Gandhi, the prophet, who wanted the empowerment of the masses. Gandhi with his uncanny intuition had observed as early as 1918 – before he began to dominate national politics – that people were not ready to follow his advice, but were ready to accept his services in a cause which suited them.<sup>68</sup> This seems to be exactly what happened. We are still living out its consequences. Not having engaged in a prolonged struggle for the positive ideals that he envisaged for the nation, political independence became a matter of white *sahibs*, giving way to the brown *sahibs* who got more busy with dividing the spoils of office than in committing themselves to long-term goals or moral principles.

Thus, the Gandhian approach to religion and its role in public life is characterized by an inner contradiction: highest ideals at the individual level and an unashamed compromise of those principles in the public sphere.<sup>69</sup> The objective moral law, through which he sought to relate the interior journey of the person with the public realm, was something that could be compromised at the altar of political expediency. In this sense Hiren Mukerjee is right when he says that “we purchased our political freedom with a coin that was ethically counterfeit.”<sup>70</sup>

An alternative course of action would naturally have involved a hard and prolonged struggle.<sup>71</sup> However, with the considerable charisma, immense moral strength and mass appeal

---

<sup>68</sup> B.R. Nanda, p. 170.

<sup>69</sup> See Hiren Mukerjee, *Gandhi: A Study* (New Delhi: People's Publishing House, 1979), p. 198.

<sup>70</sup> Mukerjee is referring to Gandhi's penchant for compromise. See Mukerjee, p. 196.

<sup>71</sup> If politics is the art of the possible in achieving one's immediate goals, this makes Gandhi a great politician – perhaps the greatest in modern times. But if we are looking for a model that relates religion to public life he does not seem to offer any help. Gandhi's penchant for compromise can perhaps be traced to his radical privatization of religion where each individual has his own religion.

that Gandhi possessed, it is likely that his *satyagraha* would have produced lasting results that would have changed the face of the communal question forever. This route may not have made Gandhi the Father of the Nation so soon, but when India became free – as it was bound to – Gandhi would have sired a progeny that was truly Gandhian.

To point out this drawback in Gandhi's philosophy is in no way to belittle his personal integrity. At the personal level he remains a religious, moral and a political giant, seldom seen in history. Political power, for Gandhi, was never an end in itself. But once the political process was set in motion, with the *hartal* on the Rowalt Bill, it gained its own momentum, and he did not even have a chance to look back to see if that process accorded with his vision for the country. In the process India achieved her freedom, but not the freedom he wanted, nor a nation that had internalized his ideals. We are able to learn even from his failures because of his courage to experiment with what he considered to be the truth of the moment. His experiments teach us that genuine secularism requires a lived experience of unity beyond pluralism, a unity which results from the common struggles of an otherwise diverse people. His experiments also teach us that not any common struggle can bring about the desired unity: these must be struggles that maintain an uncompromising stand on certain moral principles that cut across religious boundaries. Here one cannot have a 'confederation of religions' that compromises with these basic principles to please different constituencies.

To conclude, if religion is to play a creative role in public life it requires not only the interiorized religiosity of a saint, but also a public commitment to certain shared values, such that these values can grow into the common consciousness of the people beyond religious boundaries. Contemporary India – and any pluralistic society for that matter – can neglect this lesson of history only at its own peril.<sup>72</sup>

---

<sup>72</sup> Independent India has largely followed the Gandhian path of compromise even on basic principles when it concerns members of different religions, as pointed out in the Shah Bano case earlier. The Hindutva forces follow the same policy of short-term political expediency, except that they have turned the tables around in catering to majority sectarianism and show a more pronounced ethical duplicity in achieving their goal.





**Part II**  
**Contextual Cases**



#### 4.

## **Gandhian Thought Vis-À-Vis Indigenous Ideology: Some Reflections for an Integral Humanism in the Third Millennium**

*Joseph Marianus Kujur*

As long as there is violence which threatens the very future of the human race, the relevance of Gandhi would continue. He would remain relevant till this danger of total annihilation of the human race is removed.--*J.P. Narayan*

Two considerations which require attention at the outset of this paper in the light of the above title are: one, Gandhi did not have direct contact with the indigenous people, nor is there any specific treatment of their problems in his writings; and, two, there is seemingly a dialectical relation between the Gandhian thought and indigenous ideology.

### **Gandhi and the Tribes**

Gandhiji came face to face with the natives of South Africa belonging to various tribes, namely, the Zulus, the Bachuanas, the Basutos and the Swazis, etc. He was shocked to see the plight of about five million natives politically controlled by a meagre 2.5 million Europeans. Gandhi was a witness to the discrimination of the blacks first by the Dutch when they started their colony in South Africa in the middle of the 17th century, and later by the British who overpowered the former in the first half of the 19th century. The basis of the discrimination against the local Blacks was 'color'. Their dignity as human beings took a back seat as Blacks were looked upon as pre-scientific, pre-logical, incapable of any rational thinking. The attitude of the white was that of superiority and ethnocentrism; the rights and privileges of the blacks were insignificant for the white minority. This was apparently the first encounter of Gandhi with an indigenous population who had lost their right of self-assertion. In the context of India we have more than enough sources to show Gandhi's involvement with the low caste whom he called *harijans*, meaning 'children of God', but we hear little about Gandhi's involvement with the aboriginal, the native, the tribal who are the indigenous people of India, though the Indian Government vehemently denies the existence of any 'indigenous' people in the country.

Once, when Gandhi was asked why he paid little attention to the tribals, he said, "I have entrusted that part of our work to A.V. Thakkar."<sup>1</sup> Thakkar was a social worker, who had headed the fact-finding mission to report on the allegation of police brutality in Gujarat. He was sympathetic to Congress without actually being part of it; he was also a friend of the poor, the untouchable and the aborigine. However, the disinterested response of Gandhi regarding tribals is mysterious.

Gandhi did have an impact on the Tana Bhagat movement in Chotanagpur in the sense that the puritanical ideas of Gandhi penetrated the movement. The Oraon Tana Bhagats, who were fighting the British for their socio-economic cause, initiated another element of 'purification' in

---

<sup>1</sup>As quoted in Ramchandra Guha, *Savaging the Civilized: Verrier Elwin, His Tribals, and India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 53.

their sect dividing Oraon tribe itself on the basis of purity-pollution. Thus some would hold Gandhi to some degree responsible for the division and for the Hinduisation of the tribals?

The moral values Gandhi stood for were different from those of the tribals. Gandhi was stern in his dealings with those with moral lapses, and his normal remedy was immediate expulsion from his *ashram*, always with a possibility of a return after real penitence. That may have been one of the reasons why Verrier Elwin was disillusioned with Gandhi.

To say that Gandhi was sympathetic to the tribals would be an exaggeration. In fact, Elwin, though a foreigner, was a real friend of the tribals. No doubt, he has been accused of exploiting tribal women and marrying them for his professional interests as an anthropologist. Nevertheless, if anyone had real love for the tribals of India, it was Elwin and not Gandhi. According to Guha, to Elwin's dismay, the Congress and politicians paid little attention to the needs of the original inhabitants of their country.

It is said that it was Gandhi who gave the term '*adivasi*' to the indigenous people. As far as the Oraons of Bihar are concerned, Gandhi played a significant role either for the better or for the worse. Tribals, especially, the Oraons, Mundas and Kharias of Chotanagpur had united against the atrocities by the British and their unjust laws that were alienating them from their land, society and culture. Rallies organized in Ranchi to oppose the British Government were highly successful. It is alleged that the Congress, under the leadership of the then President of the Congress Party, Dr. Rajendra Prasad, caused division among the non-Christian tribals and the converts by alluring the non-Christians to merge with the Party.

Guha makes some interesting observations about the political developments affecting the tribals in pre-independent India. Congress came to power in the elections of 1937. In the same year the 'Raj Gond' movement began. In August 1937, Elwin visited Gandhi at his new *ashram* at Wardha to acquaint him with the aboriginals' plight. But the latter "did not appear to think that the original inhabitants of India deserved any special consideration." Hence, Elwin thought that the Congress wished only to use tribals as cannon-fodder in their political campaigns and to convert them all to vegetarianism, abstinence and settled cultivation – the plough being the symbol of the Congress-Hindu culture sweeping the tribal areas.<sup>2</sup>

In spite of the fact that Gandhi was relatively passive towards the tribal cause, if one looks into the Gandhian philosophy and indigenous ideology, one cannot but be amazed by the extent to which they shared values, ethos and the spirit. The effort here is to point out how well intertwined they are.

The question of the relevance of Gandhi in the present scenario, let alone the next millennium, has indeed been problematic. Given the rampant corruption, indiscriminate violence and loss of the sense of respect and reverence for human life and dignity, some see the Gandhian model of humanism to be outdated. There was a time during the British rule in India when the Gandhian model of truth and non-violence offered a solution to the existent problems of the day, but times are much different now. At the beginning of the 21st century, there is everywhere an atmosphere of suspicion, insecurity and apprehension. It is appropriate to ask whether Gandhian thought has any significant contribution to make in bringing harmony, peace and prosperity to the third millennium.

What is their relation to the values upheld and cherished by the indigenous community, not only in India but also in many other countries the world over? The present paper attempts to

---

<sup>2</sup> Elwin to H. C. Greenfold, Divisional Commissioner, Jabalpur, 15th Nov. 1937, Jabalpur Collectorate Records; as quoted by Guha, 1998, p. 108.

explore objectively the dialectics between Gandhian thought and indigenous ideology for a meaningful inculcation of an integral and holistic humanism in the next millennium.

## **Gandhian and Tribal Thought**

### *Faith: the Basis for Action*

Kumar and Kumar<sup>3</sup> treat the Gandhian faith in its full contours, which resonates well with the belief system of the tribes, especially in the tribal belt of Bihar. Gandhi, like the tribals, is a theist. He firmly believes in one God and does not believe in a pantheon of deities. Tribes of Bihar also are basically monotheists, but they believe also in the existence of spirits – some benevolent by nature, others malevolent – who have to be appeased from time to time. Gandhi does not accept God's existence on any scriptural or revelatory authority. For Gandhi, God's existence is a matter of personal faith. According to the tribal world view, the Supreme Being exists very concretely in their midst. It is He who created them and taught them the art of cultivation for self-sustenance. The experience of the Supreme Being is in their Genesis myth which is narrated at every important social activity of the tribe.

In the Gandhian cosmology, there is an orderly world, but the Divine is of a higher order to which the natural order is subordinate. Tribals believe in the hierarchy of beings: there are the natural and the supernatural realms. Whereas in the natural world there is an egalitarian society, the supernatural world is a hierarchy of beings. The Supreme Being is all goodness, the most beneficent one, who can never be wrong. The spirits, on the other hand, are subordinated to Him and depend on human beings for their sustenance.

In Gandhi's philosophy, the divine order is a moral order intrinsically and intuitively realized by every human being. This moral awareness is the basis of the human awareness of God's existence, whose power sustains the moral order. It is Gandhi's conviction that the practice of moral living is possible only for the individual in relation to other human beings. For Gandhi, such cooperation can be based only on genuine love. *Ahimsa* or non-violence is the basic law of love, which, according to Gandhi, should govern all human affairs and all interpersonal relations.

Tribes have a very similar ideology, which notion of the moral order among the tribes is also a foundation of their social order. Their belief system nurtures and nourishes their pattern of behavior. Religion thus becomes a way of life for them. Morality is part and parcel of their social framework. All the activities of a good tribesman are governed by his faith in one Supreme Being who is interested in the welfare of the whole of humankind. That is why *Singbonga*, the Great God of the Munda tribe, sent messengers to the Asur, the iron smelters, to stop working on their bellows night and day as it was causing pollution in the entire universe. But when they refused to pay heed to the messengers, as a last resort, He destroyed them, in order to maintain the world order (a popular 'myth of the origin of the evil spirits' in the Munda tribe).

### *Gandhi's Sarvodaya and the Tribes' Participatory Model for the Community Welfare*

*Sarvodaya* means 'development of all'. Tribal society has evolved a socio-cultural mechanism to take care of the entire tribe. *Gola Dhan*, for instance, is a system of 'grain-bank', contributed by each family. In times of crises, people take loans from the 'grain-bank' and later return it at a

---

<sup>3</sup> Raj Kumar and Vijendra Kumar, (ed.), *Mahatma Gandhi: Life, Ideology and Thoughts, A Vision for 21st Century* (Jaipur: Mangal Deep Publications, 1999), pp. 131-32.

low interest rate. Similarly, the tribal villages have a system of *madait* or *sangat* which literally mean ‘cooperation’. In case a poor family needs the help of others, the whole village decides to work for it without any remuneration.

The recent trends of planned change have seen many developmental programs not only in India, but also in other developing countries. One of the reasons for the failure of various models of modernization is the insensitivity of the policy-makers the implementation of the policies in local cultures. It was Gandhi, the visionary, who first understood the setbacks of a model where power and power-relations were centralized. Gandhi was a charismatic leader who believed in change not only externally, but also internally. In fact he insisted on the inner change of heart in order to effect an exterior change. According to Midatala Rani, “Gandhi’s idea of social change may be described as the ideological combination of two schools of thought, namely, ‘pacifism’ and ‘social revolution.’ Elements of these two traditions converge to produce ‘non-violent revolution.’<sup>4</sup> Gandhi’s concept of social revolution is non-violent his notion of change for the betterment of human life and society is free from violence of all kinds.

His concept of development is *Sarvodaya* through *Antyodaya*, implying the welfare of all through the weakest of the society.<sup>5</sup> The principle of *Sarvodaya* is illustrated in Gandhi’s translation of Ruskin’s book *Unto This Last*.<sup>6</sup> As a strategy of development *sarvodaya* emphasizes harmony and ethical virtues of life rather than class struggle or domination. The concept of *Sarvodaya* upholds the moral and human values in economic and social reconstruction. Agriculture is considered by Gandhi to be the most appropriate basis for providing for one’s livelihood. Principles of cooperation and collective endeavor are central to society. Education, moral uprightness, non-violence, simplicity, self-restrained life-style, etc., are the values which effect development of the *Antyodaya*, which is the development of the weakest in society.<sup>7</sup>

The Gandhian model of development as a strategy emphasizes ‘*aparigraha*’ or non-acquisition in excess of need.’ “Trusteeship” implies that property belongs to all, and the holder manages it and takes care of it only as a socially responsible trustee.<sup>8</sup> The idea of communal holding of property and its participatory management comes very close to the tribal notion of property. Gandhi also advocated anthropo-centered, appropriate technology for development. The dream of Gandhi is of a decentralization of power to the village or locality, based on surplus human labor, small machines and appropriate technology.<sup>9</sup> The Gandhian model also emphasizes decentralization of socio-economic and political systems starting from the village to the highest level.

Gandhi emphasizes consensus to avoid unnecessary confrontation, division and tyranny in the village.<sup>10</sup> The tribal notion of common holding of land and their attitude to the land expresses the solidarity for the tribe. Hence, the tribal worldview has a scope for the human-divine interaction in very concrete terms, even in the holding of property. The village *panchayat* (elders of the village) works on the basis of communal brotherhood, equality and consensus. There is no question of domination. When the *panchayat* is in progress, the *sarpanch* (the President of the elders) is only the president of the meeting; he does not take any decision on his own. He only articulates what the *panchayat* decides. There is consensus in all matters; there is no room for power struggle.

---

<sup>4</sup> *Gandhi Marg*, vol. 20, no. 2, July-Sept, 1998, pp. 211-12.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 213.

<sup>6</sup> As treated by Midatala Rani in “Sarvodaya as a development Strategy,” *ibid.*, pp. 214-15.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 215.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

*Structural Violence and the Gandhian Ahimsa.* The second millennium is marked by violence, violence of all kinds, at all levels. In this century we have seen enough of the violence perpetrated by the state. We have also witnessed the terrorist violence, secessionist-insurgency, ethnic conflicts and caste wars. The phenomenon of violence has been universal: the stripping of women of lower castes or of minority communities; of the rape of nuns; cold-blooded murder of priests; caste conflicts of Jehanabad claiming hundreds of lives; and naxalite attacks on their adversaries. Outside India, we hear of the blood bath in the LTTE attacks, and wars in Croatia, Iraq, Kuwait, East Timor or Kargil that have claimed thousands of lives. Yet, the arms race among various countries goes on. Nuclear experiments continue with a renewed vigor under the pretext of national security. The exploitation, oppression and dehumanization of the tribals continues unabated.

Gandhi's ideology seems dead to some, Gandhi had never been so irrelevant now. Gandhi, they say, has no solution for the present crises. The corresponding traditional tribal values of tolerance, harmony, equality, sharing, humility, honesty, simplicity and symbiosis with nature are being looked upon as irrelevant today, not only by the non-tribals but also by the tribals. The real solution lies in 'tit for tat', in 'an eye for an eye'; 'Might is right' is the slogan of the day.

To serious people concerned about society, however, Gandhi is the prophet of the millennium because he can be relevant only in relation to violence, untruth, corruption and domination. His message makes one's life meaningful only in the struggle to rid the world of the process of dehumanization of the weaker sections of the society. Gandhi is concerned about the structural violence which is perpetuated from one generation to another. According to Dashrath Singh, Gandhi's perception of structural violence was in terms of economics, politics, social systems and the education-system.<sup>11</sup> Evil, according to Gandhi, was a by-product of the social structure. Therefore Gandhi "hated capitalism, not the capitalist; racialism, not the white English men and women; untouchability, not the untouchables; modern civilization, not the Western people living in it. He saw very clearly the evil or violence present in the social structure itself."<sup>12</sup> For Gandhi, economics that is destructive of the moral well-being of any individual or nation is immoral;<sup>13</sup> a political structure bereft of religion and morality cannot bring about the dignity, inner freedom and justice of the citizens.<sup>14</sup> He saw violence in the economic and political systems of India, as well as of the world.

Positively, Gandhi was convinced that all societies were held together by non-violence just as is the earth by the law of gravitation.<sup>15</sup> His ideal of social organization was the family: his paradigm of society was in the pattern of family *vasudhaiva kutumbakam* – the idea that the whole world is one family. In such a network of systems, every unit of society is "governed by the principle of interdependence, complementarity, cooperation, dedication towards duty, and enjoys the same respect, social status, and importance."<sup>16</sup> Tribal values resonate with the Gandhian process for making this world a better place in which to live. The tribal's reverence for life can be seen in their myths, ritual practices and entire belief system.

---

<sup>11</sup> "Gandhi and the Concept of Structural Violence," *ibid.*, pp. 197-209.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 201.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 203.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 204.

## *Paradigm of Indigenous Equality and Gandhian Promotion of Human Rights*

A closer look at the Gandhi's life and works takes us into the realm of his philosophy of being. What left a lasting mark in Gandhi's life was the suffering of the natives, the workers, the traders, the clerks who were robbed of their human dignity in South Africa. Even before the promulgation of the Indian Constitution underlining the fundamental rights to her citizens, the right to dignity, equality and justice were promoted by Gandhi. In fact, it was precisely this cause that cost him his life.

In a tribal society, egalitarianism is one of the most cherished values. Everybody in the tribe has equal status irrespective of his or her political or economic power. In the Genesis myths of the Oraon, Kharia and Munda tribes, 'pride' and 'disobedience' are said to be the greatest offences. If one is proud, one is sure to disobey or violate the law of the tribe, they argue. Any offence against the tribe is considered an offence against the Supreme Being Himself, which results in *chchilan* or ostracism from the tribe. This excommunication is not for the sake of punishment, but for reconstruction, reparation or reconciliation. Thus the Gandhian model of reconciliation, forgiveness, hatred for the sin and not the sinner, etc., makes a lot of sense in a tribal context. Everybody in the tribe is equal and is treated equally.

The welfare of the tribe is of prime concern. It does not mean that an individual is made a scapegoat. The law of the tribe is to uphold the dignity of each individual, and to facilitate the peaceful and harmonious co-existence of the members of the tribe. The freedom of each individual includes responsibility toward one another. This value was much cherished by Gandhi himself. Thus, Dennis Dalton, on the basis of the Gandhian *sutras* or formulas, draws a link among Gandhi's key ideas of freedom (*Swaraj*), duty (*Dharma*), non-violent action (*Satyagraha*), and self-reliance (*Swadeshi*).<sup>17</sup>

### **The Convergence of Gandhian Thought and the Indigenous Quest for Truth**

Though Gandhi has not been a crusader for the cause of the tribals, we find in his philosophy a space for an indigenous-Gandhian dialogue. His stress on non-violence and his application of the philosophy of God, world and man is operational in the daily life of the tribals. All life – plant, animal and human – are created by God according to the tribals, which is close to the Gandhian vision of a non-violent society. And in such a society, Gandhi envisages decentralization of power. Village life should arouse a sense of cooperation and fellowship. In such a society the dignity of labor is maintained and is not replaced by the use of machines.

The cherished dream of every tribal is for 'equality,' both economic and social. This finds a central place in the Gandhian philosophy. Humans are all equal and economic equality is the key to non-violence. Land is given to them by the Supreme Being. As humans are his stewards, the land can neither be sold nor misused. Gandhi's idea that man should free himself to serve society is nothing new to the tribals. Their life is an epitome of service and communitarianism. Here Gandhi's position that 'the caste system was to maintain the social order' can be seen as a justification. The equality of man and woman is yet another area of commonality between Gandhi and the indigenous peoples. Gandhi believed in an intimate relation between man and nature.

Times have changed down through the decades. Old values have acquired new meanings or new interpretations, often to suit the convenience of the interpreters. Writing off some great personality's credibility under the pretext of its irrelevance is nothing new. Complacency makes

---

<sup>17</sup> "Gandhi on Freedom, Rights, and Responsibility," *ibid*.



the matter worse. It is difficult, no doubt, to follow the *Mahatma*, ‘the great soul,’ but not impossible. Similarly, the tribal’s own quest for truth is concretized in their signs and symbols, feasts and festivals, rites and rituals, and in the sacraments of their daily life. If they can live a harmonious and an integrated life, why not others?

Gandhi was not a Mahatma by birth, but earned this title because of his magnanimity. In his early days as a student in India and later in South Africa, he was vulnerable to temptations but he developed the moral strength to resist, proving the spirit to be stronger than the flesh. This points to the solution to the problems in the world. Similarly, in their struggle for survival tribals have evolved a way to brave the challenges of violence, untruth, evil and death with fortitude, hard work, truth, benevolence and respect for life.

The problem lies within oneself and not outside, though it has its impact outside. By finding solutions in the inner realms of being, Gandhi drives home the point that only inner freedom can lead one to the ultimate truth. The pre-requisite for inner freedom is openness and disposition of the heart which leads one away from arrogance, pride and disobedience – the vices abhorred in a tribal society. Jayaprakash Narayan, a great Indian leader, rightly said, “As long as there is violence which threatens the very future of the human race, the relevance of Gandhi would continue. He would remain relevant till this danger of total annihilation of the human race is removed.”<sup>18</sup> Henry Skolimowski notes that the problems during Gandhi’s time, namely, casteism, corruption, violence, exploitation, misery, degradation and poverty, etc., have continued to this day. He calls for a second Gandhian revolution, “a revolution of consciousness, based on high moral values” and a clear realization of the true destiny of man. Such a revolution must be “based on simplifying our life-styles and reducing consumption as a precondition of peace with the poor, with nature, and with and within ourselves.”<sup>19</sup> It is no exaggeration to say that Gandhi is a bridge to the 21st century as a symbol of the person who is spiritual, *Satyagrahi* (non-violent) and *Swadeshi* (self-reliant).<sup>20</sup>

---

<sup>18</sup> M.P. Sinha, ed., *Contemporary Relevance of Gandhi* (Bombay: Nachiketa Publications Limited, 1970), p. 3.

<sup>19</sup> . “Need for a Second Gandhian Revolution,” *Gandhi Marg*, vol. 20, no. 1, April-June, 1998, pp. 81-85.

<sup>20</sup> Romesh Diwan, “Gandhi, the US, and the World: A Bridge to the Twenty-First Century,” *Gandhi Marg*, vol. 20, no. 3. Oct.-Dec, 1998.



## 5.

# Relevance of Gandhian Praxis in Empowering Women

*Sebastian Vazhapilly*

Man and woman are equal in status, but are not identical. They are a peerless pair being supplementary to one another, each helps the other, so that without the one the existence of the other cannot be conceived.--*M.K. Gandhi*

This chapter explores the relevance of Gandhian perspectives in addressing the phenomenon of male domination and violence. As we shall see shortly, in the process of countering colonial domination and violence which is an apparent form of male aggression, Gandhi created a new language of inversion. Through this language he inverted the male assumptions and presuppositions which had legitimized colonial aggression. He showed the world that his agenda and strategies in countering male domination and aggression were not mere abstract idealism but concrete and feasible action plans. Though there are significant differences between colonialism and the subordination of women, the common denominator in both may be termed male domination.

The Gandhian strategy consisted in the view that there is a prior horizon when we deal with domination, namely, the human mind which creates language, myths, and symbols which are instrumental in subjugating its victims: be it the colonized or women. He firmly believed that any strategy of countering domination needs to begin from the horizon of human interiority. Gandhi responded to the question of domination and violence in a complex and original manner in the context of colonialism, and such a response may be of some relevance in the feminist strategy of countering male domination.

However, it must be noted that the question of 'relevance' is very complex because of the polymorphous nature of human consciousness. There are endless varieties and complex ranges in the differentiation of consciousness across the world. What makes sense in one type of consciousness need not make sense in another. For instance, what makes sense in a scientific consciousness may look incomprehensible in a mythic consciousness and vice versa. What is meaningful in one culture need not be meaningful in another. From the philosophical perspective, the underlying problem of discussing the question of 'relevance' is the question of meaning.

Something is relevant for us precisely because it is meaningful to us just as there are situations, persons, incidents and events that touch our lives, there are others that do not touch our lives; sometimes we do not even notice them. Being selective we focus our attention on certain experiences and exclude others. What does not fit within the scheme will not be noticed or, if forced upon our attention, will seem irrelevant or unimportant. Our inner world is very much influenced by our biological needs, cultural factors, prejudices, interests and aversions, loves and commitments, to a greater or lesser degree.

Thus, the question of relevance is deeply embedded in subjectivity and inter-subjectivity. Jayaprakash Narayan, a noted Gandhian, points this out: "In considering the relevance of an individual or an idea, what is of great importance is the point of view from which one is looking

at the question.”<sup>1</sup> What does one really want? What are one’s convictions, ideas and ideals? As Narayan points out, for “a person having one type of idea and pursuing one set of ideals and objectives Gandhi may be entirely irrelevant. On the other hand, for another person who is interested in other ideals, who cherishes other sets of values of life, ...Gandhi would be very deeply and intensely relevant.”<sup>2</sup>

This chapter has two parts. The first focuses on Gandhi as resisting colonial male domination and aggression by creating a new language of inversion. The second part delineates some of the pertinent insights for empowering women contained in the Gandhian strategy.

### **Dynamics of Inversion: Gandhian Metaphor**

Much of Gandhi’s time and energy was spent in fighting the largest colonial power of the twentieth century, namely, the Britain; his vision evolved from this struggle. Gandhi was a master strategist. In reading Gandhi, it is crucial to note that he did not accept the rules of the game set by the adversary, the British. Had he played the game by the rules of the colonizer, Gandhi would have been another minor figure thrown into the dustbin of history. Instead, he set up his own rules of the game by inverting the ideological premises of the British. By such inversion he questioned and challenged the assumptions and presuppositions upon which the very Empire was built. In this section we shall focus on some of the key inversions effected by Gandhi in his fight against colonialism.

#### *Gandhian Inversion of Colonial Defining*

What is important to note is the fact that colonialism is a mental state rooted in the consciousness of both the colonizers and the colonized. Colonial power did not flow primarily from the barrel of guns, but from the mediation of potent ideological constructions by which the colonizer and the colonized were bound in a symbiotic relationship. Such ideological constructions involved a double dimension: representing the self (colonizer) and the other (colonized). Within the framework of this construction, colonial rule was seen as ‘willed by God’ such as benefitting the native. Indian intellectuals of the nineteenth century, such as Ram Mohun Roy shared the belief that India stood to gain from the colonial rule.<sup>3</sup> K. N. Panikkar writes: “In pursuit of cultural hegemony the colonial state and its ideologues endeavored to create and propagate several myths about the character and capacity of the colonized which in course of time the colonized themselves began to believe.”<sup>4</sup> The basis of colonial authority rested on the mental attitude of the acceptance of subordination by the colonized.<sup>5</sup>

As Edward Said points out, colonialism is not a simple act of accumulation or acquisition. Colonialism is supported by impressive ideological formations that include notions that certain territories and people require and beseech domination.<sup>6</sup> The colonizers had a sense of mission out of their moral superiority to civilize the natives, and such an attitude is crystallized in the opinions

---

<sup>1</sup> Jayaprakash Narayan, “The Relevance of Gandhi,” in *Contemporary Relevance of Gandhi*, ed. M. P. Sinha (Bombay: Nachiketa Publications Limited, 1970), p. 1.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> K.N. Panikkar, *Culture, Ideology, Hegemony: Intellectual and Social Consciousness in Colonial India* (New Delhi: Tulika, 1998), p. 73.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 71.

<sup>5</sup> Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (London: Vintage, 1993), p. 11.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 8.

of colonial ideologue, Jules Harmand: “It is necessary, then, to accept as a principle and point of departure the fact that there is a hierarchy of races and civilizations, and that we belong to the superior race and civilization, still recognizing that, while superiority confers rights, it imposes strict obligations in return.”<sup>7</sup> For Harmand, the legitimization of colonial conquest is based on moral superiority: “The basic legitimization of conquest over native peoples is the conviction of our superiority, not merely our mechanical, economic, and military superiority, but our moral superiority. Our dignity rests on that quality, and it underlies our right to direct the rest of humanity. Material power is nothing but a means to that end.”<sup>8</sup> E. Said illustrates this ‘will’ to rule: “In India, for instance, by the 1930s a mere 4000 British civil servants assisted by 60,000 soldiers and 90,000 civilians...had billeted themselves upon a country of 300 million persons. The will, self-confidence, even arrogance necessary to maintain such a state of affairs can only be guessed.”<sup>9</sup>

It is not merely the brute power of weapons that assured the permanence, stability and continuity of colonial empires, but the cooperation – either active or passive – of the colonized contributed to it. Both the colonizer and the native are caught up in the web of a symbiotic relationship. As A. Nandy points out, “In the colonial culture, identification with the aggressor bound the rulers and the ruled in an unbreakable dyadic relationship. The *Raj* saw Indians as crypto-barbarians who needed to further civilize themselves. It saw the British rule as an agent of progress and as mission. Many Indians in turn saw their salvation in becoming more like the British, in friendship or in enmity.”<sup>10</sup> It is this symbiotic relation that Gandhi tries to address squarely in his fight against colonialism.

Let us focus on one of the basic assumptions of British colonialism in order to understand some of the ‘inversions’ effected by Gandhi in his fight against British colonialism. Colonial hegemony rested on the superiority of aggressive masculinity. Within the colonial framework, socio-political domination came to be seen as correlative to specifically male domination over femininity. As Nandy points out, the homology between sexual and political dominance which Western colonialism invariably used – in Asia, Africa, and Latin America – was not an accidental by-product of colonial history.<sup>11</sup> According to Nandy:

The homology, drawing support from the denial of psychological bisexuality in men in large areas of Western culture, beautifully legitimized Europe’s post-medieval models of dominance, exploitation and cruelty as natural and valid. Colonialism, too, was congruent with the existing Western sexual stereotypes and the philosophy of life which they represented. It produced a cultural consensus in which political and socio-economic dominance symbolized the dominance of men and masculinity over women and femininity.<sup>12</sup>

One of the basic Gandhian inversions consisted in transforming the colonial perception of masculinity which is at the root of domination and aggression. Such an inversion is intrinsically related to his views on women. To a casual reader Gandhi’s views on women can be at times confusing. This is because there are times when he speaks about the superiority of women, and there are times when he speaks about the equality between man and woman. There are also times

---

<sup>7</sup> Quoted by E. Said, *op. cit.*, p. 17.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 10.

<sup>10</sup> Ashis Nandy, *The Intimate Enemy: Loss and Recovery of Self under Colonialism* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1983), p. 7.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 4.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 4.

when Gandhi speaks about the complementary nature of both sexes. Here are examples of these sexual orderings:

1. “If by strength is meant brute strength, then indeed is woman less brute than man. If by strength is meant moral power, then woman is immeasurably man’s *superior*.”<sup>13</sup>
2. “Man and woman are *equal* in status, but are not identical. They are a peerless pair being supplementary to one another, each helps the other, so that without the one the existence of the other cannot be conceived.”<sup>14</sup>
3. “Just as fundamentally man and woman are one, their problem must be one in essence....Each is a *complement* of the other. The one cannot live without the other’s active help.”<sup>15</sup>

Why does Gandhi go in for such an ordering? Is it not enough to stress the equality of man and woman? According to Nandy’s analysis, this is a creative Gandhian political statement. Gandhi challenges the hyper-masculinity of colonial domination by inverting the priorities. Nandy writes: “To put this awareness to political use, he challenged first the ideology of biological stratification acting as a homologue of – and legitimacy for – political inequality and injustice.”<sup>16</sup> The colonial culture’s ordering of sexual identities assumed: Manliness is superior to Womanliness. Those sections of Indian society which tried to take on the British on their own terms, namely, masculinity vs. masculinity or through violent means, were doomed. In the history of colonial India, there are many examples of this sort of failed attempts to drive the British away: Netaji Subash Chandra Bose and Bhagat Singh, to name but two.

But Gandhi’s solution was radically different. According to Nandy, Gandhi used two sets of orderings, each of which could be invoked according to the needs of the situation. The first borrowed intact from the great and little traditions of saintliness in India: manliness and womanliness are equal, but the ability to transcend the man-woman dichotomy is superior to both, being an indicator of godly and saintly qualities.<sup>17</sup> To quote Gandhi: “A man should remain man and yet should become woman; similarly, a woman should remain woman and yet become man. This means that man should cultivate the gentleness and the discrimination of woman; and woman should cast off her timidity and become brave.”<sup>18</sup> In *Harijan* he pointed out: “Languages proclaim that woman is half of man and, by parity of reasoning, man is half of woman. They are not two separate entities, but halves of one.”<sup>19</sup> Gandhi’s second ordering was invoked specifically as a methodological justification for the anti-imperialist movement. There is a radical reversal involved here: The essence of femininity is superior to that of masculinity, which in turn is better than cowardice. Interestingly, the *Sanskrit* expression for cowardice translates as “failure of

---

<sup>13</sup> Italics added. *Young India*, April 10, 1930. Quoted from, M. K. Gandhi, *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, vol. XLIII (Delhi: The Publications Division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Government of India, 1971), p. 219.

<sup>14</sup> Italics added. Quoted from, M. K. Gandhi, *The Role of Women*, ed. Anand T. Hingorani (Bombay: Bharat Vidya Bhavan, 1964), p. 5.

<sup>15</sup> Italics added. *Harijan*, February 24, 1940. Quoted from, M. K. Gandhi, *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, vol. LXXI, 1978, p. 207.

<sup>16</sup> A. Nandy, *op. cit.*, p. 52.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 52-53.

<sup>18</sup> M. K. Gandhi, *To Ashram Sisters* (Ahmedabad: Navjivan Trust, 1952), p. 95.

<sup>19</sup> *Harijan*, March 23, 1947. Quoted from, M. K. Gandhi, *The Role of Women*, p. 120.

masculinity” or *Kapurusatva*.<sup>20</sup> Gandhi wrote: “Cowardice is impotence worse than violence....A coward is less than man. He does not deserve to be a member of society of men and women.”<sup>21</sup> Gandhi constantly emphasized the superiority of self-sacrifice, non-violence, love and courage which he termed as qualities of woman.<sup>22</sup> By such reversal, Gandhi made the colonial assumption of masculine superiority stand on its head.

Nandy spells out some of the implications of these relationships which are culturally defined and could be missed by an outside observer: (1) The concept of femininity (*naritva*) which was constantly stressed by Gandhi nearly fifty years before the present feminist movement started, went beyond the dominant Western definition of womanhood. (2) The feminine principle is a more powerful cosmic principle than the male principle. (3) The centrality and primacy of maternity over conjugality in feminine identity, namely, woman as a source of motherliness (*caritas*) is superior to the view of woman as an object and source of sexuality.<sup>23</sup> Gandhi’s inversion negated the very basis of the colonial culture which was rooted in hyper-masculinity.

### *Gandhian Inversion of Violence*

The second Gandhian inversion consisted in *ahimsa* or non-violence in neutralizing the violence which was at the very basis of colonial domination. In *Young India* Gandhi wrote: “The only way to conquer violence is through non-violence, pure and undefiled.”<sup>24</sup> As a strategy of countering colonial domination, time and again Gandhi emphasized the path of non-violence. For him non-violence is more powerful than violence precisely because it is based on love. As interpreted by Gandhi, *ahimsa* entails several shades of meaning: ‘non-injury,’ ‘harmlessness,’ ‘reverence for life,’ and ‘concern for the well-being of all living things.’ According to Gandhi, “*ahimsa* is not merely a negative state of harmlessness, but it is a positive state of love, of doing good even to the evil-doer.”<sup>25</sup> Gandhi, who was influenced by the *Sermon on the Mount*,<sup>26</sup> equated *ahimsa* with the Kingdom of Heaven.<sup>27</sup>

The Gandhian notion of non-violence is intrinsically related to his vision of human nature. As far as the root of violence is concerned, he did not believe in a deterministic view of human nature. He wrote: “Man is superior to the brute inasmuch as he is capable of self-restraint and sacrifice, of which the brute is incapable.”<sup>28</sup> He firmly believed in the perfectible and malleable dimension of human nature. In a letter to Esther Faering, Gandhi expressed this belief:

To say that perfection is not attainable on this earth is to deny God. The statement about the impossibility of ridding ourselves of sin clearly refers to a stage in life. But we need not search scriptures in support of the assertion. We do see men constantly becoming better under effort and

---

<sup>20</sup> A. Nandy, *op. cit.*, pp. 52-53.

<sup>21</sup> *Harijan*, September 15, 1946. Quoted from, *The Encyclopaedia of Gandhian Thoughts*, eds. Anand T Hingorani and Ganga A. Hingorani (Delhi: AICC [I], 1985), p. 65.

<sup>22</sup> *Harijan*, November 5, 1938, Quoted from, M. K. Gandhi, *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, vol. LXVIII, 1977, p. 53.

<sup>23</sup> A. Nandy, *op. cit.*, pp. 53-54.

<sup>24</sup> *Young India*, May 8, 1930. Quoted from, *The Encyclopaedia of Gandhian Thoughts*, p. 365.

<sup>25</sup> *Young India*, August 25, 1920. Quoted from, M. K. Gandhi, *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, vol. XVIII, 1965, p. 195.

<sup>26</sup> M. K. Gandhi, *An Autobiography or The Story of My Experiments with Truth* (Ahmedabad: Navjivan Publishing House, 1948), p. 92.

<sup>27</sup> *Harijan*, March 14, 1936. Quoted from, *The Encyclopaedia of Gandhian Thoughts*, p. 6.

<sup>28</sup> *Young India*, June 3, 1926. Quoted from, *The Encyclopaedia of Gandhian Thoughts*, p. 208.

discipline. There is no occasion for limiting the capacity for improvement....After all, what matters is that our capacity for loving ever expands. It is a slow process.<sup>29</sup>

Gandhi believed that both the colonizer and the colonized need to be liberated. The colonial discourse, which invariably included infantilizing and feminizing the colonized, metamorphosed the colonizer as well as the colonized. To quote Nandy: “Not only did he sense and ‘use’ the fundamental predicament of British culture caught in the hinges of imperial responsibility and subjecthood in victory, but he implicitly defined his ultimate goal as the liberation of the British from the history and psychology of British colonialism.”<sup>30</sup> Gandhi wrote in *Harijan*: “The real ‘White Man’s Burden’ is not insolently to dominate colored or black people under the guise of protection; it is to desist from the hypocrisy which is eating into them. It is time White men learnt to treat every human being as their equal.”<sup>31</sup> As Nandy points out, “the colonial culture depended heavily on Western cosmology, with its built-in fears about losing potency through the loss of activism and the ability to be violent.”<sup>32</sup> In Nandy’s view, Gandhi was clear in his mind that activism and courage could be liberated from aggressiveness and recognized as perfectly compatible with womanhood, particularly maternity.<sup>33</sup> This implied a change of consciousness in the rulers and in the ruled.

To understand the Gandhian notion of non-violence we need to take note of an important Gandhian strategy, namely, non-cooperation, which he used effectively in the Indian freedom struggle. He wrote in *Young India*: “I consider non-cooperation to be such a powerful and pure instrument that if it is enforced in an earnest spirit, it will be like seeking first the Kingdom of God and everything else following as a matter of course.”<sup>34</sup> In his view, “non-cooperation is not a passive state, it is an intensely active state – more active than physical resistance of violence. Non-cooperation, in this sense used by me, must be non-violent and, therefore, neither punitive nor vindictive nor based on malice, ill-will or hatred.”<sup>35</sup> Non-cooperation in the Gandhian sense is directed against an unjust system, and not necessarily against individuals. Thus, in the Gandhian scheme, the basis of “non-cooperation lies not in hatred but in justice, if not in love.”<sup>36</sup> Gandhi was constantly questioning both the victimized Indians and the unjust system of the British through powerful symbolic actions.

Gandhi’s approach was inclusive; he invited the British for a soul searching. For Gandhi, the British were an adversary who should leave Indian shores; but he did not consider them as enemies. As Nandy points out, “Gandhi’s partiality for some of the Christian hymns and Biblical texts was more than a symbolic gesture of a Hindu towards a minority religion in India. It was also an affirmation that, at one plane, some of the recessive elements of Christianity were perfectly congruent with elements of Hindu and Buddhist world views and that the battle he was fighting for the minds of men was actually a universal battle to rediscover the softer side of human nature,

---

<sup>29</sup> M. K. Gandhi, “Letter to Esther Faering,” January 13, 1918. Quoted from, M. K. Gandhi, *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, vol. XIV, 1965, p. 146.

<sup>30</sup> A. Nandy, *op. cit.*, pp. 48-49.

<sup>31</sup> *Harijan*, June 30, 1946. Quoted from, *The Encyclopaedia of Gandhian Thoughts*, p. 374.

<sup>32</sup> A. Nandy, *op. cit.*, pp. 54-55.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 54.

<sup>34</sup> *Young India*, June 2, 1920. Quoted from, M. K. Gandhi, *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, vol. XVII, 1965, p. 477.

<sup>35</sup> *Young India*, August 25, 1920. Quoted from, M. K. Gandhi, *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, vol. XVIII, 1977, p. 195.

<sup>36</sup> *Speeches and Writings of Mahatma Gandhi*, Quoted from, *The Encyclopaedia of Gandhian Thoughts*, p. 234.



the so-called non-masculine self of man relegated to the forgotten zones of the Western self-concept.”<sup>37</sup> From his inclusive perspective, Gandhi pointed out that the inspiration for his life vision came from the *Sermon on the Mount* as well as *The Gita*.<sup>38</sup>

### *Gandhian Inversion of Power*

The third inversion Gandhi effects is about power. As we have already seen, he reverses the colonial ordering which equated power with masculinity. According to Gandhi, “Power can be acquired only through ceaseless, loving service, and waiting upon God.”<sup>39</sup> One can discern here what is usually termed as feminine qualities of ‘loving service,’ and ‘waiting.’ He also speaks of two kinds of power which are qualitatively differentiated, namely, physical power which is ephemeral and the power of the spirit which is enduring: “Power invariably elects to go into the hands of the strong. That strength may be physical or of the heart, or, if we do not fight shy of the word, of the spirit. Physical force is transitory, even as the body is transitory. But the power of the spirit is permanent, even as the spirit is everlasting.”<sup>40</sup> What is interesting to note here is the contrast he makes between the masculine notion and the feminine notion of power; for Gandhi, feminine power is far superior. “Woman is the incarnation of *ahimsa*. *Ahimsa* means infinite love, which again means infinite capacity for suffering. Who but woman, the mother of man, shows this capacity in the largest measure?”<sup>41</sup>

In the Gandhian notion of *ahimsa* there is an inversion of the standard understanding of power. His philosophy of non-violence, truth and love provided an alternative paradigm of power. Mahajan Mani writes on the dialectics of non-violence and power: “Gandhi’s non-violence acquires greater meaning now as an alternative to power. The Gandhian technique rests on elements of influence in contrast to the ingredients of power. The whole theory and practice of Gandhian thought are based on non-violence.”<sup>42</sup> Power which is attained through and based on love is what Gandhi advocates; and this power is not a power to dominate. According to him, such love has enduring power: “The law of Love, call it attraction, affinity, cohesion, if you like, governs the world. Life persists in the face of death. The universe continues in spite of destruction incessantly going on. Truth triumphs over untruth. Love conquers hate. God eternally triumphs over Satan.”<sup>43</sup> In short, the Gandhian notion of power is informed by love, non-violence, self-sacrifice and truth. It is antithetical to colonial domination, injustice, oppression and violence.

By his language of truth and non-violence, a language which both the British and Indians understood, Gandhi established the pre-eminence of his method. In doing so, he also sowed the seeds of self-doubt in the British. Gandhi in a way demolishes the colonial myth of moral superiority which had been the legitimizing foundation to rule the natives. As Nandy points out, Gandhi “recognized that once the hegemony of a theory of imperialism without winners and losers was established, imperialism had lost out on cognitive, in addition to ethical grounds.”<sup>44</sup> Gandhi’s

---

<sup>37</sup> A. Nandy, *op. cit.*, p. 49.

<sup>38</sup> *Young India*, December 22, 1927. Quoted from, *The Encyclopaedia of Gandhian Thoughts*, p. 304.

<sup>39</sup> *A Pilgrimage for Peace*. Quoted from, *The Encyclopaedia of Gandhian Thoughts*, p. 254.

<sup>40</sup> *Harijan*, February 1, 1942. Quoted from, *The Encyclopaedia of Gandhian Thoughts*, p. 254.

<sup>41</sup> *Young India*, October 17, 1929. Quoted from, *Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, vol. LXXI, 1970, p. 208.

<sup>42</sup> Mahajan P. Mani and K. S. Bharathi, *Foundations of Gandhian Thought* (Nagpur: Dattsons, 1987), p. 222.

<sup>43</sup> *Young India*, October 23, 1924. Quoted from, M. K. Gandhi, *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, vol. XXV, 1977, p. 259.

<sup>44</sup> A. Nandy, *op. cit.*, p. 100

multi-pronged inversion strategy negated the very basis of the colonial assumptions and presuppositions which were rooted in aggressive masculinity.

### **Empowerment of Women: Relevance of Gandhian Metaphor**

As we have seen, Gandhian strategy is set within the framework of binary oppositions: defining and redefining; violence and non-violence; brute power and power to love. There is some sort of adversativeness about such oppositions.<sup>45</sup> From a Gandhian perspective such adversativeness need not be destructive; often it can be supportive, creative, and more importantly, it can be corrective to male assumptions and presuppositions. Time and again Gandhi showed through his praxis that the adversary need not be necessarily an enemy. Though Gandhi may not be a feminist in the modern sense, his vision and strategy show a remarkable affinity to the concerns of contemporary feminism.

#### *Violence against Women as Negation of Truth*

Far from being a monolithic doctrine, contemporary feminism entails wide-ranging and often conflicting perspectives.<sup>46</sup> Irrespective of these differing horizons and interpretations, if there is one theme that cuts across various feminist perspectives, it is the critique of patriarchy. From the feminist perspective, patriarchy denotes a societal system which legitimizes and authenticates the predominance of the male, and brings about a concentration of power and privilege in the hands of men. According to a considerable number of feminists, in almost all cultures patriarchy has served to legitimize male domination through the mediation of religious, political, social, economic and familial structures. Feminist scholars further point out that androcentrism which is intrinsically related to patriarchy, has resulted in asymmetrical power relations between the male and the female in the human species.

Researchers have chronicled violence against women to be the result of such asymmetrical power relations.<sup>47</sup> Many societies have gone to remarkable lengths to control and punish women. From a historical perspective, rape, *sati* (widow-burning), foot-binding, drowning, whipping, hanging, clitoridectomy, dowry-deaths, female infanticide and *purdha* (veil) may be pointed out as institutionalized forms of control and punishment of women which involve varying degrees of violence. Against such a background it is not entirely surprising that when asked what was the worst aspect of being female, the participants in a twelve-country workshop held in China unanimously pointed to male violence.<sup>48</sup>

---

<sup>45</sup> As Walter Ong points out, adversativeness is part and parcel of human existence. If our feet press against the surface we walk on and if it does not resist pressure, we are lost. Gravity is reassuring; it establishes fields where adversativeness can work. Moreover, such adversativeness functions as a central element in all physical existence. However, adversativeness is significant beyond the physical in the sense that it has provided a paradigm for understanding our own existence: in order to know myself, I must know that something else is not me and is (in some measure), set against me, psychologically as well as physically. Walter Ong. *Fighting for Life: Contest, Sexuality, and Consciousness* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981).

<sup>46</sup> These differences are crystallized in such perspectives in terms of radical feminism, liberal feminism, third world feminism, Eco-feminism, European feminism, socialist feminism etc. Feminist perspectives can be seen also in criminology, anthropology, historiography, sociology, psychology, theology, philosophy and economics.

<sup>47</sup> See for example, E. J. Burford and Sandra Shulman, *Of Bridles and Burnings: The Punishment of Women* (London: Robert Hale, 1992).

<sup>48</sup> See Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, "Introduction," in *Concilium* 1 (1994), p. viii.

The causes of violence are clearly multiple and cannot be explained using a single set of determinants.<sup>49</sup> Male domination manifests itself in a variety of ways and from the recent anthropological perspectives, male violence has been described as culture specific. If this is true, then violence as a culturally embedded concept may not have commensurable salience cross-culturally.<sup>50</sup> However, this should not be construed as radical relativism, lest we overlook the dehumanizing manifestations of violence. “Violence against women and their children remains all-pervasive. It is found in all religions of the world. Violence cuts across social, race, and class-status lines, cultural differences and religious denominations.”<sup>51</sup>

One of the essential acts of domination is defining<sup>52</sup> – defining the Self and the Other. In *The Second Sin*, Thomas Szasz writes succinctly:

In the animal kingdom the rule is  
Eat or be eaten;  
In the human kingdom,  
Define or be defined.<sup>53</sup>

From the Gandhian perspective, the subjugation of women in its complex forms amounts to a negation of truth.<sup>54</sup> Woman has been defined by the male as inferior, temptress, evil, destructive, and weak. There are too many such definitions which legitimize the subjugation of women.<sup>55</sup> By these male ideological constructions of falsehood, women have been relegated to the very margins of society. From the Gandhian viewpoint, such ideological constructions of falsehood degrade both men and women. If violence against women constitutes a negation of truth, then the recovery of truth requires a negation of negation. As we shall see shortly, since an authentic disclosure of truth is also transformative, the recovery of truth requires transformation both in men and women.

---

<sup>49</sup> H. Moore, “The Problem of Explaining Violence in Social Sciences,” in *Sex and Violence: Issues in Representation and Experience*, eds. Penelope Harvey and Peter Gow (London: Routledge, 1994), p. 138.

<sup>50</sup> See for example, *Sex and Violence: Issues in Representation and Experience*, eds. Penelope Harvey and Peter Gow (London: Routledge, 1994).

<sup>51</sup> Quoted from, “Final Statement of the ‘Women against Violence’ Dialogue,” in *Voices from the Third World*, Vol. XVIII, no. 1, June (1995), p. 213.

<sup>52</sup> . Etymologically the word ‘define’ means determining and fixing the boundaries: from the Latin, *de*: down, *finire*: to set a bound. When someone defines, he or she sets a boundary confining and limiting the object thus defined. As an act, defining is not only ontological in nature, but also political in a broader sense.

<sup>53</sup> Quoted by Richard Harvey Brown, “Cultural Representation and Ideological Domination,” in *Contemporary Society: Tribal Studies*, vol. 1, ed. Georg Pfeffer and Deepak Kumar Behera (New Delhi: Concept Publishing company, 1997), pp. 28-50, p. 28.

<sup>54</sup> According to Gandhi, “Untruth is tantamount to violence.” *The Diary of Mahadev Desai* (Ahmedabad: Navjivan Trust, 1932), p. 177. Quoted from, *The Encyclopaedia of Gandhian Thoughts*, p. 350-51.

<sup>55</sup> Religious traditions have played an important role in defining women. In ‘*De Culta Feminarum*,’ Tertulian, an early Father of the Church wrote: “And do you know that you are Eve? God’s sentence hangs over all your sex and His punishment weighs down upon you. You are the devil’s gateway; it was you who first violated the forbidden tree and broke God’s law.” For John Chrysostom, a Greek hermit, woman was a necessary evil: “Woman – a foe to friendship, an unescapable punishment, a necessary evil.” St. Ambrose: “Adam was led to sin by Eve and not Eve by Adam. It is just and right that woman accept as lord and master him whom she led to sin.” St. Jerome of Istria: “Woman is the Gate of the Devil, the path of wickedness, the sting of the serpent – in a word, a perilous object.” Quoted in E.J. Burford and Sandra Shulman, *Of Bridles and Burnings: The Punishment of Women* (London: Robert Hale, 1992), pp. 122, 17 and 201.

### *Reversal of the Cycle of Destruction*

It must be noted that irrespective of variations in its manifestation and cultural trappings, male domination points to an important transcultural dimension, namely, human intentionality. Though domination and violence do assume a structural autonomy, they originate in the intentionality of concrete individuals. In other words, before the actual violence against women takes place in its myriad forms, there is a prior horizon of male intentionality. Our 'acts,' including our 'acts of violence,' are intentional in the sense that they are performed with the intention of some result. The mere fact that we are not conscious of our intention does not abrogate the intentionality deeply embedded within our subjectivity.

It is precisely at this level of human intentionality that Gandhi tries to address the question of male aggression. This was one of the significant and novel experiments he brought to the political and public sphere. Within the Gandhian vision, violence in its varied manifestations amounted to the negation of truth. In this context, it is important to note that the Gandhian praxis of self-purification, which he termed a 'spiritual weapon,' also entails a transition from untruth to truth.<sup>56</sup> He was convinced of the contagious nature of such purification: "Self-purification must mean purification in all walks of life. And purification being highly infectious, purification of oneself necessarily leads to the purification of one's surroundings."<sup>57</sup> For Gandhi:

This spiritual weapon of self-purification is the most potent means for revolutionizing one's environment and for loosening external shackles. It works subtly and invisibly; it is an intensive process and though it might often seem a weary and long drawn out process, it is the straightest way to liberation, the surest and the quickest, and no effort can be too great for it. What it requires is faith, an unshakable, mountain-like faith, that flinches from nothing.<sup>58</sup>

As we have already indicated, from a Gandhian perspective, violence against women ultimately amounts to untruth. Feminists have unearthed many forms and faces of this untruth. History is replete with chronicles about male cruelty against the female and about the immense trouble men have taken to control, torture, silence and violate women. Rather than see violence as the idiosyncratic behavior of a few deranged men, feminist theorists tend to view male violence as a key element in male power over and control of women.<sup>59</sup> Perhaps, for the male, the female remains mysterious and more importantly, unconquerable. If females are unconquerable, then the next best alternative is to make them invisible. In most parts of our male-dominated, shared history women have been made faceless non-beings. Feminists have drawn our attention to the 'invisible presence' of women in history written by men. Various cultures have invented ingenious methods to make the female invisible. The feminist consciousness has felt it imperative to address male domination embedded in the patriarchal system. An increasing number of feminist writers have begun to explore the ways in which social institutions and the traditional relationship between sexes can interact to produce and sanction violence against women. They point out that the violence against women is not merely 'private trouble' and should be made public in the political

---

<sup>56</sup> He constantly undertook fasting not only as a political weapon but also as a means of penance and self-purification. Quoted from, M. K. Gandhi, *An Autobiography*, pp. 391-92.

<sup>57</sup> *Young India*, February 7, 1929. Quoted from, *The Encyclopaedia of Gandhian Thoughts*, p. 301.

<sup>58</sup> *Young India*, March 28, 1929. Quoted from, *The Encyclopaedia of Gandhian Thoughts*, p. 301.

<sup>59</sup> Sonya Andermahr, Terry Lovell and Carrol Wolkowitz, *A Glossary of Feminist Theory* (London: Arnold, 1997), p. 286.

platforms.<sup>60</sup> If violence against women in its various forms amounts to untruth, then the recovery of truth is a daunting task.

Gandhi saw non-violence (*ahimsa*) and violence (*himsa*) as two generating principles that are diametrically opposed: “One who hooks his fortunes to *ahimsa* – the law of love – daily lessens the circle of destruction and to that extent, promotes life and love. He who swears by *himsa* – the law of hate – daily widens the circle of destruction and, to that extent, promotes death and hate.”<sup>61</sup> In his practical realism, Gandhi did acknowledge the existence of both good and evil: “If there is good, there must also be evil, just as where there is light there is also darkness.”<sup>62</sup> In the Gandhian scheme, the reversal of the circle of destruction can be achieved only through the mediation of non-violence, truth, and love. The evil of violence can be reversed only by goodness. And he was convinced that it was within our capacity to do good: “The power to do good does not come from without. It exists always within us, and we have only to develop it by proper means.”<sup>63</sup> “Good is self-existent, evil is not. It is like a parasite living on and around good. It would die of itself when the support that good gave was withdrawn.”<sup>64</sup> Gandhi made use of this practical wisdom in the form of non-cooperation in his political struggle.

In the Gandhian philosophy of societal transformation, violence, untruth, and domination can be countered only through the praxis of love, truth and non-violence. In the Gandhian vision, there is an intrinsic unity between truth, non-violence and love: “*Ahimsa* and Truth are so intertwined that it is practically impossible to disentangle and separate them. They are like the two sides of a coin...who can say which is the obverse, and which is the reverse? Nevertheless, *ahimsa* is the means; Truth is the end.”<sup>65</sup> “In its positive form, *ahimsa* means the largest love, greatest charity.”<sup>66</sup> And again: “The universe continues in spite of the destruction incessantly going on. Truth triumphs over untruth. Love conquers hate.”<sup>67</sup>

### *Empowerment and Transformation*

The very notion ‘empowerment of women’ implies that women do not yet have power over their own destiny, or, as a corollary, it presupposes that there is an asymmetrical power relation between male and female. Here, empowerment may be understood as a process by which marginalized persons gain some control over their lives and their destiny. Although there is a broad consensus among the feminists about the need to empower women, the precise meaning and import of power is far from unanimous given the differing feminist interpretative horizons. If power means an hegemonic value system in the feminist discourse of empowerment, then it would not be any different from the ideological underpinnings of patriarchy. However, we must note the fact that the deprivation of power which women experience is relative. History shows that women in

---

<sup>60</sup> 60. Loraine Gelsthorpe and Allison Morris, “Feminism, Politics and Action,” in *Feminist Perspectives in Criminology*, eds. Loraine Gelsthorpe and Allison Morris (Buckingham: Open University Press, 1992), p. 142.

<sup>61</sup> *Harijan*, June 22, 1935. Quoted from, M. K. Gandhi, *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, vol. LXI, 1977, p. 191.

<sup>62</sup> *Harijan*, September 7, 1935. Quoted from, M. K. Gandhi, *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, vol. LXI, 1977, p. 392.

<sup>63</sup> M. K. Gandhi, *Ethical Religion* (Madras: Ganesan, 1922), p. 36.

<sup>64</sup> *Harijan*, September 14, 1947. Quoted from, *The Encyclopaedia of Gandhian Thoughts*, p. 147.

<sup>65</sup> M. K. Gandhi, “From Yervada Mandir,” in *The Selected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, vol. 4, ed. Shriman Narayan (Ahmedabad: Navjivan Publishing House, 1968), p. 219.

<sup>66</sup> *Speeches and Writings of Mahatma Gandhi*, Quoted from, *The Encyclopaedia of Gandhian Thoughts*, p. 6.

<sup>67</sup> *Young India*, October 23, 1924. Quoted from, M. K. Gandhi, *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, vol. XXV, 1977, p. 259.

most societies did have power, and they still do have power though that power belongs to a different order. Indeed, it is an intriguing paradox: women are and have been powerful; women are and have been powerless.<sup>68</sup>

From the Gandhian perspective, the possibility of the empowerment of women rests on the cessation of cooperation with male domination. To quote Gandhi: “Violence dies when it ceases to evoke response from its object.”<sup>69</sup> In withdrawing support from male ideological constructions of falsehood, it symbolizes a refusal to cooperate in androcentric hermeneutics and interpretations of untruth. Such non-cooperation is part and parcel of the process of reversal of untruth. In the context of non-cooperation, Hervé Ott writes: “It is the passivity of non-resisting subjects that gives strength to tyrants. The same is true of violence. The victim collaborates in the oppression. Our point is not to judge such behavior, but to see that only by questioning it can we make way for another kind of behavior.”<sup>70</sup>

One might wonder whether or not the Gandhian vision of empowerment entails naïve platitudes. As it has been pointed out in the previous section, Gandhi understood the meaning of feminine power and used it effectively as a political weapon in inverting the colonial hegemony. After all, Gandhi admitted that he learned the lesson of non-violence from his wife:

I learned the lesson of non-violence from my wife, when I tried to bend her to my will. Her determined resistance to my will on the one hand, and her quiet submission to the suffering my stupidity involved on the other, ultimately made me ashamed of myself and cured me of my stupidity in thinking that I was born to rule over her and, in the end, she became my teacher in non-violence.<sup>71</sup>

Gandhi did have a very unique notion of empowerment which is embedded in a distinctive notion of power. In the Gandhian scheme, power is not a power to dominate or to be violent; rather it is a power that flows from truth and non-violence. Moreover, this power springs from within rather than from without. Such power creates an environment which is antithetical to domination. But Gandhi knew well that such empowering is a very slow process and comes at a cost.

Many of us want changes to take place sooner rather than later, and perhaps feminists are no exception in this regard. Perhaps the urgency felt by many feminists is quite understandable. Women have endured male domination for far too long and have tolerated patriarchal structures for too many centuries. Women have put up with androcentric interpretations of reality too long. But whether we like it or not, we need to recognize the fact that it takes time to change mental frames which have been embedded in the collective consciousness for centuries. As Rekha Pandey points out, women’s oppression is not only widespread but also the deepest, in that it is the hardest to eradicate; abolition of women’s subjection cannot be effected like the abolition of a class society.<sup>72</sup>

We are dealing with mental frames when we deal with patriarchy. We are dealing with mental frames when we deal with male domination. We are dealing with mental frames when we deal with various forms of injustices committed against women. If we want changes that are

---

<sup>68</sup> Jean Bethke Elstain, “The Power and Powerlessness of Women,” in *Beyond Equality and Difference*, eds. Gisela Bock and Susan James (London: Routledge, 1992), p. 110.

<sup>69</sup> *Speeches and Writings of Mahatma Gandhi*, Quoted from, *The Encyclopaedia of Gandhian Thoughts*, p. 365.

<sup>70</sup> Hervé Ott, “Principles of Non-violent Action,” *Theology Digest*, vol. 35, No. 3 (1988), p. 215.

<sup>71</sup> *Harijan*, December 24, 1938. Quoted from, *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, vol. LXVIII, 1977, p. 204.

<sup>72</sup> Rekha Pandey, *Women: From Subjection to Liberation* (Delhi: Mittal Publications, 1989), p. 3.

meaningful, then we need to be patient when we deal with change. Mental frames and consciousness of groups and societies take time to change. It takes time to bring about changes in the mental frames of both the oppressor and the oppressed. Gandhi was keenly aware of the dimension of interiority in the transformation of society: “All true change comes from within. Any change brought about by pressure, is worthless.”<sup>73</sup>

## Conclusion

Time magazine asked a select group to tell whom they would choose as the ‘person of the century.’ Steve Jobs, co-founder of Apple Computer Inc., responded to the query: “Mohandas Gandhi is my choice for the person of the century because he showed us a way out of the destructive side of our human nature. He demonstrated that we can force change and justice through moral acts of aggression instead of physical acts of aggression. Never has our species needed this wisdom more.”<sup>74</sup> Human beings possess freedom, consciousness, and meaning systems that enable us to transcend violence, something that differentiates us from the animals. In a way, that is what Gandhi did: he moved beyond the endless spiral of violence and destruction. It required the creation of a new consciousness and new meaning systems. It needed redefining a violent masculinity.

The direct or indirect object of (male) violence is the death and destruction of the other (female).<sup>75</sup> In its broadest sense, violence symbolizes negation of life. Ultimately is not collective male violence tantamount to *thanathos*, a death wish, as the human species will have a minimum chance of regeneration? Who in the human species is better equipped than the females with their self-giving *caritas* to counter male *thanathos*? The life-giving female matrix (literally, womb) of *caritas* symbolizes the power of women in inverting the destructive principle of *thanathos*.<sup>76</sup> The Gandhian paradigm of non-violence or love stands as a viable alternative to the destructive side of humanity: he showed that masculine *thanathos* can be transcended by *caritas*, a feminine prerogative. Notwithstanding the controversies and myths surrounding him, this paradigm of non-violence seems to be one of the enduring, and so relevant, aspects of Gandhian legacy.

---

<sup>73</sup> *Harijan*, March 31, 1946. Quoted from, *The Encyclopaedia of Gandhian Thoughts*, p. 39.

<sup>74</sup> *Time*, April 19, 1999.

<sup>75</sup> “The believer in brute force becomes impatient and desires the death of the so-called enemy.” *Speeches and Writings of Mahatma Gandhi*, Quoted from, *The Encyclopaedia of Gandhian Thoughts*, p. 32.

<sup>76</sup> Gandhi summarizes the effects of *caritas* and *thanathos*: “Where there is love, there is life; hatred leads to destruction.” *Young India*, May 5, 1920. Quoted from, M. K. Gandhi, *God is Truth*, ed. Anand T. Hingorani (Bombay: Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, 1962), p. 49.





**Part III**  
**Civilizational Critiques**



## Technology in the Third Millennium: A Gandhian Perspective

*Joseph Isidore Fernando*

It is imperative that the technological process be brought within the moral domain of non-violence. Failure to do this will spell chaos and tragedy.

We confront technology everywhere. Technology has come to stay largely and permanently: the modern person is *homo technologicus*. At the beginning of the 21st century we are astounded by how technology has changed the face of the earth and how it has revolutionized modern living. Science and technology are the new religions; they do wonders and perform miracles. If a person from a primitive society were to visit a modern technopolis, s/he would believe that s/he were in wonderland. Very ordinary things of everyday use which we have taken so much for granted with a vanishing sense of wonder (very un-Platonic indeed!) would appear miraculous to the primitive person. For example, press more and more buttons, more and more things turn on and go zooming – from domestic appliances to spacecrafts. Rejoice, hopefully we will have many exciting technological inventions in the third millennium.

### Our Experience of Technology

The first sentence of Aristotle's *Metaphysics* reads "All men by nature desire to know." Our innate curiosity has resulted in the advancement of knowledge in the arts and sciences. Our knowledge of the world has helped us to gain greater control over nature and to use nature for our purposes. Beginning with the Industrial Revolution in the West, life has become very comfortable as more and more goods are produced. Time-saving, labor-saving devices have increased our comfort. Technology today has entered every field of human activity. The immense benefits of technology have been a boon to humanity. The use of electricity, petrol, nuclear energy and so on has been the soul of modern industry and technology. Modern transportation and communications have accelerated the growth of technology. Jet-age travel and satellite communications have made the world shrink. Even an ordinary thing like moving around on a two-wheeler has tremendously contributed to faster, independent, personal mobility. The entire world has become a global village due to ultramodern transportation, communications media and computer global networking. Medical technology has contributed to the eradication, control and healing of diseases and to longevity. Biotechnology offers a host of marvelous and unprecedented opportunities in terms of human health and reproduction, agriculture, poultry, dairy, fishery and so on. The benefits bestowed on us by technology are numerous that it would not be an exaggeration to call technology a miracle worker.

But at the same time we cannot desist from asking: At what cost have these miracles of technology been performed? In other words, given our experience, what is the negative impact of technology on human beings, nature and society? Therefore, we shall now turn our attention to the adverse effects of technology.<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> P.T. Durbin, *Philosophy and Technology* (Dordrecht: D. Reidel, 1983).

## *The Impact of Technology on Environment*

Technological growth has resulted in environmental decay and degradation. Excessive exploitation of nature threatens the environment. Poisonous gases emitted from factories increasingly pollute the atmosphere and hence, the air we breathe. In certain highly industrialized cities more than half the population suffers from respiratory diseases caused by pollutants in the air. If a person lives in a city like Calcutta for a long period s/he develops a lung disease called locally, 'Calcutta lungs,' consisting of tiny holes in one's lungs caused by the pollutants. Added to the industrial pollution of the air is the pollution caused by the motor vehicles which emit deadly carbon monoxide into the atmosphere. In a city like Bombay, half the pollutants in the air are emitted by motor vehicles owned by urban citizens.

Untreated industrial effluents are diverted into streams, rivers and the sea, which in turn are poisoned. Aquatic life is the worst hit by industrial wastes, so much so that some species are becoming extinct. Industrial effluents affect the land too, damaging soil fertility and turning fresh water into salty water unfit for consumption and agriculture. Polluted air destroys plant life. Though the plants convert carbon dioxide into oxygen during the day, there is a limit to this capacity, beyond which they perish. As a result, we have noticed the extinction of some plant species. In some places excessive pollution causes acid rain, which in turn causes great havoc. In certain mining areas children are born with irreparable genetic damage caused by pollution. Industries and transport cause excessive noise leading to noise pollution beyond the acceptable level. Excessive noise harms people, causing deafness, blood pressure, hypertension, nervous disorders, irritability, headaches, insomnia, restlessness and, in some cases, even heart attacks.

Chlorofluorocarbons (CFC) emitted by refrigerators in millions of homes go up in the air and cause holes in the ozone layer. The ozone layer is a protective layer in the atmosphere and prevents the ultraviolet rays of the sun from reaching the earth. Due to ozone depletion ultraviolet rays of the sun have had harmful effects on humans and animals. Ultraviolet rays cause skin cancer in humans, and it is reported that some animal species like frogs and turtles are vanishing in some countries due to depletion of the ozone layer. Oil tankers which spill oil into the sea destroy marine life. Mechanised deep-sea fishing, too, ruins marine life. Mercury has been found in the fish sold in the markets of some countries.

Forests are disappearing at a faster pace due to the indiscriminate felling of trees. Environmental scientists tell us that the forest cover which is the source of rain and oxygen should be 30 percent of the total land mass of a country. The Amazon forests are known as the lungs of the world, as they supply 70 percent of the oxygen to the world. Deforestation causes both floods and drought. Soil erosion caused by deforestation leads to floods. Trees in the forest prevent soil erosion as the roots of the trees tightly hug the soil. With soil erosion, rain water flows down from the slopes of the mountains without resistance and floods the plains. Drought in the summer, too, is caused by deforestation. Trees in the forest soak up the rain water in the bosom of their roots like a sponge and keep releasing it gently and gradually. That is why there are streams and brooks flowing even in the summer. In the absence of trees in the forests, nothing else can soak up water and release it gradually for the benefit of humans, animals and plants.

Forests disappear for a number of reasons. Modern life style, backed by technology, consumes a lot of timber products.<sup>2</sup> Forests are cleared to make way for human habitation. Huge trees are

---

<sup>2</sup> For instance, the Japanese architecture demands the use of a lot of wood for paneling Japanese homes. As a result huge quantities of wood logs are imported by Japan from Thailand, Indonesia and the Philippines where the forests are disappearing.

felled while clearing the forest area for cultivation of cash crops. In hill stations like Ooty, environmental disaster is feared due to clearing the forest for the sake of planting crops. Though Cherrapunji in Meghalaya is supposed to have the highest rainfall in the world with rains almost daily, incredibly even Cherrapunji suffers from drought.<sup>3</sup> Strip-mining, too, leaves its indelible scars on hills and forests.

Hit by deforestation and pollution, some species of fauna and flora have already vanished from the earth forever. The use of chemical fertilizers has robbed the earth of its fertility. Pesticides and insecticides have killed many animal species. Through the consumption of food grains chemical pesticides enter the human body to alter it genetically.

For millions of years solar energy has been stored in coal or fossil fuels. Modern technology especially in developed nations uses up colossal volumes of non-renewable fossil fuels. It is feared that the oil wells of Arabia will dry up in thirty years. At present there is hardly any evidence of the judicious use of fossil fuels, which are known to be highly polluting.

The environment is threatened by untreated waste. Heaps of garbage choke the environment. Empty cans and polytene bags litter the area. Mountain-climbers all along Mount Everest leave behind garbage which threatens the fragile ecosystem of the mountains. Even in outer space, garbage in the form of about 30,000 disintegrated parts of spacecrafts like rockets and satellites, orbit the earth and occasionally hit it. Nothing is beyond our reach to pollute: space, air, water, soil, the mountains and oceans.

As technology advances, our habits, too, keep changing. For instance, instead of eating healthy food, people go for junk food with high chemical contents detrimental to health. Millions of gallons of soft drinks are consumed daily which do not contain even a single drop of natural fruit juice. Fast food is becoming more popular with the urban population who may not realize that fast foods are not equivalent to healthy wholesome food from the poison in the air, water and soil harmful chemicals have been detected in the milk of mothers though which it has enters human body to cause genetic disorders.

The existence of nuclear reactors is a matter of great concern for those who care for the earth. They produce cheap and abundant energy, but the problem is with nuclear waste. It is highly radio active, and so far no safe method has been found to dispose it of. Nuclear waste from some developed countries has been dumped into the sea or soil of some poor nations after bribing their political leaders. The Chernobyl nuclear reactor accident is a great warning to humanity about the hazards of nuclear energy. The havoc it caused is so horrifying that no one would favor the continuance of nuclear reactors. Indeed, it is said that the nuclear reactors in India are already leaking, and the surrounding neighborhood is being affected by radioactivity.

We are concerned about another serious problem – the greenhouse effect. The continuous emission of pollutants into the air increases global temperature. As global temperature increases, ice melt in the polar regions which in turn causes the sea level to rise. If the sea level rises, the sea will devour the land. About thirty island nations of the world face the threat of being submerged in the sea after some years. It is said that at the present rate of rise in global temperature the island nation of Maldives will disappear into the sea within some thirty years. The Association of Island States has appealed to the industrial states to scale down the level of pollution, but one wonders whether such an appeal will ever be heeded. The greenhouse effect alters the seasons in the world,

---

<sup>3</sup> Some years ago in December when this researcher visited Cherrapunji, there was hardly any sign of rain there. On the contrary, there was drought in the area. The hills appeared brown and denuded. People of Cherrapunji had difficulty in finding water for their needs.

and the rhythmic functioning of nature is seriously impaired or interfered with so that the world climate is adversely affected.

Cities with a technological base attract more and more people from villages. The exodus from the rural to the urban areas results in the heavy pressure of the population in the cities. Consequently, in the cities of the developing countries we find overcrowding, sanitary chaos, filth and garbage, slums and shanties, polluted drinking water, and so on. Nearly half the population of these cities lives in slums under subhuman conditions. We are unable to check the exodus from villages to townships and cities.

The greatest threat from technology comes from highly sophisticated nuclear arsenals. The best brains of the world are pressed into the service of military technology. Huge quantities of deadly weapons are heaped upon the earth. Nations compete with each other in obtaining the most sophisticated arms. Humanity today is capable of global suicide – the entire human race can be wiped off the face of the earth anytime any day. The threat of nuclear holocaust looms large before us.

### *The Socio-Economic Impact of Technology*

Technology has increased the wealth of the industrial nations; the more sophisticated the technology, the greater the accumulation of wealth. As the Industrial Revolution spread from England to the rest of Europe, those nations were in dire need of raw materials to support their industries. Colonialism was the outcome of such a need. Nations in Asia, Africa and Latin America were plundered for the sake of capitalism in the home countries of the colonial powers. This resulted in mass poverty in the colonies. Economic exploitation of the colonies was coupled with political ruthlessness so that the nations reeling under the yoke of colonialism had to struggle for decades to be freed from the shackles of slavery and oppression.

Even after independence from foreign powers these nations are still bleeding from the wounds of colonialism. We witness mass poverty, unemployment, illiteracy, malnutrition and subhuman living conditions in the so-called developing nations, which are really poor nations. The wretched of the earth are found in these poor nations. With the globalization of economy these days there is a fresh threat of neocolonialism due to superior technology which is the key to greater power and wealth. Marxists are right in their observation that the owners of the means of production would have their wealth multiplied even in their sleep. Technocrats rule the world today. Multinational corporations, backed by their governments, are the most powerful force in the world of today, and run the world as they deem fit.

### *The Psychological Impact of Technology*

In the rich nations the technocrats have created technopolis in which the most important question regards the quality of life. In a technopolis the ruling monarch is technology, which is soulless and faceless, hence automation, the mechanical and the mechanized characterize the life-style. The danger is that the people will be uprooted from the soil, alienated from fellow humans, devoid of tenderness and joy, and steeped in drudgery and melancholy. This is due to being estranged from the healing powers of nature, from the warmth and simplicity of the people, from the ordinary and enriching pleasures of life which abound in social intercourse with good-natured people who love the smell of the earth, the feel of the air, rain and sunshine, and are passionately in love with the world. Technopolis can create psychopathic killers, nihilists and terrorists;

excessive technology can ruin human nature and the joy of living just as, for example, the mass media can enslave the masses by destroying their capacity for thinking.

The Northern Hemisphere with its excessive technology takes its toll in the Southern Hemisphere. Exploitation and unfair global trade practices leave their victims in perpetual subhuman conditions, devoid of dignity, decency and self-respect. Life is an eternal nightmare for those condemned to live in utter misery. But can we blame technology for its negative impact, or are we to blame ourselves for the abuse of technology? What would Gandhi say about technology?

### **Gandhi's Views on Technology**

The focus of this research paper is Gandhi's view of technology. Given his views, how would he visualize the role of technology in the next millennium? In some circles Gandhi is portrayed as an obscurantist, anti-technological and outdated. But a careful examination of his views falsifies such a portrayal. The ensuing passages have been gleaned from his writings.

Industrialism is, I am afraid, going to be a curse for mankind. Industrialism depends entirely on your capacity to exploit, on foreign markets being open to you, and on the absence of competitions.<sup>4</sup>

True, industrialism has not banished poverty. Millions of people go to bed hungry and live in conditions incompatible with human dignity. Added to that, even life-sustaining eco-systems have become fragile due to excessive and thoughtless modes of industrialization. Such industrialization can be termed a curse for humanity. Therefore, Gandhi maintains: "The future of industrialism is dark"<sup>5</sup> and in the third millennium could reach the height of darkness unless priorities are rearranged.

Further, Gandhi holds: "Machinery has its place; it has come to stay. But it must not be allowed to displace necessary human labor."<sup>6</sup> Gandhi rightly recognizes that we cannot do away with machinery, but it should not put people out of jobs and rob them of the dignity of labor, without which human beings cease to be human beings. This is what Gandhi calls necessary human labor. "That use of machinery is lawful which subserves the interest of all."<sup>7</sup>

The use of machinery becomes unlawful when it is solely meant for increasing the profit of the owner of the machinery at any cost. Gandhi would reject anything that does not fit into his scheme of *Sarvodaya* (welfare of all, not of a few or of many): "I would favor the use of the most elaborate machinery, if thereby India's pauperism and resulting idleness could be avoided."<sup>8</sup>

Gandhi has a practical approach as he favors complex technology aimed at the eradication of poverty and the creation of employment. "Are you against all machinery?" Gandhi's answer to this question is an emphatic 'No'.

---

<sup>4</sup> *Young India*, 12 Nov., 1931.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 12 Nov., 1931.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 5 Nov., 1925.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 15 April, 1926.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 3 Nov., 1921.

“You are against this machine age.” To say that is to caricature my views. I am not against machinery as such, but I am totally opposed to it when it masters us. “You will not industrialize India?” I would indeed, in my sense of the term. The village communities should be revived.<sup>9</sup>

Gandhi was by no means anti-technological, but, at the same time and unlike Nehru, he is not bewitched by its power. He opposes the indiscriminate multiplication of technology, an obsession of the modern person, the technocrat, the citizen of a technopolis:

What I object to is the craze for machinery, as such. The craze is for what they call labor-saving machinery. Men go on ‘saving labor’ till thousands are without work and thrown on the open streets to die of starvation. I want to save time and labor, not for a fraction of mankind, but for all, I want the concentration of wealth, not in the hands of a few, but in the hands of all. Today machinery merely helps a few to ride on the backs of millions. The impetus behind it all is not the philanthropy to save labor, but greed. It is against this constitution of things that I am fighting with all my might.<sup>10</sup>

Gandhi is too correct in saying that machinery helps a few to ride on the backs of millions, as is true today of multinational corporations. The New Indian Express<sup>11</sup> reports under the heading ‘Microsoft bigger than India’: “The market value of Microsoft Corp touched \$ 507 billion, about Rs. 21,92,268 crore on Friday, the first time ever any company has passed the half trillion dollar level. This value is much higher than India’s Gross Domestic product (GDP) of about Rs. 17,70,000 crore.”<sup>12</sup> Gandhi would relentlessly fight such a state of affairs:

I am personally opposed to great trusts and concentration of industries of elaborate machinery. “So you are opposed to machinery, only because and when it concentrates production and distribution in the hands of the few?” You are right. I hate privilege and monopoly. What ever cannot be shared with masses is taboo to me. That is all.<sup>13</sup>

Gandhi was rudely shocked by the exploitative use of machinery by the English capitalists. He wrote in *Hind Swaraj*: “It is machinery that has impoverished India. It is difficult to measure the harm that Manchester has done to us. It is due to Manchester that Indian handicraft has all but disappeared.”<sup>14</sup> In pain and anguish at the starvation and death of many villagers caused by British exploitation,<sup>15</sup> Gandhi wrote in *Hind Swaraj*: “Machinery is the chief symbol of modern civilization; it represents a great sin.” A major component of his vision of *Sarvodaya* is preservation of the villages:

---

<sup>9</sup> *Harijan*, 27 Feb., 1957. See also *Young India*, 17 June, 926.

<sup>10</sup> *Young India*, 13 Nov., 1924.

<sup>11</sup> *The New Indian Express* (Madurai Edition), 18 July, 1999.

<sup>12</sup> One crore is 10,000,000.

<sup>13</sup> *Harijan*, 2 Nov., 1934. See also *Young India*, 24 July, 1924.

<sup>14</sup> M.K. Gandhi, *Hind Swaraj* (Ahmedabad: Navajivan Publishing House, 1998).

<sup>15</sup> This fact is recorded by Marx in his *Capital*, vol I, p. 406. The English cotton machinery produced an acute effect in India. Marx quotes the Governor General who reported in 1834-35. “The misery hardly finds a parallel in the history of commerce. The bones of the cotton-weavers are bleaching the plains of India.” K. Marx, *Capital*, vol. I (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1986).



The revival of the villages is possible only when they are no longer exploited. Industrialization on a mass scale will necessarily lead to passive or active exploitation of the villagers as the problems of competition and marketing came in. Therefore we have to concentrate on the village being self-contained; manufacturing mainly for use. Provided this character of the village industry is maintained, there would be no objection to villagers using even the modern machines and tools, that they can make and afford to use. Only they should not be used as a means of exploitation of others.<sup>16</sup>

### *Alternative Technology*

Alternative technology is very much in keeping with the spirit of Gandhi ever since E.F. Schumacher's classic, *Small Is Beautiful*, was published<sup>17</sup> and should become more relevant in the next millennium. Many people are dissatisfied with the technology we have, and would like to replace it with another, called "alternative," more viable, appropriate, careful, frugal or participatory. Based more on small group initiative than on societal mobilization it presents a radical challenge to contemporary technological practice. Examples energy devices, agricultural practices and tools, transportation vehicles, and building designs in which the emphasis is on hardware, but the attempt is to transform the organizational arrangement whereby technology is developed, controlled and delivered. They include cooperative organizations for medicine, farming, food delivery, marketing, financial credit, communications, insurance, banking, and so on which, to banish the anonymity of city life, emphasize a re-emergence of neighborhood identity by tapping the artisan skills of various members of the community through "sweat equity" exchanges of services.<sup>18</sup>

Alternative technology groups insist that technology should follow two design norms: sustainability and democratic patterns of organization. The concept of sustainability leads to the selection of only practices that can be continued into the indefinite future. Some current industrial practices which provide air, water, fertile land and a stable climate but now are recognized as interfering with the regenerative capacities of the earth's life-sustaining process, will have to be drastically modified. Since the stock of fossil fuels and other materials is very limited, we need to develop an economic philosophy which would treat these scarce resources as capital, rather than as raw materials. Artifacts of the future should be made of renewable materials that can be grown, not made from finite material stocks. The emphasis is on conservation and curtailing the flow of materials from manufacture to consumption.

Democratic management of technological enterprises is the second design norm of alternative technology groups. This calls for decentralization of productive facilities into small, relatively autonomous units, which could be the only way to the realization of democratic self-management. Technology can be made more democratic in an additional way: "When technological tools and products are intelligible to the user, a new form of power results. The user is no longer at the mercy of a mysterious, alien object, but instead can adapt, repair, and thus preserve it. In this light the producer of flimsy, disposable objects becomes both irresponsible and politically suspect."

Finally, proponents of alternative technology hold, "that in fashioning a technology the character of work itself must be included as a design constraint, rather than a mere afterthought."

---

<sup>16</sup> *Harijan*, 29 Aug., 1936. See also M.K. Gandhi, *Sarvodaya* (Ahmedabad: Navajivan Publishing House, 1984).

<sup>17</sup> E.F. Schumacher, *Small Is Beautiful* (Delhi: Rupa & Co, 1990).

<sup>18</sup> See M.L. King, *Where Do We Go from Here: Chaos or Community?* (New York: Harper & Row, 1967). See also M.L. King, *Stride toward Freedom* (New York: Harper & Row, 1953).

Schumacher has proposed that every job be required to meet three *desiderata* 1) a means to attain an appropriate existence; 2) the enhancement of human skill; and 3) overcoming ego-centeredness through joint participation in common tasks. By these criteria a humanly repressive workplace is clearly immoral. Schumacher distinguishes between moral and immoral apparatus, with the distinction turning on whether the pace of production is under human or machine control.

The advocacy of alternative technology has come under severe attack. Some consider alternative technology as impractical since it aims at restructuring industrial practices which are deeply embedded in socio-political philosophies which define what are reasonable goals of technology. Others think of alternative technology as “an ill-formed ideological movement, a kind of radical chic for generally well-educated dropouts from the integrated, capital-intensive society.” Yet others dismiss it for lack of feasibility.

Alternative technology cannot be dismissed as a mere fad or impractical and impossible venture. Small is beautiful, especially when the local communities can look after and manage their needs on a co-operative basis rather than being recipients of consumer goods and services from a centralized body. Big is beautiful only from the point of view of multinational corporations, as huge heavy industries are the global sources of their income. If small is beautiful, electricity, for instance, can be produced through the use of *biogas* for every village, for which a centralized Electricity Board is not necessary. Through alternative technology, human sanity and ecological balance can be preserved, whereas large-scale industries and consumerism may eventually create a sick world.

### *Technology Assessment*

The search for an appropriate normative basis for evaluating technology is conditioned by a type of policy analysis known as technology assessment. This aims at a comprehensive picture of the factors involved in technological choices and directs attention to the broader social context that is affected, often unintentionally, when a new technology is introduced, or an existing one modified. Technology assessment is not a critique of technological means or ends, but a search for strategies for mitigating unwanted side effects.

Within the past quarter century, concerns about the undesirable features of modern industrial technology have taken new forms. These challenges have gone beyond the already painfully obvious fact that twentieth-century technology, in concert with evil human intentions, has developed the capacity to obliterate our species. Instead, what is now being questioned are certain systemic properties of industrial technology itself, properties which, despite the good intentions of human actors, lead to unwanted and unanticipated results that are themselves threatening the species.

Technology assessment originated in the U.S.A. and initially was concerned with the environment.<sup>19</sup> Technology assessment reflected the fact that while technologies based on market economies were responsive to short-term consumer demands, some long-term results were beginning to be recognized which ultimately threatened life. Technology assessment was proposed as a new form of political analysis that would assist in the separation of negative impact, that might occur when a new technology was introduced or an existing one was significantly modified.

---

<sup>19</sup> In the U.S. the National Environmental Protection Act of 1969 and the Technology Assessment Act of 1972 made technology assessment and environmental impact analysis obligatory for technological project receiving government financing. Technology assessment policy is seriously viewed in Canada, Japan and Western Europe, with France, Germany and England taking the lead.

Technology assessment certainly reflects disappointment with the contemporary technology of the industrial nations and is supposed to be neutral. Impact analysis performed by such technical experts as economists, scientists and engineers assumes that the identification of impacts is basically an exercise in scientific prediction. It is expected to predict what effects the introduction of a particular technology may produce through economic, legal, environmental, social, political and technological means. Though it faces the danger of manipulation inasmuch as it is funded and potentially influenced by industrialists, legislators and policy-makers, technology assessment has a proper positive role to play in the contemporary industrial world.

However as alternative technology, technology assessment and legislation are extrinsic to the intrinsic moral imperative, we must turn to the realm of values for further and more decisive understanding and handling of technological issues.

### **Revolution in Values**

For Gandhi, without a revolution in values, humans will be ill-prepared to handle technology. We are already overpowered by our own inventions and lack maturity in our relation to them. One of the great problems of humanity is the wide gulf between our scientific progress and our moral progress: we have become materially richer, but morally and spiritually poorer. The human person lives in both internal and external realms: the former is expressed in art, literature, morality and religion, while the latter is the mechanical gadgets, techniques and instruments. Our problem is that the internal is lost in the external or, to paraphrase Thoreau, that we have “improved means to an unimproved end.” The abundance of Western civilization has brought people neither peace nor serenity of spirit. Certainly science has been a blessing to humanity, but that does not mean we should minimize the internal and maximize the external dimension of our lives. Creative living in the modern world demands re-establishment of the moral ends of personal character and social justice lest we be destroyed in the misuse of the instruments of our creation. As Arnold Toynbee said, in the rise and decline of some twenty-six civilizations on earth, the decline has been caused not by external invasions, but by internal decay. Self-centered, consumerist societies may collapse prematurely if the technological process is divorced from moral practice.

The stability of global living calls for a revolution of values to match the revolutions in science and freedom in modern times. The present increasing tendency to love things and use people must be reversed: things are to be used, and people to be loved. When machines, profit and property are treated as more important than persons, the trio of racism, materialism and militarism cannot be overcome and a civilization can easily disintegrate due to moral and spiritual bankruptcy. A genuine revolution of values means that our loyalties must become universal, rather than parochial. Each nation must foster an overriding loyalty to humanity as a family in order to preserve the best in individual society. Moreover, the survival of human beings requires worldwide fellowship based on love of which all religions speak. As the supreme unifying principle of life, love is the key to understanding the ultimate reality and hence the fundamental reality of all creatures.

Love has to become the mode of daily life because we no longer can afford to hate or retaliate. History shows that hatred and retaliation bring only destruction. Arnold Toynbee remarks: “Love is the ultimate force that makes for the saving choice of life and good against the damning choice of death and evil. Therefore, the first hope in our inventory must be the hope that love is going to have the last word.” There is a tremendous sense of urgency for humanity to choose between non-violent co-existence and violent co-annihilation before it is too late. This may be humanity’s final

choice between destruction and community because of the very real technological potential of a nuclear war.

Moral bankruptcy gradually is eating into societies all over the world; today materialism engulfs humanity. Overemphasis on materialism in the form of a consumer culture weakens the moral and spiritual fabric of humanity. As materialism unchecked may swallow up our civilization there is an urgent need to re-order our priorities. Life in its wholeness ought to be accepted and an integrated value system must assume its rightful place in society. Embracing a part, as if it were the whole, spells disaster. Clearly the physical is no substitute for the moral and the spiritual, for materialism certainly is not the whole of existence. Hence, the need to restructure our priorities.

The essence of morality for a moral being is love through non-violence. The human person is neither merely a sensuous being of desires nor one of praxis, but a moral being. The human person is not a brute following the law of the animal kingdom: the survival of the fittest. On the contrary, tolerance, the spirit of “live and let live” and *ahimsa* are bonds of love that bind people together. In a moral perspective, equality, justice and liberty are not just political rights, but moral values which insist more on duty and obligation than on rights.

In the history of philosophy, there has been a glorification of the human being as rational animal, not only in contrast but in opposition to non-rational nature. The conception which views the human being as “lord of beings,” rather than in truth the “shepherd of Being,”<sup>20</sup> implies a challenging and dominating attitude towards nature which is regarded as the mere stuff upon which to exercise the human will. Such an attitude leads not only to the ecological disruptions we perceive today, but to a truncation of the human experience.

Affirmation of the primacy of the moral leads to a recognition that human beings are primarily moral beings and as such not the master of the world, but its caretaker, steward and custodian. This requires humility on the part of humans. As rational beings they cannot treat non-rational nature at whim, for non-rational nature takes shelter in humans as moral beings. Human beings are called to respect the unity of life – all life, including the non-human. They are the spokespeople for the world, certainly not its rulers; the logic of domination has no place in the genuine thinking of the moral being.

Secondly, moral persons relate to the world with a great sense of moderation: they depend on nature for their livelihood and treats nature as finite and limited. Therefore, they exercise moderation in dealing with the world. As *homo technologicus*, they believe in science and the advancement of knowledge, they must use the world and do so with a sense of moderation. They do not run away from the world, or call for a halt to science and technology, nor do they believe in indiscriminate and endless exploitation of the world to satiate consumer greed guided by maximum consumption. Rather they believe in careful, guarded, moderate use of the world’s resources. The principle of moderation must guide the moral person who cares for the welfare of generations yet unborn.

Thirdly, moral persons are deeply aware of the fact that there are irrational people who reject rational behavior, which is bound to a moral sense. Irrational human beings are guided incorrigibly by passions to which the rational makes no sense. When in control they turn the world into a hell, for they reject the rationality which is the “given” foundation for moral actions. When multinational corporations, power-mongers, chauvinists and racists pose a threat to the world, both physical and human, moral persons must make the choice to save the world from the irrational and immoral. This choice implies suffering and sacrifice without which nothing significant can ever

---

<sup>20</sup> ‘Shepherd of Being’ is a Heideggerian concept. See M. Heidegger, *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*. Trans, William Lovitt (New York: Harper & Row, 1971).

be achieved. As “shepherds of Being,” moral persons must protect beings from technological predators. Leaders of movements for environmental protection and for a safer and cleaner world must be eternally vigilant against the enemies of nature and money-mongers. Non-violent resistance must be adopted for such protests without fear or favor.

Lastly, moral persons perceive the contemporary technological threat to be rooted in and to originate from violence. Having driven God the creator out of the universe, humans have no respect for creation and would destroy nature and eventually her/himself. Creation experiences brokenness, because human beings themselves are in a state of brokenness which they impose on creation. Moral persons understand that violence has crept into the world – in our thinking, in our attitude towards the other, in our interpersonal relations, and finally in our relations with nature, resulting in ecological catastrophes.

### *Technology and Non-violence*

Overpowered by violence, the modern person has lost her/his sense of justice, balance, respect and tenderness. Instead s/he is filled with lust for power, hatred, anger, ruthlessness and covetousness, in a word, ‘wickedness.’ The moral person has the tremendous task of transforming everything on the basis of non-violent, universal, unselfish love which alone can guarantee not only the survival of the world and the species, but also and more basically a joyful, meaningful and rich experience of life for humans.

In our increasing confrontation with the abuse of technology by the rich and the mighty, we need a powerful means to achieve a just, rational and human use of technology. As stated earlier, our technological practice is already rooted in violence. To counter this further violence cannot be employed for violence to counter violence leads only to a vicious circle. Therefore there is but one strategy to adopt, namely, that non-violent resistance. It is imperative that the technological process be brought within the moral domain of non-violence: failure to do so will spell chaos and tragedy.<sup>21</sup>

One of the great virtues of non-violent resistance is that it reduces hostilities to a minimum. Non-violent coercion not only produces good will, but also offers the greatest opportunities for evolving communal harmony. It maintains moral, rational and co-operative attitudes amidst conflict; thus it increases moral forces rather than destroying them. Another important merit of non-violent resistance is its practicality, especially for an oppressed minority group. Non-violent tactics put enormous pressure on the governments and force those in power to act justly; they can be employed in all conflict situations. Moreover, non-violence is not merely a tactic but a moral imperative and way of life that seeks to restore the wholeness of a community by reconciling the oppressor with the oppressed. We need serious study and experiment with non-violence as a philosophy and strategy.

Technology can be at the service of humans only in a non-violent culture because there it has to recognize fundamental human rights and respect the dignity of the human person. The many technological inventions expected in the next millennium must be judged according to whether they contribute to the development of the human person as truly free and creative. Absolute preference should be given to the alleviation of human suffering, to the eradication of hunger and disease, to the fight against social injustice and to the struggle for lasting peace. As in a society without love technology can become a monster, we are called upon to seek love above all else. In

---

<sup>21</sup> See Martin Luther King, *Why We Cannot Wait* (New York: The New American Library of World Literature, Inc. 1964).

this, Gandhi, with his common sense approach to technology, can be relied upon as a sure guide for the forthcoming millennium.

## 8.

# A Gandhian Prospective Paradigm for Culture

*George Joseph M.*

I do not want my house to be walled in on all sides and my windows to be stuffed. I want the cultures of all lands to be blown about my house as freely as possible. But I refuse to be blown off my feet by any.--*M.K. Gandhi*

Modern European culture is looked upon by many as superior and progressive. Many non-European states regard it as an ideal way of life and have decided to make this culture their own. They have borrowed from Europe not only the advantages of science and technology, but also its philosophy, art, literature, languages, etc. Above all, there has been a conscious attempt to imitate the European life-style. However, Gandhi's reaction to that 'well-appreciated' modern culture was different and unique. He responded to modern European culture as a member of a traditional community who lived and enjoyed the local culture. This study of his analysis of culture may help us to derive a few solutions to many of our common problems.

## Culture

### *The Meaning of Culture*

The term 'culture' is translated as an equivalent of *samskara* in many Indian languages. It is considered as a moral quality to be achieved through a process of purification. Many Indian thinkers have used the words 'culture' and 'civilization' as analogous, but they are not the same. The term *nagarikatha*, which stands for 'civilization,' denotes the social and material progress of a particular period or of a people belonging to a particular race or community, etc. The two words were used as similar because of the presence in both the words of the act of refinement. Their adjectival forms such as 'cultured', 'civilized', etc., indicate the sense of 'cultivated', 'refined', etc. For example, one who is refined is said to be a cultured or civilized person. The refinement will not be complete without moral purification. An individual or social stage would not be referred to as cultured or civilized unless the individual or the society was guided morally.

The members of a morally oriented society should consciously eliminate the evils and bring the society closer to goodness. Mahatma Gandhi advocated such a concept of culture.

### *Theory of Cultural Change*

Gandhi did not develop any systematic theory as such on social or cultural transformation. But we may be able to draw out of his teachings what was implicit in his thoughts. According to him, human life progresses towards goodness by overcoming evils. There are elements of good and evil in every person. Similarly, society too consists of both *himsa* and *ahimsa*. Humanity should progress towards goodness by being non-violent. Therefore, the essence of human progress should be moral progress. He also observed that humanity was advancing morally. He argued that the existence of society is itself a sign of the presence of *ahimsa* in society, for social life would

be impossible if *himsa* prevailed over the goodness that still remains with human beings. We can maintain a level of mutual trust and social order because of the non-violent life style of many.

Gandhi described human history as a movement from *himsa to ahimsa*. He called it the great law of history. But the law was considered not natural, but moral and spiritual. The historical role of man, according to Gandhi, was to participate in the creation of a non-violent society with non-violent love.

At the same time, progress towards *ahimsa* was often obstructed by our violent activities. Some people satisfies their selfish interests without fulfilling their social responsibilities. They used their social placement for the promotion of their own goals, and were motivated by brute force. Gandhi developed *satyagraha* as a method to eliminate such brute force from among the people. *Satyagraha* could help us derive the force that could transform a society by insistence on truth and love.

*Satyagraha* as a method is aimed at the elimination of evil from society. The intention of *satyagraha* was to annihilate only the evil, not the evil doer. Therefore, we should not use evil means to eliminate evil, lest evil accumulate. *Satyagraha* could transform society by making of the evil doer as an activist of *ahimsa*. Only a fully convinced and a well-trained person could seek the conversion of the enemy. *Satyagraha* was not an emotional outburst against the evil doer, but the determination of the volunteers to act in the best way possible for the welfare of all. The *Satyagraha* campaign should be a program developed gradually towards a non-violent social order. It should be planned to function step by step, so that the deviations or the degradations could be effectively checked.

According to Gandhi, most persons consciously or unconsciously are used to practicing *satyagraha*. Many members of our families voluntarily accept suffering for the sake of each other, without any ill will against them. We serve others without considering how much others have contributed to our welfare. Similarly, in our families, we correct each other in many ways, even to the extent of causing pain or disturbance to each other. But we do not do it with any evil intention or ill will towards them. What we desire is for the best in life for all the members of family.

Many of our families enjoy great peace and prosperity because of the self-suffering love of the members of those families. But many are not aware that they have been practicing non-violence. If they awakened to their abilities and social roles, they would work for a non-violent society. We need such education, which can bring out the talents and willingness of the students for the creation of an orderly society. In such a society, all would consciously and consistently work for the welfare of all. But some may not be happy with a non-violent society. They may prefer to live in a violent society, where they can pursue their personal goals, which would be against the collective interest. In such a situation of violence, the non-violent members have to sacrifice themselves for the conversion of such evil doers. Selfless love of the *satyagraha* volunteers can win over evil doers to the service of society. Until then the non-violent struggle should be continued. The *satyagrahis* are those who are optimistic about the final victory of goodness.

### **Basic Principles of Non-Violent Cultural Order**

A cultured society would become a reality only when it is based on and maintained through the tools of truth and non-violence. According to Gandhi, *swaraj* could not be achieved through untruth or by violent means. He considered *satya and ahimsa* as the basic foundations of a non-violent social order.



*Satya* is usually considered a virtue. But the Gandhian concept of *satya* should be understood not in its moral sense, but in its metaphysical sense. *Sat*, the Real is ‘one,’ and Gandhi believed in the Oneness of Reality. As that Reality pervades all, Gandhi affirmed the essential unity of everything in Reality. Though called by different names by different people, this Supreme Absolute was seen by Gandhi as the beginning and as the end of everything.

Gandhi considered the Reality as both immanent and transcendent. He is within everything; the things of the world change and perish, but He remains as the underlying principle behind all these changes. The Reality transcends the changing and perishable phenomena of the world; it is the Supreme Essence and the Primordial Being. Gandhi, like the Upanishadic thinkers, held that the highest possible, positive description of the Reality was *Satchitananda*, i.e., Truth, Consciousness and Bliss. As the Truth stands for the ontological reality that ‘embraces all and everything;’ he described God as Truth. But he felt the necessity of modifying this definition when he was exposed more to the different metaphysical positions. His belief that ‘God is Truth’ might not be accepted by all, especially by the atheists. Therefore, he looked for a better explanation for the all-embracing Reality, which could be acceptable to all. This attempt is found in Romain Rolland’s narration of his conversations with Gandhi in December 1931. Romain Rolland described Gandhi’s views on God as follows:

He was asked at Lausanne to define what he understood by God. He explained how, among the noblest attributes which the Hindu Scriptures ascribed to God, he had in his youth chosen the word *truth* as most truly defining the essential element. He had then said, ‘*God is Truth.*’ But he added, two years ago I advanced another step. I now say, *Truth is God.* For even the atheists do not doubt the necessity for the power of truth. In their passion for discovering the truth, the atheists have not hesitated to deny the existence of God and from their point of view, they are right.<sup>1</sup>

When Gandhi defined Truth as God, his intention was to transcend the limitations of the different concepts of God which were held by the various religions and atheists, because such concepts divide people in the name of the doctrines in which they believe. However, Gandhi’s concept would be acceptable to all, as it was not against the belief of anyone. In this way, he invited both believers and non-believers in God to pursue the Truth, and through that process make the world a little more non-violent.

God, who is within us, is our final end. *Satyagraha* is an unending urge for the Truth. In *The Message of the Gita*, Gandhi says: “Man is not at peace with himself till he has become like unto God. The endeavor to reach this state is the supreme, the only ambition worth having. And this is self-realization. This self-realization is the subject of the *Gita*, as it is of all scriptures.”<sup>2</sup> The *Gita* showed the most excellent way for self-realization, namely, was *Nishkama karma*. In normal life *karma* is unavoidable. “There must be action where there is body. Not one phenomenon for man is embodied being is exempted from labor.”<sup>3</sup> A human being is placed in the world in a way that he or she can neither avoid work nor run away from work. But as actions bear their results, human beings, as actors, are bound by *karmaphala*. Hence, the *Gita* suggested *nishkama karma* or renunciation of the fruits of action as the means of liberation from bondage.

A *nishkama karmin* should not give up action, because the *Gita* teaches that the one who gives up action falls, and the one who gives up only the reward rises. This is *karma* without *kama*. The renunciation of the fruits of action does not mean that one should be indifferent to the results of action: it is not a purposeless action. The action of the *karma yogi* is to aim not at any selfish end

---

<sup>1</sup> Homer A. Jack (ed.), *The Gandhi Reader* (Madras: Samata Books, 1983), pp. 383-84.

<sup>2</sup> M.K.Gandhi, *The Message of the Gita*, compiled R.K. Prabu (Ahmedabad: Navajivan, 1994), p. 9.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*, p. 9.

but at the welfare of all. Gandhi quoted from the *Gita*, “No one has attained his goal without action... If even I were lazily to cease working, the world would perish. How much more necessary then for the people at large to engage in action?”<sup>4</sup> Action for *loka samgraha* is unattached work: the worker should not be possessive of his work, nor of its fruits for himself. Renunciation means absence of hankering after the fruit. The worker should achieve equanimity of mind to be a selfless servant; he should be unaffected by the ups and downs of the world.

From ancient days, *ahimsa* has been considered as the first and the foremost ethical principle. Indian traditions treated it as an important moral quality of a *mumukshu* in his progress towards salvation. The literal meaning of *ahimsa* is abstinence from any form of killing. *Ahimsa* was practiced by abstaining from evil thoughts, harmful words and damaging actions. Gandhi’s concept of *ahimsa* was broader in its application compared to the traditional understanding. For him “the principle of *ahimsa* is violated by every evil thought, by undue haste, by lying, by hatred, by wishing ill to anybody. It is also violated by our holding on to what the world needs.”<sup>5</sup> All our activities were bound by the principle of *ahimsa*.

According to Gandhi, both *satya* and *ahimsa* were closely intertwined. *Satya* is the end of *ahimsa* which is the means; they are not different, but two aspects of the same thing. Through his life and teachings, Gandhi affirmed that without *ahimsa* it was impossible to seek Truth. At the same time, the path of *ahimsa* could be visualized by a person only if it was illuminated by the Truth itself, because the subject, the object and the way of our search would not be known unless the True Self revealed them to us. In other words, the higher human aspirations could be realized only as God’s own gift. This is possible only with a living faith in God. Thus, the true practice of *ahimsa* is a blessing from God himself. It would help us not only to seek God, but to gain the courage to reveal Him to others through selfless service.

*Ahimsa* is an expression of infinite love. A non-violent man involves himself in ceaseless work for the good of all. A *karma yogi*, who has given himself up for the service of society, volunteers to suffer for the sake of the happiness of the human race. The non-violent volunteer was capable of transforming the society with his selfless acts. Conversion of the hearts of others would take place by seeing his exemplary behavior. Gandhi saw such volunteers as the corner stones of village *swaraj*.

Socio-cultural transformation takes place not only by loving cooperation, but also by self-suffering non-cooperation. When individuals or institutions believed in evil and violence without refraining from them, non-violent love could show its face through non-cooperation and civil disobedience. Gandhi suggested resistance as an effective method of protesting against injustice and the evil in society. He assumed that injustice and tyranny could not be practiced without the willing or unwilling cooperation and support of the sufferers of those evils. We could resist the evils by dissociating ourselves from the evil doers. In this way, Gandhi used the virtue of *ahimsa* as a technique for social and cultural transformation and emancipation.

*Brahmacharya* is one of the requisites for a volunteer of a non-violent order. Its literal meaning is conduct that moves one to be in touch with God. This requires very great concentration on Him, which may become possible only by turning away from sensual pleasures and passions. An individual self, who can control himself by keeping the senses in their proper places, can seek the Ultimate Self successfully.

A celibate life can be opted for by married people, too. But both the husband and the wife should agree voluntarily to follow the vow of celibacy in their pursuit of Truth. They should be

---

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*, p. 12.

<sup>5</sup> M.K.Gandhi, *Sarvodaya*, ed. B. Kumarappa (Ahmedabad: Navajivan, 1984), p. 8.

able to grow from their love and commitments within the family to the broader aspects of universal love. They should be successful as *grahastarmins* who could do sacrifices such as *deva yajna*, *pitru yajna*, *bhuta yajna*, etc. That way, the family which could carry out selfless duties could gradually extend its love and service to others. They should behave as if they were unmarried and think of each other as brother and sister. While making themselves available for universal service. Thus, their love would be free from the impurity of lust and attachment.

Non-stealing and non-possession are the other two important virtues to be followed in a cultured society. They are similar in many ways. The usual understanding of the word ‘stealing’ was the wrongful attempt by one to take the property of others. But Gandhi perceived *asteya* in a wider social sense. Relating it to the satisfaction of basic human needs, to possess what one does not need is an act of stealing: “We are not always aware of our real needs, and most of us improperly multiply our wants, and thus unconsciously make thieves of ourselves.”<sup>6</sup> Only a person who could progressively reduce his wants could be a successfully non-violent person. Much of the disorders and miseries in the world originate from the massive breaking of the principle of *asteya*. The anxiety and worry about the future could be eliminated in us, if we followed the principle of non-stealing. A humble, simple and vigilant person could observe this principle and gradually become a non-violent person.

Gandhi’s version of non-possession also was related to his concept of a contented life. *Aparigraha* differs from *asteya* in that the things which were possessed by one were not taken or stolen from anybody else who was entitled to hold it. For example, the possession of an inherited property, which was surplus in relation to one’s needs would be considered as a non-virtuous holding. One who pursues truth should be satisfied with the gratification of the needs of the present. Gandhi states very emphatically: “A seeker after Truth, a follower of the law of Love cannot hold anything against tomorrow. God never stores for the morrow; He never creates more than what is strictly needed for the moment. If therefore we repose faith in His providence, we should rest assured that He will give us every day our daily bread.”<sup>7</sup> Therefore, those who own more than what they require should realize that the surplus they hold is not theirs, but that of others. Thus they should safe-guard the surplus wealth in order to cater to the needs and welfare of all.

The votary of *satya* and *ahimsa* should uphold absolute honesty, purity of heart and self-discipline. According to Gandhi, to be honest is difficult, but not impossible. Many feel that it is imprudent to be honest and say that one can be successful in business only by using dishonest means. Gandhi was sincere to the old saying that ‘honesty is the best policy.’ He found that there were no inner contradictions between business and honesty; on the contrary, he felt that honesty brought prosperity to business. He advised the *satyagrahis* to be always honest.

An impure person cannot practice non-violence. As selfishness arises out of impure hearts, greed would compel one to seek the advantages of the world. Vinoba suggested internal purity or *Antah-Shuddi* as one of the qualities needed for a *sarvodaya* worker. He should activate *Shuddha Vyavahara* or a pure and honest life, and renounce unfair ways of earning wealth or securing commodities and comforts. Purity of heart was considered as a basic requirement for a volunteer of the village non-violent culture.

---

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid*, p. 12.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid*, p. 13.

## The Village as the Bedrock of Culture

According to Gandhi, the possibility of moral and spiritual life was the criterion of an ideal culture. He could learn it from the way of life of the villagers who were leading a contented life. His experience with villagers helped him to derive the idea of simplicity as the essential feature of a contented life. Most villagers, even in their poverty, try to be self-satisfied and self-dependent. He observed that the greatest heritage that we receive from our fore-fathers was the religious spirit. “The innate culture that the villages of India show, the art which one sees in the homes of the poor, the restraint with which the villagers conduct themselves, are surely due to the religion that has bound them together from time immemorial.”<sup>8</sup> He feared that this great religious heritage would decay completely through the influence of modern civilization, leading gradually to irreligion. Gandhi recognized that many hated religious values due to the evils meted out in the name of religion. If ignorant and fanatic votaries of a particular religion became intolerant of other religions, society would lose its harmony and peace in the name of religion. But though such discouraging elements were associated with religious practices, we should not give up religion and lose its good values. Instead of repudiating religions, we should purify them by overcoming imperfect beliefs. Then religions would help to establish harmony both within the person and in society.

Similarly, Gandhi considered morality as an essential feature of a cultured society. He supported his argument by explaining the Gujarati equivalent of the term civilization as good conduct. According to him, “Civilization is that mode of conduct which points out to man the path of duty.”<sup>9</sup> Civilization was primarily concerned with the moral life of individuals in a particular society. A moral person could gain self-satisfaction by controlling his passions and desires, which would help everybody to live in peace and contentment. We must work towards a social system where we can lead a good moral life. Our ancestors opted for a kind of social structure where the members could seek real happiness by avoiding all luxuries. Dissuaded from aggression and greediness, their culture was relatively stable. They feared that any rapid change would break the social and moral fibers. Gandhi appreciated their choice of an economic structure where everyone would be satisfied with the satisfaction of basic needs.

## Critique of Industrial Culture

According to Gandhi, the existence and the continuity of humanity heavily depended on the presence of *ahimsa* in the society. Humanity has been evolving toward perfection by eliminating the elements of *himsa* from the society. But modern civilization has obstructed this process and intruded a kind of violence in industrial societies which destroyed traditional values and the ancient cultures of Europe. Gandhi feared the spread of the violent industrial culture to the other parts of the world. He warned of such an invasion and suggested the means by which India and other traditional communities could withstand such a cultural invasion. He opposed the industrial culture on the following grounds.

---

<sup>8</sup> M.K.Gandhi, *Village Swaraj*, compiled H.M. Vyas (Ahmedabad: Navajivan, 1963), p. 96.

<sup>9</sup> M.K.Gandhi, *Hind Swaraj or Indian Home Rule* (Ahmedabad: Navajivan, 1988), p. 55.

## *Competition and Exploitation*

The traditional, need-based and hand-made production methods of the various societies could produce all the essential goods required by them. To a certain extent they were self-sufficient. Yet, these societies also experienced many crises, such as famines due to natural calamities, traumatic death due to contagious diseases, feelings of insecurity due to war, etc. Human attempts to create a self-sufficient society without any misery were the reason for the onset of industrial culture. Unfortunately, industrialization converted the self-sufficient economies into dependent economies. With the industrial revolution, powerful machines entered into the various production processes. Those machines could produce in abundance and made the commodities better and cheaper. Massive production required the expansion of markets for raw materials. New market mechanisms were developed to bring more and more people into the consumer network. The products entered into the local as well as the distant markets and eliminated the traditional producers from their production processes. Seeing the unending greediness of the industrialists, Gandhi expressed, “Industrialism is, I am afraid, going to be a curse for mankind. Industrialism depends entirely on your capacity to exploit, on foreign markets being open to you, and on the absence of competitors.”<sup>10</sup> The industrialized countries sent expeditions to the non-industrialized states and established their colonies, they exploited other nations systematically. The exploited nations initially appreciated the presence of industrially advanced states, considered this a blessing and allowed themselves to be exploited. Gradually this paved the way for imperialism.

The material ambition of the capitalists often transgressed the limits of their markets and led to a brutal war for markets among nations. Gandhi observed: “What is the cause of the present chaos? It is exploitation, I will not say, of the weaker nations by the stronger, but of sister nations by sister nations. And my fundamental objection to machinery rests on the fact that it is machinery that has enabled these nations to exploit others.”<sup>11</sup> He traced the cause for the degradation of culture among nations to the adoption of mechanization. With the entry of powerful machines in the production sector, man lost control over his tools and, on the contrary, machines began to regulate human behavior. Thus, we were moved to work against our own brothers by competing and exploiting within ourselves.

The main goal of the capitalist was making profit. When more and more people entered into the fray for earning profit, the fear of incurring loss was also in the minds of everybody. Therefore, they were forced to engage in a ruthless fight among themselves for their own survival. Accordingly, “in trade and manufacture there is oppressive competition, which results in fraud, chicanery and theft.”<sup>12</sup> Every capitalist believed that more profit could be extracted only by exploitation. They tried to get more work from the workers by offering lesser pay and by getting more money from the consumers by over-charging. Capitalists never worried about the miserable living conditions of the workers, either in their factories or in their houses. Gandhi had a direct personal knowledge of the poor living conditions of the mill workers in Bombay where they worked like slaves. The condition of the women workers in the mills was shocking. Such a production process could never be considered friendly to humanity.

Industrialization was based on the unscrupulous exploitation of the natural resources. According to Gandhi, it was human duty to protect all that belonged to the subhuman world. Human willingness to be the custodian of the universe was one of the most wonderful phenomena

---

<sup>10</sup> *Village Swaraj*, p. 11.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid*, p. 12.

<sup>12</sup> *Sarvodaya*, p. 33.

in human evolution. But by using machines, we exploited nature to satisfy more and more of our greed. Therefore, industrialization was against the peaceful coexistence of man with nature.

Due to competition and exploitation, humanity lost its dignity. It was unethical to continue with a social structure that was regulated by warring competition aimed at the elimination of one's own co-producers and co-workers. It was immoral to promote a system which was based on the exploitation of one's own fellow beings. Gandhi had no second thoughts about condemning such a culture, "Indeed, the West has had a surfeit of industrialism and exploitation. The fact is that this industrial civilization is a disease because it is all evil."<sup>13</sup> Gandhi criticized the competitive and rapid mechanization because of its immoral nature and failure to establish a peaceful society.

### *The Problem of Unemployment*

Work was an essential feature of all human beings. Man was a self-reflective actor who should earn his livelihood through his labor. Gandhi insisted on producing the essential goods required for everyone by one's own toil. He observed that the mechanization was gradually dislodging the necessary human labor from the workers. The majority of the people could not continue with their traditional work. Only a few were incorporated in the new productive methods. For example, the Indian handicraft had been destroyed by the cloth mills of Manchester. Thus, they were deprived of their livelihood. Gandhi pointed out such a danger: "If by some chance, one man could plough up by some mechanical invention of his the whole of the land of India, and control all the agricultural produce and if the millions had no other occupation, they would starve, and being idle, they would become dunces, as many have already become."<sup>14</sup> The introduction of labor-saving machines was a criminal act, according to him. By eliminating human labor, the human character as a self-reflective actor was destroyed.

The machine was highly admired as an instrument which could liberate humankind from the hardships of tiresome and strenuous labor. But the capitalists mechanized the production processes with developed techniques with a view to save on labor. No capitalist used the machine to liberate the laborer from the tediousness of hard work, but only to reduce the work force for earning more profit. Even though human relations should be built on the basis of love, in reality they were based on greed. Gandhi was not blindly opposed to the use of the machines. He appreciated the use of those types of machinery which could serve the interests of all. He was for a decentralized and labor intensive type of machinery which could eliminate pauperism and idleness among the workers.

Mechanization, initially, displaced the traditional workers from their means of livelihood. Of course, a few got better employment opportunities initially but due to the excess of competition leading towards monopoly even those workers gradually lost their jobs and unemployment was mounting. Thus, Gandhi was against mechanization for India. With a smaller population and in better circumstances, even England could not overcome its economic crisis. In other advanced countries, too, the problems of unemployment could not be solved. If India should dislodge its people from their traditional fields of work, Gandhi wondered where they could be accommodated.

---

<sup>13</sup> *Village Swaraj*, p. 12.

<sup>14</sup> *Sarvodaya*, p. 41.

### *Centralization and Concentration*

Machines, of course, eased the production process. Machinery produced a larger quantity of goods within a short period of time with a minimum number of wage laborers. The traditional producers could not compete with this type of mechanized production. Therefore, thousands of traditional producers were forced to leave the field so that production became centralized in the hands of a few. Factory civilization had its base on the centralized economic system. The commodities were produced in the centralized factories and distributed to the various markets at distant places through a well-developed transport system. There was no direct personal link between the producers and the consumers.

As huge investments were required for industrialization, the traditional producers could not mechanize their production techniques, because the traditionalists were not working for the accumulation of wealth but for earning their livelihood. Therefore, only those who had already accumulated wealth through some other means established factories and monopolized the production of commodities.

No individual will undertake the risks of such a huge investment unless he could get the money back with very high returns. His intention was a high level of profit. Every capitalist aimed at the elimination of his competitors and wanted to become a monopolist in the supply of goods to the market. In this way, wealth became concentrated in the hands of a few. Gandhi opposed this phenomenon in every way, "I want the concentration of wealth, not in the hands of a few, but in the hands of all. Today machinery merely helps a few to ride on the backs of millions."<sup>15</sup> The most unequal kind of society in the history of the world has been created by industrialization. Greater inequalities between the rich and the poor became a feature of the industrial culture. The rich were the symbol of power, status, privilege and luxury; the poor remained powerless, under privileged and destitute, with the gap between the rich and the poor increasing day by day.

The centralization of the economy and the concentration of wealth could not be protected without the help of the police. A good portion of the wealth was spent on maintaining the army and the police forces. The economy could be centralized only by adopting violent means, which was inconsistent with the non-violent structure of a society.

### *Urbanization*

Centralization of an economy led to the concentration of the population in the industrial areas, producing an urban civilization. Centralization of the economy was due to the mechanization of the production processes. Huge machines and large scale production could not be decentralized due to such factors as the availability of raw materials, power supply, skilled laborers, technicians, managerial hands, etc. Cities provided the necessary conditions which could bring together the infrastructure and other necessary facilities. Thus, cities became the focus for facilities, accessibility, capabilities, and so on. Urban civilization itself was considered the symbol of progress.

More and more people moved to the cities attracted by job opportunities, decent salaries and huge profits. Gradually, cities became overpopulated and living conditions in urban areas became miserable. Gandhi considered urbanization a snare, where all the vices grew.

Urbanization depended on its capacity to exploit the village economy. It destroyed the village handicrafts which were the backbone of the rural culture. Cities could survive only by sucking the

---

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid*, p. 42.

blood of the villagers. Cities lived on the farm products produced in the villages but taken to the cities because of their higher purchasing capacity. Consequently, villagers “produce the food and go hungry. They produce milk, and their children have to go without it.”<sup>16</sup> The modern economic structure failed to satisfy the basic needs of a vast section of the people who were really producing goods for the fulfillment of the basic needs of humanity. Gandhi was of the strong opinion that life in cities was based on the exploitation of the labor of the villagers. He asserted, “We must not be deceived by the wealth to be seen in the cities of India. It does not come from England or America. It comes from the blood of the poorest.”<sup>17</sup> At the same time, the luxuries provided by the urban civilization were beyond the reach of the villagers.

### *Value Crises*

Like many other thinkers, Gandhi also subscribed to the view that modern civilization, which was the creation of modern science and technology, was a disease. Industrial culture provided facilities by which we could do many good things for the advantage of humanity, but it could not move us beyond the perpetuation of the unredeemable evils in the universe.

Modern culture rested on a bundle of paradoxes. We have machines which could reduce the hardships of laborers, but modern production techniques converted millions of workers into beasts. Modern culture promoted bodily ease, but did so by risking the lives of millions in dangerous occupations: millions sacrificed their life for the sake of millionaires. Imbalance had crept into society and every walk of life. There was abject poverty in the midst of plenty. The problem of unemployment rose with the rise in the number of new production centers, for the growth of production techniques many lost their means of livelihood. The health conditions of the people deteriorated. There were new diseases which were unknown to us earlier. More and more scientists and doctors were engaged in researches to discover remedies, but with no avail. A good number of people survived longer, but with prolonged ailments.

The social organism to use affected by disease and Gandhi accused modern civilization for the degradation of morality. Industrial culture made religion less important, which modern science compartmentalized knowledge into sharp specializations. This influenced the moral and religious pursuits of learning, too, relegating them to the concerns only of those who were specializing in those subjects, while others remained indifferent to them. In this way, Europe became a land of agnostics and atheists.

The impetus of commerce rendered religion purposeless as modern civilization substituted God with money. All the great religions of the world have taught against the very ambition which is characteristic of modern civilization. They advised refraining from worldly pursuits and turning to godly pursuits.

Industrial culture promoted a life of bodily ease and care for oneself; what was promoted by the society and sought was bodily pleasures. The industrial culture could flourish only by multiplying human wants; a contented life was against the spirit of capitalism and industrialization. If we did not indulge in excessive consumption, the enormous quantities of commodities produced would be wasted, and consequently many of the factories would be compelled to be closed down. According to Gandhi, the strength of a culture should be measured not by weighing the pleasures one could enjoy in it, but by the moral integrity members of the society could achieve.

---

<sup>16</sup> *Village Swaraj*, pp. 24-25.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid*, p. 23.



## Alternative Way of Life

Gandhi was aware of the fact that many national leaders were not convinced of the dangers of industrialization, but were fascinated by the material development of industrial societies. Gandhi was of the opinion that India could not be liberated without putting aside modern civilization. Our socio-cultural features were unique and different from those of others and we should develop means and tools indigenously in order to create a better socio-cultural situation in our society by rectifying the defects and weaknesses of our own culture. Accordingly, he suggested a non-violent model of development for India as an alternative pattern meant for the integrated development of the individual and society, which he named village *swaraj*. Such a model would look after the basic necessities of every member in the society. He specified that everybody should get a balanced diet, necessary clothing and necessary shelter. He explained the possibility of the village *swaraj* overcoming the ills of the lopsided growth of the world.

The goal of the village *swaraj* was an ordered society which could pursue the path of happiness and peace for individuals and the whole society; it was an attempt towards perfection. By *swaraj* Gandhi meant self-control and independence. The micro-aspect of *swaraj* was the realization of self-control and independence by each and every individual. It aimed at the full development of the individuals. Such mature members were the perfect volunteers who could motivate the whole community towards perfection. Thus, *swaraj* could be created by sovereign individuals whose strength was pure moral authority.

The macro aspect of *swaraj* was the realization of order, peace and independence by society. In short it was the manifestation of truth in the society. The non-violent, socio-political, economic, moral and spiritual structures provide the infrastructure necessary for an integral development of individuals in the society. In such a situation all individuals can lead a virtuous life without great hardship.

But such a social structure could be achieved only there are perfect individuals in the society who would volunteer to work for the general welfare of the community. In this sense, *swaraj* was a process towards perfection for both individuals, as well as for society.

### *The Significance of Swadeshi*

According to Gandhi, the village *swaraj* was not simply the resurgence of the old village *panchayats*, but a fresh attempt to create independent village units on strong moral foundations. He felt that the village *swaraj* would be the most workable social system in the context of modern India. It was a non-violent structure of a society.

The village *swaraj* was a democratic unit where social, political and economic structures were methodically decentralized. *Swaraj* was not imposed from above, but emerged from the masses. It was the self-rule of persons. The village *swaraj* was envisaged as an ideal infrastructure for the integral development of the person and of society. According to Gandhi, the workability of the village *swaraj* depended on the successful implementation of the principle of *swadeshi*.

The concept of *swadeshi* was popularly understood as the expression of a citizen's love towards his nation. It is described usually as an act of patriotism. A patriotic act is mostly generated out of a person's love towards his nation and hatred towards the other competing nations. Thus, we were able to practice *swadeshi* of the most popular type with much spirit and vigor during our freedom struggle against the British dominance. Even now, a few voluntary organizations use *swadeshi* as a political weapon to fight against the economic dominance of the industrially

advanced countries. This practice of *swadeshi* brings about a division between *swadeshi* and *videshi* or *paradeshi*.

But the Gandhian concept of *swadeshi* was not intended to create a division in the society. Gandhian *swadeshi* aimed more at the integration of the people. It was considered a virtue prescribed for the implementation of justice in a situation where one lived by paying what one owed to one's own immediate neighbors. The foundation of *swadeshi* was to be traced to a universal moral law aimed at the good of all.

How can one seek the good of all by giving what one owes only to his immediate neighbors and not to others? Can universal love be limited to one's immediate surroundings alone? According to Gandhi, *swadeshi* should not exclude individuals who are far away, but our attempt to serve them should not be to the exclusion of our immediate neighbors who need our help. We should be available to the people who are immediately near us. If an individual neglects his kith and kin, to be of service to humanity by attending to the needs of distant people he might not get a chance to serve at all, because he might not be needed there. Therefore, the motto 'one who serves his neighbor serves all the world' was considered by Gandhi as the motivating principle of *swadeshi*.<sup>18</sup> Similarly, we should also seek the help we want primarily from our neighborhoods.

Gandhi tried to bring out the social implications of *swadeshi* by defining it as "that spirit in us which restricts us to the use and service of our immediate surroundings to the exclusion of the more remote."<sup>19</sup> Its implications could be seen in various realms. Gandhi advised those people who were after foreign cultural and religious traditions to be contented and happy with their own heritage in which they were born and brought up. One should prefer one's own socio-cultural traditions to that of a foreign tradition. Gandhi found that many Indians were forced to leave their own Hindu traditions due to the intolerant attitudes towards low caste people. Therefore, he tried to empower the backward classes and untouchables to refine the system by purging it of its evils instead of running away from their original established culture. Similarly, he encouraged the volunteers of *swaraj* to develop a political institution based on indigenous political traditions. The concept of *swadeshi* had a deeper and longer impact on the Indian economy. According to the *swadeshi* principle, one should use only those goods which were produced by one's immediate neighbors, so that the local industries could be saved from collapse due to unhealthy foreign competition. Gandhi assumed that a non-violent social system could be established only if we followed the principles of *swadeshi*.

### *Non-Violent Social Order*

According to Gandhi, 'the welfare of all' was the goal of an ideal social order. This could be achieved only through all-embracing, non-violent love. Violence leads to hatred and mutual distrust which is the beginning of a war of each one against the other that leads to the end of the human species. Thus, non-violence should be the primary basis for achieving human brotherhood; it can enlighten the people and redeem them from their darkness. Because of our ignorance, we separate and segregate people in the name of nations, religions, class, caste, race, etc. The clannish tendency in us could be satisfied when we confine ourselves to our peer groups. A non-violent love is all-embracing; a non-violent society can incorporate all within itself. Everybody, without any exception, has an important place in a non-violent society: prince and

---

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid*, p. 40.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid*, p. 54.

peasant, Hindu and Muslim, touchable and untouchable, white and black, saint and sinner, all are treated equally without any segregation, in such a society. Physical and mental differences among the members are recognized as complementary for the development of the society. The aim of a non-violent society is not the uniformity of the people, but their unification, non-violent love is the center of human unity.

Gandhi was not satisfied by just affirming the essential likeness of human beings. All living beings should have the same status; we should establish equality between man and man and also with the whole creation. As he was influenced by the Indian religious teachings, he found no difficulty in accepting the divine presence in every being. He believed that the essence of every living being was the same. Thus, his wider concept of brotherhood could accept equal status for man and for the whole of God's creation.

Each individual was unique in his or her own way and was also different from others in many respects. In a non-violent society, differences among the members were not treated as inequalities. Gandhi blamed the vertical division of the Indian society in terms of caste, color, power, wealth, etc., and considered it an unjust social order. We should aim at a horizontal division of the society where there is no social ranking, because "all these are pervaded by God, there is none that is high and none that is low, all are absolutely equal, equal because all are the creatures of that Creator."<sup>20</sup>

By equality, what Gandhi meant was equal status and not equal division of social wealth. Whenever he referred to equal wages for all services, his emphasis was not on the wage but on equal respect for all professions. As everyone should strive to fulfill only his or her needs and be satisfied with that, the distribution of wealth was not a question to be specifically considered. He emphasized the co-operative and collective use of society's wealth. Special talents of any particular member of the society should be treated as his gifts to the society for serving the poor and the needy. Thus, every member of a non-violent society should give great importance to the welfare of all. They should be ready to sacrifice their self-interests for the common interests of all. Everyone was free to choose his profession according to his aptitude and temperament to fulfill the social needs. Vocations should be chosen not for one's personal advancement, but for the good of society as a whole. On the contrary, in practice we opt for a profession that will fetch us money, power and status, which endangers society. For example, if one who does not have an aptitude for taking care of sick persons, chooses to become a doctor or a nurse, what good can the society expect?

A non-violent social organization should respect the individual's freedom: every member in society should be considered a responsible person. Thus, society should be regulated with the least external coercion. Freedom is an internal force and voluntary actions should be guided by the moral force from within. The society should make provision for the integral development of individuals by their own moral pursuits.

In contrast a violent society finds it easier to regulate society by external force. In order to establish social order it inculcates fear in the minds of its members; at the cost of human dignity, it establishes a social order.

Gandhi was of the opinion that the progress of a society is retarded by the suppression of the free expressions of the individual. Fear tends to eliminate criticism, but the absence of criticism is a sign of retardation. No society could be refined without accepting criticism. A society that suppresses public opinion becomes dogmatic and remains static. A non-violent social order should be transparent and accept freedom of expression as its moral basis.

---

<sup>20</sup> *Sarvodaya*, p. 56.

Gandhi observed that his society was unbearably male-dominated and customs and conventions were not at all favorable to the female members of the community. On the contrary, many privileges and exceptions were given to the male members. Among high caste Hindus, widowhood was enforced, while men were allowed to remarry. Gandhi realized that the remarriage of widows was better than forcing women to suffer their bitter widowhood. Therefore, he encouraged the remarriage of widows. Women were enslaved by male chauvinistic social norms; wives were treated badly for misconduct, while that of husbands was tolerated.

Child marriage was a notorious practice. Parents gave away their girl children in marriage at a tender age. Some parents allowed aged men to marry their young daughters. Gandhi considered this abominable and questioned the authority of parents to indulge in such misdeeds. In this regard, Gandhi can be considered as a forerunner to many modern feminists. He analyzed the history of female inferiority: "The two (man and woman) live the same life, have the same feelings. Each is a complement of the other. The one cannot live without the other's active help. But somehow or other man has dominated woman from ages past, and so woman has developed an inferiority complex. She has believed in the truth of man's interested teaching that she is inferior to him."<sup>21</sup> He argued for the equal rights of both sexes; treating one as superior and the other as inferior he considered an act of violence.

Gandhi asserted that a non-violent India could be formed only by the elimination of untouchability and the establishment of equal status for all members of the society. He wondered how a few sparks of the same fire could be treated as outcasts. He was not satisfied with a mere friendly or sympathetic attitude towards the so-called untouchables. The village *swaraj* could be established only through selfless love and service by the leaders to every member of the society. Any form of segregation or separation of a few was against its spirit.

There was a link between untouchability and *varnadharma* and many questioned his attempt to justify *varna*. Yet Gandhi accepted the *varna* system which divided employment according to families as a workable social system. For Gandhi, *varnasramadharma* was a functional division of the society in ancient India. Its initial purpose of it was to protect certain skills through inheritance which might have otherwise been destroyed in the course of history. It was arranged in a way that would provide livelihood to all. The noble purpose of the *Varna* system was degraded through the enslavement and exploitation of manual workers. Gandhi believed that a refined law of *varna* would be a workable principle under village *swaraj*, helping to overcome material ambitions. He also considered *varnasramadharma* to be a means for the realization of God. This he explained it in *Young India*, in 1927:

*Varnasrama Dharma* defines man's mission on this earth. He is not born day after day to explore avenues for amassing riches and to explore different means of livelihood; on the contrary man is born in order that he may utilize every atom of his energy for the purpose of knowing his Maker. It restricts him, therefore, for the purpose of holding body and soul together, to the occupation of his forefathers.<sup>22</sup>

We know that his position on *varnasrama dharma* was widely criticized in India. Several movements of the backward communities have criticized the rigid laws of the *varnas* and opposed the very concept of *varna* as a systematic and concealed attempt by the upper caste people to

---

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid*, p. 59.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid*, p. 56.

exploit the lower caste members of the society, to torture them without applying any physical coercion. Critics questioned the wisdom of Gandhi in reviving a system which had failed even in a primitive simple society. But Gandhi stuck to his position that it ensured the survival of hereditary skills, provided livelihood to all, and reduced excessive competition and exploitation. He considered it a remedy against pauperism. But he subscribed also to the view that a rotten *dharma* was the worst *adharna*.

An analysis of Gandhi's village *swaraj*, where each member stood for the welfare of all, would help us perceive that the law of *varnasrama dharma* has no significant role to play in it. In *swaraj* the occupation of each member was not based on inheritance, but on the social need and aptitudes of each and every individual. In a multi-religious and multi-cultural society such as ours the choice of occupations could be made without any caste connotations. Above all, when we consider the negative influence of the caste system in our society, it has been pointed out by critics that it would have been better for Gandhi to think of a *swaraj* without the phenomenon of the caste system.

A non-violent society gave equal respect to all the religions. No religion was considered as specially favored by either the state or the village *swaraj*. Gandhi advised Congress workers to cultivate the habit of building friendships with persons belonging to religions other than their own. One should develop the same regard for the other faiths as one had for one's own. Every religion attempted to realize the same reality. God expressed Himself to all, but we failed to understand Him. When His revelation was received by the human hand, our imperfections got alloyed with it. Most of us could not fully understand the Truth. Thus, we were biased towards considering other religions to be inferior. The core teachings of all religions were similar, the differences being mostly in their interpretations and rituals. Gandhi expressed this idea by using the analogy of the leaves and the tree. The leaves of a tree are separate and differ in many respects from the tree, but all are supported from the same stem and root. They do not quarrel with each other, due to their differences, instead they dance to the tune of the same breeze and play a sweet symphony together. Every religion should try to create such harmony. The task of the spiritual members of the society should not be to compare and compete, but to compare and complement each other for the full realization of Truth. The realization of the religious values was hindered due to proselytization and the related competition among many religions. The implication of *swadeshi* was that all should discover the richness of their own ancestral religion. If there were evils or defects in the teachings or practices of one's religion, one should try to purify his religion. A change of religion was not the proper method of fighting against the evils of one's own religion. Conversion of heart was the aim of every religion, if hearts were not converted, religious conversion would be superfluous and absurd. Every religion should be able to serve humanity without competing with each other.

Ever since Gandhi landed in South Africa in 1893 he was an eyewitness to the way Indians, including himself, were repressed and segregated by the white people and their regime. Along with other Indians, he developed *satyagraha* as a powerful weapon against racial separation. They courted arrest by disobeying the ordinance known as 'The Black Act,' by which all Asians in South Africa were ordered to register with authorities and carry a certificate with them at all times. He condemned such discrimination as a threat to human brotherhood and was concerned about the fate of the people of color under the dominance of the White. When Afro-Americans organized themselves against racism, they were advised to follow the non-violent political techniques for lessening racial discrimination and some were adopted by the organization called the Congress of Racial Equality – CORE. Under the leadership of Martin Luther King Jr, the Civil Rights movement in America adopted and successfully implemented the Gandhian methods.

In the same way, Gandhi very vigorously attacked the Nazi anti-Semitism. He felt that in Europe Jews were ill-treated as untouchables by the Christians. Aggression against the Jews reached its peak when German Nazism turned against them, but Gandhi did not show any sympathetic bias towards the Jews. He blamed the Jews for not asserting their citizenship in the country where they were born and brought up. He feared that their call for a homeland in Palestine would be taken as proving the Nazi argument that the Jews were exploiting Germany without loving that country. Gandhi brought to the notice of the Zionists and the world powers that their imposition of the Jews on the Arabs was wrong and inhuman. Already in 1938 Gandhi wrote in *Harijan*:

What is going on in Palestine today cannot be justified by any moral code of conduct. The mandates have no sanction but that of the last war. Surely it would be a crime against humanity to rob the proud Arabs of their land so that Palestine be given to the Jews partly or wholly as their national home.<sup>23</sup>

If the world powers had heeded the words of Gandhi, they could have avoided another volatile zone in the world. But their interest was not to solve the problem but to pass on the issue to somebody else. The intention of *swadeshi* was not to create a national land for any race, but to promote an attitude among people so that they could live together by appreciating the cultural and racial differences of each group.

In sum, an ideal social order was one where every member of the society could lead a happy life by pursuing his goal. In such a society everybody could enjoy freedom with a non-violent spirit. Choice, with an all-embracing non-violent love, would not contradict any collective interest. A non-violent society is an integral society which would seek the total development of every member in it. Such a society could provide sufficient job opportunities to all the individuals without any kind of discrimination. And all would use their talents and opportunities for the welfare of all.

### *Non-Violent Political Order*

According to Gandhi an ideal political system should be a stateless democracy where social life was self-regulated. In that case, no political structure would be required to regulate or control social behavior. But he was not such an idealist as to believe in the full realization of such an ideal. So, he suggested a political structure that would be closer to his ideal of a stateless democracy. Real democracy should aim at the integral development of the individual and of society. The state should prepare all individuals for self-regulation.

The state as externally coercive should gradually vanish by the creation of smaller units which would regulate themselves from within. Therefore, the state was considered as a temporary phenomenon that was planning for the perfection of the individual and the society. According to him the state was not 'withering away' in the process of perfection, but would be scattered into smaller units. He wrote in *Harjan* in 1948 to the people of independent India: "True democracy cannot be worked by twenty men sitting at the Center. It has to be worked from below by the people of every village."<sup>24</sup> Modern democracy is highly centralized; it is hierarchical in nature and

---

<sup>23</sup> Homer A. Jack (ed.), *The Gandhi Reader*, p. 318.

<sup>24</sup> *Sarvodaya*, p. 71.

its power is concentrated in the hands of a top few in the hierarchy who are unwilling to share power with others. This defeats the purpose of democracy as the individual has no voice whatsoever in shaping the policies of the government. This is election-centered, party-dominated, power-conscious and complicated.

*The swadeshi* spirit of Gandhi helped him to discover an indigenous alternative to modern democracy in the village *swaraj* of the *panchayats*. Since a village was a small unit, all its members could share and contribute to the village in a significant manner. They could influence the planning of their village; and the advantages of the community could be used for the welfare of all. In a village *swaraj*, individual persons could be the architects of their own government. Such a small unit, endowed with socio-political and economic powers, is called *panchayat raj*. It is a non-violent, self-sufficient, economic unit with full political powers. *Panchayat raj* would enable its members to better their living conditions in all aspects.

*Panchayat raj* was a system which Gandhi tried to revive from the ruins of the traditional *panchayats*. The village assembly had been called *panchayat*, as it consisted of *five* village leaders chosen by the villagers. Village *panchayats* were republics vested with full powers. Later, India was conquered by different foreign rulers and changed the pattern of administration to suit their needs.

They neglected the significance of the village *panchayats*, and the powers were transferred to a centralized body. The British authorities considered the *panchayat* system as a crude and primitive socio-political system. Moreover, they found that the *panchayats* did not effectively favor the British interests. The new administration was meant for collecting resources for the British *Raj*.

Gandhi very cautiously attempted to revitalize the *panchayat raj*. As the efforts of Congress to revive the old *panchayat* system were defeated in 1921, he entrusted the Provincial Congress Committee with the task of supervising the process of empowerment of the village *panchayats*. Full autonomy could not be given to the *panchayats* primarily due to the existence of British administration, but secondly because of the immaturity of the villagers. The criminal jurisdiction of the traditional *panchayats* was suspended, as not acceptable to the British judiciary. Even civil suits could not be settled unless both the parties agreed to accept the verdict of the *panchayat*. Gandhi and other village volunteers considered national independence as a favorable condition for the establishment of autonomous republics of village *swaraj*.

Gandhi and others, planned the structure of the *panchayat raj* in an ever-widening and never-ascending circular form. A *panchayat* consisted of five persons elected through adult franchise by the members of the village. The cooperation among the different *panchayats* was assured by linking the village *panchayats* with other units. Two *panchayats* could be joined together under an elected leader from among them, to form a unit. Such a leader would be a first grade leader. Fifty first grade leaders representing a hundred *panchayats* jointly form another unit and would elect a second grade leader from among them. Second grade leaders from every part of India would plan for the whole of India. They would serve the nation with due care and attention in their own respective areas. In order to regulate their function, a chief could be chosen. The *panchayat raj* system could be treated as a national network which incorporated all citizens and cultures into the national stream. Decentralizing the political system could overcome the isolation of individuals as well as the communities, for every section would be recognized in such a system.

Every *panchayat* should be able to maintain and manage its affairs by itself. The *panchayat raj* aimed at the formation of a non-violent, self-sufficient economic unit with full political power. Village workers should organize a self-contained and self-supporting village through agriculture

and handicrafts. People should also be educated in sanitation and hygiene. Adequate measures should be taken to prevent ill-health and disease.

*Panchayat raj* was structured in the form of an ‘oceanic circle’ whose center was the individual who was ready to perish for the good of all. Thus the realization of the ideals of the village *swaraj* depended on the moral authority of her humble members. Under such a political system no individual or unit could compete with each others for selfish advantages. Competition would be only for excelling in their moral perfection.

### *Non-Violent Economic Order*

In the economic sphere, the adoption of *swadeshi* was considered to be the local arrangement for providing accessibility of livelihood for all individuals in a non-violent way. Existence of this world involves a certain amount of violence; modern economic activities require a higher degree of violence. The purpose of a non-violent economy is to minimize this violence to the greatest extent possible.

Moral values are the guiding principles of the non-violent economy. It demands from all its members that they be satisfied with a minimum of basic needs. The goal of the non-violent economy is to produce the basic necessities of life and to distribute them to all. Such an economy is workable if the needs are simple, because “simplicity is the essence of universality.”<sup>25</sup>

The simple needs of all members could be satisfied by society and similarly the means to gratify those wants also should be simple. Righteous ways were promoted to produce food, clothing and shelter for all. It was to be a human-centered and need-based economy.

The foundation of the non-violent economy was the laborer. All the members of the society should work and earn their livelihood. Therefore, an economic structure should be planned in such a way that it be able to provide an opportunity for everybody to work. This would be possible when all would be willing to work and could also be provided with jobs. What Gandhi meant in this regard, was not to make everyone simply a wage laborer, but a manual laborer. According to him, it was a moral and spiritual demand to be a manual laborer. It is said in the Bible that one eats by the sweat of one’s brow. The *Gita* considers laboring for food *asyajna*. Everybody was expected to work with his hands for his daily bread; this was known as bread labor. Gandhi explained:

The idea is that every healthy individual must labor enough for his food, and his intellectual faculties must be exercised not in order to obtain a living or amass a fortune but only in the service of mankind.<sup>26</sup>

Accordingly, the advantages of the able members should be shared with the weak. When we work only for the satisfaction of our basic necessities, many of the humanly created problems are reduced. A non-violent economy discourages the human tendency to amass surplus wealth and goods.

A non-violent economy should work towards promoting social justice; the welfare of all is its goal. The weak and the poor in the society should not be neglected, but should be able to meet their needs as anybody else. Gandhi expressed his wish in the following words:

---

<sup>25</sup> *Village Swaraj*, p. 183.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid*, p. 36.



I want to bring about an equalization of status. My ideal is equal distribution, but so far as I can see, it is not to be realized. I therefore work for equitable distribution.<sup>27</sup>

A good economic structure should be able to obstruct the possibility of unequal possession of wealth by any single individual. On the contrary, capitalism enables a few to amass wealth by destroying the integrated development of the individual and the society. Economic inequality also led to social, political and cultural inequalities in a society. The direct task of the village *swaraj* is to create economic equality so that one could uphold one's own dignity as a human being. Economic disadvantages in a society used to force an individual to accept sub-human conditions of living and it was difficult for a person to escape such an inferior position. Instead, all must have equal opportunity; everyone should be able to fulfill his or her human wants.

Any lopsided growth in society should be discouraged. Gandhi suggested a structural re-arrangement towards this end by a "leveling down of the few rich in whose hands is concentrated the bulk of the nation's wealth, on the one hand, and a leveling up of the semi-starved naked millions, on the other."<sup>28</sup> Thus, the status of all could be placed more or less in the same level. A non-violent social structure could be aspired to only if the wide gap among the different members of the community could be reduced.

Gandhi opted for "Trusteeship" as a workable proposition for the village *swaraj* for the proper distribution of wealth for the welfare of all. In every village, there might be a few with many exemplary qualities and abilities. If they utilized those abilities to amass to themselves wealth and other advantages without sharing them with others they would be encouraging a violent economy. They should be satisfied with what they essentially needed. All they possessed and produced, apart from what they needed, they should be willing to use for the general welfare of the society and more specifically for the most disadvantaged people in the society. A trustee was only a guardian of wealth in a village *swaraj*.

The rich man will be left in possession of his wealth, of which he will use what he reasonably requires for his personal needs and will act as a trustee for the remainder to be used for the society.<sup>29</sup>

The trusteeship affirmed the social character of wealth. Some should possess the wealth to protect it, but the guardian of wealth could use from what he possessed only what was necessary for him for an honorable livelihood.

Gandhi suggested the theory of trusteeship to the nation as an alternative to the socialist program of annihilating *zamindars* and chiefs. He felt that the advantages and abilities of those gifted people should be used for building up of the village *swaraj*. He wanted those privileged members of the society to overcome their greed and come down to the level of the bread laborers.

Many in India, were not as optimistic as Gandhi about the workability of trusteeship. Critics questioned the wisdom of Gandhi in entrusting the affairs of the villages to the already ill-reputed village heads. *Zamindars* and other rich people who enjoyed power, wealth, status and recognition would not be willing to part with the privileges enjoyed by them. It was logical to conclude that they would exploit the poor members of our villages much more systematically and intensively when their possessions were legitimized.

---

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid*, p. 37.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid*, p. 37.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid*, p. 38.

Gandhi accepted the genuineness of these arguments. But his faith in *satya* and *ahimsa* gave him a strong ground for his belief that any person, however incorrigible he might be, could be corrected. And his experience was that the villagers, even in their crude behavior, were not as selfish as the English rulers or the city people. They were simple, and on many occasions he could guide them with the help of the Congress volunteers. Through prayer, pleading and persuasion, they could convert many village heads to be right leaders of the village. The *bhoodana* movement of Vinobabhave was an example to this effect. If these means failed, volunteers might be asked to enter into non-violent, non-cooperation and civil disobedience, so that the village heads might be convinced of their duty to the society. Gandhi admitted that trusteeship was an ideal, but if we worked towards that ideal, we could be closer to it. Because of the close and clannish relations among the villagers, trusteeship could be practiced successfully. In villages, nobody could flourish or could aspire to be great without the willing cooperation of the villagers. For example, the wealth in the villages was visibly produced, accumulated and maintained by the collective efforts of many, especially the poor, in the villages. Trusteeship was considered only an initial step in the formation of a non-violent economy. Gradually property should lose its individual character and should become the property of the entire village.

Gandhi preferred trusteeship to government ownership. As trustees were locally available persons who lived with the villagers and were aware of the regional resources and traditional technology, they would be the right planners for the *swadeshi* economy. Moreover, social wealth could easily be decentralized and distributed to all the members through them. Gandhi observed that under trusteeship, there might be a tendency for the privatization of ownership due to selfishness. Yet he opted for trusteeship in preference to state ownership, as the violence of private ownership would be less injurious to people than the violence of the state. The state was coercive in nature, and represented violence in a concentrated and organized manner. According to him, the state was a soulless machine. However evil an individual might be, as he had a soul, he could be corrected. Thus, through non-violent means, true trusteeship could be established.

Gandhi was of the opinion that mechanization and industrialization obstructed the realization of the village *swaraj*. Industrialization could endure only by large-scale consumption. The goods to be produced were not chosen on the basis of the needs of the people but were profit motivated. Therefore, it was the market mechanism that decided production in the economy. Industrialists flooded the market with various consumer articles and imposed them on the people through fair or foul means. One of the great disadvantages of mechanization was that it aggravated the unemployment problem. Gandhi pointed out that the advanced countries even in their glory struggled hard to find jobs for their people. In order to gain more profits capitalists introduced labor saving technology. If agriculture was also to be mechanized in the same manner, more and more people would be alienated from their traditional means of livelihood.

As an alternative, Gandhi urged reviving the traditional village production processes which were labor intensive and need based. He encouraged the development of technology which could serve the interests of all and welcomed the improvement of the cottage machines that could reduce the hardships of the manual laborers.

### **Cultural Diffusion and *Swadeshi***

Gandhi had closely observed the different living traditions in India and had discovered the richness of her heritage. It was one of the richest living cultures among the countries of the world. He exhorted the people of India to make it still more meritorious by removing from it all its

demerits and eliminating the negative elements from our culture. The lost or faded glory of the tradition had to be rediscovered and enriched before drawing from alien cultures. Yet, Gandhi did not appreciate a clannish seclusion from other societies by avoiding all possible meetings with outsiders. A temporary separation from other cultures was encouraged by him in order to create a proper environment for self-analysis. He felt that this would help us to realize ourselves and relate with others with self-dignity. Gandhi wrote in *Young India* in 1921:

I do respectfully contend that an appreciation of other cultures can follow, never precede, an appreciation and assimilation of our *own*. It is my firm opinion that no culture has treasures so rich as ours. We have not known it, we have been made even to deprecate its study and depreciate its value. We have almost ceased to live it.<sup>30</sup>

A healthy meeting with other cultures should be based on mutual respect. He encouraged a healthy mingling of our culture with other cultures, but not at the cost of losing one's own culture. Incorporation of other traditions with ours should not destroy the healthy, social and moral order of our culture:

I do not want my house to be walled in on all sides and my windows to be stuffed. I want the cultures of all lands to be blown about my house as freely as possible. But I refuse to be blown off my feet by any.<sup>31</sup>

We should be open to others and enrich our tradition by receiving from the great treasures of other groups. The inventions which have taken place in this world should be treated as the wealth of every community. For example, Gandhi entertained the idea of training a few scholars in foreign languages so that they could translate the classical works in those languages into various regional languages for the advantage of all, but he felt that it should not destroy the social and moral heritage of India. Similarly no particular culture should be imposed on anybody or any group of people. Instead, the elements of an alien culture could be accepted voluntarily by any community who found them useful and acceptable and it would be ideal if the receiver could also give something back to the giver.

Gandhi upheld similar views regarding the *swadeshi* economy. It did not mean that there should be mutual exclusion among the societies. The *swadeshi* concept was not against receiving essential services or goods from foreigners when they could not be produced by immediate neighbors; similarly we could also extend the benefit of our service to the people of nearby places. The motivation behind the principle of self-dependency and self-sufficiency was not against interdependency; rational animals are social in nature, and an ideal social order requires that all the people work together as brothers. But Gandhi emphasized the point that dependency should be mutual, and it should not pave the way for oppression and exploitation. Therefore, it should be a fraternal cooperation where the relationship should not be hegemonic or businesslike, but between equals.

---

<sup>30</sup> *Sarvodaya*, pp. 143-44.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid*, p. 144.

## Conclusion

Gandhi suggested a non-violent way of life as an ideal culture. The core of non-violent culture is its simplicity; a simple way of life is affordable to all. Contentment and self-dependency can be acquired by leading a simple life. A system that multiplies wants promotes a violent culture. Modern culture, instead of satisfying the needs of the people, served the luxuries of a few and continues to increase human misery. The inability of industrial culture to fulfil the simple needs of the majority – like the basic needs of food, shelter and clothing – is well exposed by Gandhi.

As an alternative to complex industrial culture a *simplified social structure* was proposed by Gandhi, wherein individuals could lead a *simple life*. But in the present context, both a simplified social structure and a simple life are targets difficult to realize. Yet Gandhian remedies are used to cure many social maladies of modern societies. For example, the paradoxical existence of modern communities as both cosmopolitan and ‘clannish’ creates social problems. The new cosmopolitan societies are clannish because of their fascist and fanatic tendencies. Every society is divided in the name of class, clan, religion, nationality, languages, etc. Gandhi argued for the co-existence of every community.

The present political situation of the world calls for a Gandhian touch. Many nation states, both rich and poor, are disturbed by the revolutions for independent regions. Gandhian *stateless democracy* could be tried in order to solve these problems. Stateless democracy is a political situation created by less intervention of the centralized state in controlling and changing the regional affairs, so that the regions have a greater say in their affairs. Gandhi emphasized the participation of people in the political process. Modern democracy tries to incorporate the feelings of various groups through representation. It fails due to the absence of participation in decision making and planning. Small political units like the *panchayat raj* can properly share power with people, and many of the problems of a centralized government can be sorted out. Because of the participation in decision making and implementing the same, individuals and communities could be satisfied. It would also be an effective means to reduce the ‘clannishness’ of modern cosmopolitans.

Similarly, a *non-violent economic order* could set right many drawbacks of the present economic order. If an international organization is created to regulate the world economy on a moral foundation the violence in the production and distribution processes can be reduced. A regional moral regulation of the economy cannot withstand the violent global economy. Therefore, the enlightened volunteers of the world should come together to convince the world leaders to shift the priorities of the economy. The world economy should be made eco-friendly, need-based and labor-intensive. Without internationally organized efforts the priorities of the present economy will not be changed. This analysis shows that Gandhi could be a motivating force for us to work for a *non-violent cultural order*.

## 8. Global Village vs. Gandhian Villages: A Viable Vision

*Kuruvilla Pandikattu*

The fatal metaphor of progress, which means leaving things behind us, has utterly obscured the real idea of growth, which means leaving things inside us.--*G.K. Chesterton*

### Introduction

Technocrats and futurologists untiringly announce the ‘global village.’ The concept originated only recently and reflects: the networking made possible due to the Internet, the cultural homogeneity brought about by satellite TV, the tremendous speed of transport through advanced technology, the conferencing facilities introduced by “video” telephones, and the tremendous speed of the information transfer made possible by advanced satellite techniques.’ Critics say it is only a matter of time before the whole world becomes one monolithic, integrated village with one vision, one goal, one life style, language and culture. Of course, there would be some scope for diversity and variety, but within the wider framework of a global village. Such a vision of global village has made the earlier concept of a ‘unified world community’ and ‘a super-government’ almost obsolete.

Global village rightly symbolizes not just the technological advancement of the modern society, but also the cultural and even religious atmosphere of modern or post-modern humans. The future, represented by the global village, it is claimed, is a ‘free, democratic, egalitarian’ life where conveniences are shared, means are available to all, and each individual is given every chance for his/her personal realization.

In this article an attempt is made to show how this vision of a global village is quite different from Mahatma Gandhi’s vision of villages. Mahatma Gandhi visualized village communities which are themselves self-sustainable and viable. His villages are different, distinct, and have their own independent identities, characteristics and uniqueness. The global village, on the other hand, focuses on a uniform pattern of living, basing itself mainly on technological advancement. We shall try to show that, in the long run, this is non-viable.<sup>1</sup> The ecological problems, the possibility of nuclear disasters and dangers from genetic manipulations are the direct side effects of globalization (technologization). Globalization may point to an insecure and hence non-viable future. It is the assumption in this article that the global village is based on the concept of the supremacy of technology over a simple life style, of humans over nature, of one world over many, of one way of living over many ways of living, and of one culture over many cultures. In short, the global village fosters uniformity, unity in thought patterns, and the myth of “uninterrupted, unlimited progress.” As opposed to this, the Gandhian vision of villages is based on the needs of individual human beings, on a harmonious relationship between humans and nature, on a concern for the lowly and the rejected, on non-violence and *satyagraha*. Gandhian villages take the

---

<sup>1</sup> We take the global village as a paradigm for the technologically advanced, uniformist and religiously neutral world. Here we do not intend to give a criticism of the global village. Since our main effort is to see the relevance of the Gandhian village concept and since ours is more a philosophical than an economical concern, we do not go into a direct and methodic criticism of the global village. We take the global village as a powerful symbol that can be contrasted to the Gandhian villages.

individual persons and their needs seriously. Their problems and concerns are respected, and their basic needs are met.

Here we bring in the notion of ‘Takers’ vs. ‘Leavers,’ introduced by Daniel Quinn in his world famous novel *Ishmael*, to understand the dynamics operational in the two world views presented above.<sup>2</sup> The ‘Takers’ are the winners in the power game while the ‘Leavers’ are the losers in our civilization, who are still present in small pockets of tribal regions and non-developed areas. We shall then show the Leavers’ way of living to be best represented by the village life advocated by Gandhi.

When it comes to the question of viability, we take the arguments of Quinn that the Leavers have continued to exist in our world for about three million years, and so theirs is obviously a viable way of life. On the other hand, the Takers, in their brief existence of 3,000 years, have brought us to a catastrophic situation, and so their way of life is non-viable.

Gandhi’s option for the *Harijans* all through his life indicates that he is a Leaver and his life vision is one where the marginalized are seriously taken care of. At the same time, his opposition to the oppressive system (of the Takers) does not make him opposed to the individual persons! This is another characteristic of the Leavers’ civilization – when they oppose the system they do not oppose the persons who belong to the system. His vehement criticism of industrialized society is based on his concern for individual human beings.

Gandhi’s critique of the current Takers’ civilization, symbolized aptly by his common salt struggle, is uniquely a feature of the Leavers’ civilization. Gandhi’s own vision of a village economy, exemplified by the spinning wheel, is based on a simple life style where basic necessities are provided for all.

If *charkha* (spinning wheel), common salt and *Sevagram* (Gandhi’s *ashram*) are the symbols of the Gandhian village, the global village is depicted by the computer network. The symbol for the viable village may be taken as the *Sevagram* – Gandhi’s own *ashram*, where the primary concern is the welfare of the whole (*sarvodaya*).

It must be admitted that many of the ideas of Gandhi are outdated. We cannot imagine a future where we have to return to the romantic village situation of the (imaginary) past. But the concerns and priorities of Gandhi are crucial for the very survival of human society. It is our assumption that only a future based on these concerns can hope to survive. It is our contention that a viable future can be built only on a model similar to the Gandhian villages and not on the model of the globalized village. We do not advocate that a viable future has to be exactly modelled on the Gandhian understanding of villages. But what we are advocating is that the concerns of Gandhian villages and Gandhi’s priorities are crucial for the viability of our future human existence. This has to be carefully kept in mind when we read the ideas of Gandhi on the future civilization.

I do not claim to make an exhaustive study of the different topics dealt with in this article. Many profound and systematic studies on each of these subjects have already been made. Even the very choice of the symbols and the themes of the topic are to some extent arbitrary. What we want to indicate is the relevance of Gandhi in today’s world which seems to be moving towards a global culture. So the contribution of this paper, it is hoped, is to indicate the counter symbol to the global village, using the profound and lively symbols used by Gandhi. So Gandhi’s relevance lies in the correctives to the global culture based on his concept of self-sustaining villages. I do not attempt to criticize the various elements constituting a Gandhian village. On the other hand, I try to point out the fundamental concerns lying behind a Gandhian village and contend that, without

---

<sup>2</sup> Daniel Quinn, *Ishmael* (New York: A Bantam Book, 1995), pp. 38ff. We assume Quinn’s theory and develop on it.

giving adequate attention to these fundamental concerns, no viable global village can be achieved. Our crucial aim is to demonstrate the viability (and vulnerability) of Gandhian villages and to show that the globalized village cannot survive without incorporating the vital concerns of these villages.

### **Takers vs. Leavers**

We begin with a very brief exposition of the difference between Takers and Leavers, as developed by Daniel Quinn.<sup>3</sup> Quinn uses these pregnant terms to denote two predominant types of cultures prevalent in our world. The Takers (also the conquerors, the “civilized,” the survivors) have been conquering the Leavers (the defeated, the vanquished, the “uncivilized” and primitive people); we, the predominant people of today, are primarily the Takers!<sup>4</sup>

The Takers believe that the world is created for them; so they have the right and the commission to rule the world. That they are created to rule the world, to conquer it, improve it and to bring order and harmony into the world, is an unquestioned premise of our society. “You hear this fifty times a day. You can turn on the radio or the television and hear it every hour. Man is conquering the deserts, man is conquering the oceans, man is conquering the atom, man is conquering the elements, man is conquering the outer space.”<sup>5</sup> The method that the Takers use is that of cut-throat competition. They go to the extent of systematically destroying the competitors’ space and lives, which is something unheard of in other biological lives.

Their law is that of unlimited growth. They assume that unbridled development or economic growth is the panacea for all their problems. This leads to unrestrained production and uncontrolled expansion, needing more conquering. Their way is the only right way; they are convinced that they have found the one right way of living. They expect all others either to follow their way or to lose the very right to exist. They consider it their holy task to police the world, civilize it and set things right in the wild world around them. Such a view on life leads to the impending consequence: destruction of all other cultures, including in the end their own.

As opposed to the Takers, the Leavers believe in the premise that humans are in the world along with other animals and plants. Since the world and humans are God’s creation, humans need not feel anxious and need not rule the world. The method the Leavers follow is that of cooperation and limited competition. The law followed by the Leavers is that of sustainable growth. It acknowledges that there are many ways and not one right way. Their way is the one found suitable for them and found to work for generations. Since it is a viable way (not *the* right way), they walk along this way. They, therefore, let the others walk *their* own ways. Their task is to shepherd the earth or to be the pathfinders in the full development of other cultures and peoples. Thus they are called to shepherd, guard and guide others, not to dominate or rule over them.

It is unfortunate that the Leavers, who have existed in different forms for three million years, have been conquered by the Takers, who came to existence just 3000 years ago, with the advent of the agricultural revolution. The Taker civilization, with their holy zeal of propagating their ‘right’ way, has destroyed other cultures and led the universe to the ecological and atomic catastrophe in which we find ourselves. Obviously theirs is not a viable civilization. So the task for the future of humanity is to rediscover the Leavers’ tradition in our culture – a culture that has enabled us to exist for three million years! Quinn does not advocate going back to the primitive,

---

<sup>3</sup> See *Ishmael*, p. 39.

<sup>4</sup> For a detailed analysis see Kuruvilla Pandikattu, “Beyond the Colonial Past: A New Story-ing,” *Jnanadeepa*, 1/2 (July 1998), pp. 23-33.

<sup>5</sup> *Ishmael*, p. 73.

tribal life style. What he pleads for is to change our attitude and live the Leavers' values in our contemporary society.

At the risk of generalization and over-simplification, we can identify the Leavers with the colonized Indians and the Takers with the British colonizers. Though there will not be an exact match we see similar patterns between the dominating, 'civilized' British and the subjugated, 'uncivilized' Indians. It may be noted that some of the Indians may belong to the Takers category,<sup>6</sup> for ours is only a rough approximation, but this approximation does not affect the conclusions of the paper.

Gandhi would identify himself totally with the dispossessed, the losers, the Leavers. In this section we shall see how Gandhi opted consciously for the *Harijans* (obviously the least of the Leavers) and stood fearlessly against the system of the British (Takers) without opposing the individuals that constituted the Takers' world.

### *Committed to the Harijans*

Gandhi identified himself totally with the dispossessed and disadvantaged, the losers of the modern society. How strongly he felt on the subject of untouchability, the paradigm example of losers, was revealed in his speech at the meeting of the Minorities' Committee on November 13, 1931: "I claim myself in my own person to represent the vast mass of the untouchables. Here I speak not merely on behalf of the Congress, but I speak on my own behalf, and I claim that I would get, if there was a referendum of the untouchables, their vote and that I would top the poll."

In keeping with his commitment to the untouchables, he pleaded for the opening of temples to *Harijans*: "Temples are for sinners, not for saints; but who is to judge where no man is without sin?" He ridiculed the superstition that anybody could be unclean by birth, or the shadow or touch of one human being could defile another human being. Bathing was all very well, he told a village audience, but even buffaloes had long daily baths. 'I am a *Harijan* worker, my time is precious,' he scolded a palmist who offered to read his hand. 'Is there a cure for untouchability?' he asked a village doctor. In another village a woman barber was brought in to shave him. As she set about her job in a businesslike way, Gandhi noticed she was loaded with gold and silver ornaments. "What are these wretched things?" he said, "They don't make you beautiful. Indeed they are ugly and harbor dirt." The poor woman was visibly disappointed. "I borrowed them especially for this occasion," she replied, "I could not come before you without good ornament." Before leaving she had contributed her wages to the *Harijan* Fund.

Summing up his impressions of the *Harijan* tour, Gandhi declared early in August 1934, that untouchability was on its last legs. He had quickened the conscience of the upper class people to the wrongs they were inflicting on the *Harijans*, and he had roused the *Harijans* to the consciousness of their rights. But the battle was by no means over.

On many occasions Gandhi had undertaken fasts for *Harijan's* causes. C. F. Andrews even wrote to him (March 12, 1933) from Birmingham: "I hardly think you realize how very strong here is the moral repulsion against fasting unto death. I confess as a Christian I should do it and it is only with the greatest difficulty that I find myself able to justify it under any circumstances" (for the *Harijans* and against untouchability). The Hindu Leaders' Conference met at Bombay. The leaders, who included Madan Mohan Malaviya, Tej Bahadur Sapru, M. R. Jaykar, Rajagopalachari, N.C. Kelkar and Rajendra Prasad were anxious for a quick solution. They had,

---

<sup>6</sup> In my article mentioned above, I have tried to identify the Takers with the colonizers and the Leavers with the colonized people.



however, to carry with them the leaders of the depressed classes, particularly Ambedkar, who was not only a stubborn advocate of separate electorates but fully conscious of his pivotal position. No solution to which he did not agree was likely to commend itself to the Government. Gandhi was the last person to allow the conference to be stampeded into a wrong decision. He sent a message to the assembled leaders through his son Devadas that he (Devadas) “as his father’s son was prepared to forfeit his father’s life rather than see any injury being done to the suppressed classes in mad haste.” The conference considered a number of proposals; some of its members paid visits to Pune to discuss them with the Mahatma. The meeting had some commendable results.

This commitment to the *Harijans* and then towards the minorities, the Muslims, was the main reason for his life and for his death. It was a consistent passion for him, for which he lived and for which he died.

### *Against the System, Not against the Person*

It is obvious that Gandhi was totally against the corrupt and exploitative system perpetuated by the British. But his opposition was not directed against the individuals in the system, and he could really love the persons in the system: a characteristic Leavers’ feature.

One day, after Lord Irwin had returned from a tour of South India and had approached Delhi, a bomb exploded under the Viceroy’s train. Gandhi congratulated the Viceroy on his miraculous escape. Gandhi’s personal faith in non-violence remained absolutely firm. “I cannot intentionally hurt anything that lives, much less fellow-human beings even though they may do the greatest wrong to me. Whilst, therefore, I hold British rule to be a curse, I do not intend to harm a single Englishman or any legitimate interest he may have in India.” That is why during the war Gandhi was still very loyal to the British and helped the Government in recruiting for the war.<sup>7</sup>

“I must not be misunderstood. Though I hold the British rule in India to be a curse, I do not, therefore, consider Englishmen in general to be worse than any other people on earth. I have the privilege of claiming many Englishmen as dearest friends. Indeed, much that I have learnt of the evil of British rule is due to the writings of frank and courageous Englishmen who have not hesitated to tell the unpalatable truth about that rule.” In other words, Gandhi believed in conversion and not compulsion, so that the opponents of today might become the reformers of tomorrow.

In this section we have approximated the Takers to be the British and the Leavers to be the Indians and more specifically the *Harijans*. Then we view Gandhi as a representative of the Leavers’ tradition, opting for the *Harijans*. It will be our contention that the Leavers’ traditions (i.e. the Gandhian villages) provide us with a viable paradigm for the survival of the world. In the next section we see how much Gandhi criticizes the Takers tradition, using the simplest of the symbols available to the Leavers’ tradition: the salt!

So far, we have identified some of the cherished concerns of Gandhi for the Leavers as: identification with the “least, lost and lowest,” interest for the individual’s needs, priority to the basic needs of the people and respecting the persons in the system even when opposing the system.

### **Gandhi’s Critique of Technological Culture: The Common Salt**

We shall study the Gandhian critique of the Takers’ technological culture based on two very important facts of his life: his salt struggle and his condemnation of industrialization as a curse for

---

<sup>7</sup> See URL <http://web.mahatma.org.in/books/tendul/tendmain.asp>.

humanity. We need to remind ourselves that the Gandhian critique of technology is not for any romantic or nostalgic reason, but for the sake of the individual villagers whose existence is threatened.

### *The Decisive Salt Struggle*

The tax imposed by the government on salt was a turning point in the history of the freedom struggle. For Gandhi, the imposition of the tax, however low it might have been, was totally unacceptable, since salt symbolized the common person. A struggle between the Congress and the Government was inevitable. In January 1930, Gandhi told Tagore that he was thinking furiously ‘night and day’. The first step he took was to call for the celebration of ‘Independence Day’ on January 26. On that day, in the towns and villages of India, hundreds of thousands of people took a pledge that it was a crime against human beings and God to submit to British rule, and undertook to join a campaign of civil disobedience and non-payment of taxes if the Congress launched the tax. Independence Day revealed the latent enthusiasm in the country; Gandhi felt the country was ripe for a mass movement. He suggested the inauguration of the movement with the breach of the Salt Laws. The Salt Tax, though relatively light in incidence, hit the poorest in the land, but salt did not quite seem to fit into the plan of a national struggle for liberation. Salt manufacture was confined to the seacoast or salt mines, and, even if a strike could be organized among the politically backward laborers engaged in the industry, the prospect of launching a successful *satyagraha* struggle did not appear to be bright. These and other doubts assailed Gandhi’s closest adherents even as they followed his lead.

Gandhi announced that he himself would perform the first act of civil disobedience by leading a group of *satyagrahis* to the seashore for the breach of the Salt Laws. He communicated his plans to the Viceroy in a letter, which was an indictment of British rule, as well as an appeal for restoring to India what was her due: “Dear friend, before embarking on civil disobedience and taking the risk I have dreaded to take all these years, I would approach you and find a way out.” Then he continues:<sup>8</sup>

In common with many of my countrymen, I had hugged the fond hope that the proposed Round Table Conference might furnish a solution (of Indian freedom)...But when you said plainly that you could not give any assurance that you or the British Cabinet would pledge yourselves to support a scheme of full dominion status, the Round Table Conference could not possibly furnish the solution for which vocal India is consciously, and dumb millions unconsciously, thirsting...If India is to survive as a nation, if the slow death by starvation of her people is to stop, some remedy must be found for immediate relief. The proposed conference is certainly not the remedy. It is not a matter of carrying conviction by argument. The matter resolves itself into one of matching forces. Conviction or no conviction, Great Britain would defend her Indian commerce and interests by all the forces at her command. India must consequently evolve force enough to free herself from that embrace of death.

Gandhi had realized that in embarking on non-violence, he would be running what might be fairly termed a “mad risk,” but the victories of truth have never been won without risks, often of the gravest character. For Gandhi, conversion of a nation that has consciously or unconsciously

---

<sup>8</sup> B.R. Nanda, *Mahatma Gandhi – A Biography*. As found online at <http://web.mahatma.org.in>. Since found on the website, no page numbers are given.

preyed upon another far more numerous, far more ancient and no less cultured than itself, is worth any amount of risk. He was ready to pay the price and take the risk. So he asserted his desire to convert the nation and the people:<sup>9</sup>

I have deliberately used the word conversion. For my ambition is no less than to convert the British people through non-violence and thus make them see the wrong they have done to India. I do not seek to harm your people. I want to serve them even as I want to serve my own. I believe that I have always served them. I served them up to 1919 blindly. But when my eyes were opened, and I conceived non-cooperation, the object still was to serve them. I employed the same weapon that I have in all humility successfully used against the dearest members of my family. If I have equal love for your people with mine, it will not long remain hidden. It will be acknowledged by them even as members of my family acknowledged it after they had tried me for several years. If people join me, as I expect they will, the sufferings they will undergo, unless the British nation sooner retraces its steps, will be enough to melt the stoniest hearts.

The first impulse of the Government, as of the Congress intellectuals, was to ridicule ‘the kindergarten stage of political revolution’, and to laugh away the idea that the King-Emperor could be unseated by boiling seawater in a kettle. The experts of the Government of India did not take the breach of the Salt Tax seriously. Tottenham, a member of the Central Board of Revenue (the department which dealt with the Salt Tax), described the breach of Salt Laws as “Mr. Gandhi’s somewhat fantastic project.” A committee of two senior officers reported early in February that salt did not appear to be a promising field for initiating a no-tax campaign; that the most that could happen was that small quantities of inferior salt would be sporadically produced in certain areas and consumed locally; that neither government revenues, nor the price of salt were likely to be affected.

In spite of these remarks, Gandhi could mobilize the ordinary masses in the name of the simple common salt. The Collector of Kaira, one of the districts through which Gandhi’s itinerary lay, was so apprehensive of the political effects of Gandhi’s march that he recommended to the Bombay Government that the march should be prohibited. “So long as it is conducted peacefully,” wrote the Government of Bombay to the Government of India, “there is no provision of law which permits prohibition of the march.” The Government of India concurred with the view and added that the time for arrest would come when the matter had passed from the ‘sphere of words to that of action’. Section 117 of the Indian Penal Code, under which the arrest was proposed, being bailable, there was nothing to prevent Gandhi from continuing the march if he chose to be bailed out. Moreover, neither the Bombay Government nor the Government of India could rule out the possibility that Gandhi’s march might end in a fiasco: if the ‘salt earth’ collected by Gandhi’s party, after it reached the seashore were confiscated and no one was prosecuted, would not Gandhi ‘look ridiculous’? The Government of India, therefore, saw the wisdom of ‘waiting on events’ and taking action only when the results of the march became clear. The district magistrates through whose districts Gandhi was to march were, therefore, directed to telegraph daily reports simultaneously to New Delhi and Bombay to enable the policy-makers of the provincial and central governments to adjust the official policy to the exigencies of the political situation.

From Dandi, where he had made the first symbolic breach of Salt Laws, Gandhi sent a message that ‘at present Indian self-respect is symbolized, as it were, in a handful of salt in the *satyagrahi*’s hand. Let the fist be broken, but let there be no surrender of salt’ No less than

---

<sup>9</sup> Nanda.

60,000 Indians were jailed. The story of the historical salt *satyagraha* has become intimately linked to the freedom of India. That was indeed the beginning of the end of the British Empire.

Just before his arrest Gandhi had planned a more aggressive phase of his 'non-violent rebellion' by 'raiding' and taking possession of the salt depots at Dharsana. The raid, which was led by the aged Imam Sahib, an inmate of the *Sabarmati Ashram*, took place on May 21st. The leaders were arrested and the rank and file beaten up; an account of this raid was given in the *New Freeman* by an American correspondent Webb Miller: "In eighteen years of reporting in twenty-two countries I have never witnessed such harrowing scenes as at Dharsana. Sometimes the scenes were so painful that I had to turn away momentarily. One surprising feature was the discipline of volunteers. It seemed they were thoroughly imbued with Gandhi's non-violent creed."

In its resolution of September 14, 1939, the Congress Working Committee expressed its sympathy for those who were resisting Nazi aggression and offered its cooperation in the war against Nazism. Cooperation was, to be "between equals by mutual consent for a cause which both consider to be worthy."<sup>10</sup>

### *Curse of Industrialization*

Gandhi had very harsh words against industrialism and machinery. He is categorical in maintaining that "it is machinery that has impoverished India."<sup>11</sup> For him, machinery is the chief symbol of modern (Takers') civilization; it represents a great sin. It is the villain. We shall first see his harsh criticism of machinery and industrialization and then find underlying reasons for Gandhi's criticism. Finally, we shall find that Gandhi is open to viable industrialization and machines.

He is clear in his affirmation: "My own view [unlike that of Nehru] is that the evils are inherent in industrialism and no amount of socialism can eradicate them."<sup>12</sup> But he adds his customary caution: "What I object to, is the craze for machinery not machinery as such. The craze is for what they call labor-saving machinery. Men go on 'saving labor' till thousands are without work and thrown on the open streets to die of starvation."<sup>13</sup> This reminds us that his criticism is not for its own sake but for the sake of those "thrown on the open streets to die of starvation." Again he is consistent when he asserts: "I am not against machinery as such, but I am totally opposed to it when it masters us."<sup>14</sup>

Gandhi would categorically state his conviction that the mania for mass production is responsible for the world crisis. Granting for the moment that machinery may supply all the needs of humanity, still, it would concentrate production in particular areas, so that you would have to proceed in a round-about way to regulate distribution; whereas, if there is production and distribution both in the respective areas where things are required, it is automatically regulated, and there is less chance for fraud, none for speculation.<sup>15</sup> The reason for his vehement criticism is also given by Gandhi himself. "Industrialization on a mass scale will necessarily lead to passive or active exploitation of the villagers as the problems of competition and marketing come in.

---

<sup>10</sup> Nanda. See also <http://gandhi.virtualave.net/>. See further Shriman Narayan (ed.), *The Selected Works of Mahatma Gandhi* (Ahmedabad: Navajivan Publishing House, 1968), VI, p. 188 (Abridged as *SW*).

<sup>11</sup> *SW*, IV, p. 188.

<sup>12</sup> *SW*, VI, p. 378.

<sup>13</sup> *SW*, VI, p. 380.

<sup>14</sup> *SW*, VI, p. 382.

<sup>15</sup> M.K. Gandhi, *India of My Dreams* (Ahmedabad: Navajivan Publishing House, 1992), pp. 20-30. (Abridged as *Dreams*).

Therefore, we have to concentrate on the village being self-contained, manufacturing mainly for use.”<sup>16</sup>

He is never tired of repeating this: “Industrialism is, I am afraid, going to be a curse for mankind. Exploitation of one nation by another cannot go on for all time. Industrialism depends entirely on your capacity to exploit, on foreign markets being open to you, and on the absence of competition.”<sup>17</sup>

Elsewhere he states explicitly. “I want the dumb millions of our land to be healthy and happy and I want them to grow spiritually. As yet for this purpose we do not need the machine.”<sup>18</sup> Therefore he affirms: “My fundamental objection to machinery rests on the fact that it is machinery that has enabled these nations to exploit others. In itself it is a wooden thing and can be turned to good purpose or bad.”<sup>19</sup>

In spite of these criticisms, he is not dogmatically opposed to machines of every kind. “At the same time I believe that some key industries are necessary. I do not believe in armchair or armed socialism. I believe in action according to my belief, without waiting for wholesale conversion.”<sup>20</sup> Further, he affirms: “I refuse to be dazzled by the seeming triumph of machinery. I am uncompromisingly against all destructive machinery. But simple tools and instruments...[that] save individual labor and lighten the burden of millions of cottages, I should welcome.”<sup>21</sup>

Gandhi is realistic and concedes that machinery has its place; machines have in fact come to stay. But they must not be allowed to displace human labor. He would welcome every improvement in the cottage machine, but he knows that it is criminal to displace hand labor by the introduction of power-driven spindles. He is aware that persons cannot live without industry. “Therefore, I cannot be opposed to industrialization. But I have a great concern about introducing machine industry.”<sup>22</sup> The principle that governs the use of machinery is clearly the welfare of all. “That use of machinery is lawful which subserves the interest of all.”<sup>23</sup> Once we have shaped our life on *ahimsa*, we shall know how to control the machine. So he does not give up hope that machinery can be put to good use.

It is not surprising that a serious criticism against Gandhi’s village work was that he was turning his back on science and industry and advocating a primitive economy which would perpetuate poverty. In *Hind Swaraj*, Gandhi had mercilessly criticized machinery, mills and industrial civilization, but during the next forty years of his life he further elaborated his ideas on machinery, relating them to his fundamental doctrine of non-violence. His principal objection to mechanization was that it tended to concentrate the production of wealth in a few hands. In a country where the hands were too many and the work too little, machinery could add to unemployment and poverty. “I would favor,” he had written in 1921, “the use of the most elaborate machinery if thereby India’s pauperism and resulting idleness could be avoided.” There was a distinction in his mind, however, between ‘mass production’ and ‘production for the masses;’ the former under free enterprise often made the rich richer and the poor poorer. He was not opposed to machinery as such. Even his beloved spinning-wheel was machinery, but it was ‘machinery reduced to the terms of the masses.’ He welcomed simple tools and instruments which ‘lightened

---

<sup>16</sup> *Dreams*, p. 31.

<sup>17</sup> *SW*, VI, p. 377.

<sup>18</sup> *SW*, VI, p. 384.

<sup>19</sup> *SW*, VI, p. 377.

<sup>20</sup> *Dreams*, p. 31.

<sup>21</sup> *Dreams*, pp. 30-31.

<sup>22</sup> *SW*, VI, p. 384. See also Nanda.

<sup>23</sup> *SW*, VI, p. 379.

the burden of the millions of cottages' without atrophying the limbs of persons. He also recognized that some of these comparatively simple machines, such as sewing machines required factories for their manufacture. "I am socialist enough to say," he added, "that such factories should be nationalized or state-controlled. They ought only to be working under the most attractive and ideal conditions, not for profit but for the benefit of humanity, love taking the place of greed as motive."

The concerns evinced by Gandhi in this section are: simplicity of life, significance of symbols, need based technology vs. need creating technology and realistic assessment of human situation without giving up hope.

### **Gandhian Vision of Village Economy: The *Charkha***

*Khadi* (homespun cotton cloth) and *charkha* (hand-spinning), symbolized for Gandhi the village economy and its self-sufficiency. What is needed is that each village be self-sufficient for its basic needs. Although we may not be able to agree with the details which Gandhi gives here, we can very well agree with his fundamental insight.<sup>24</sup> His vision of the village economy is that of self-sufficient and independent units where the basic necessities of all the villagers are met and where the Leavers' life style is fostered.

Even at the risk of looking old fashioned, Gandhi speaks of the greatness of *Khadi*. According to him it "connotes the beginning of economic freedom and equality of all in the country... It must be taken with all its implications. It means wholesale *swadeshi* mentality, a determination to find all the necessities of life in India and that, too, through the labor and intellect of the villagers."<sup>25</sup> For Gandhi, *Khadi* mentality means decentralization of the production and distribution of the necessities of life. Therefore, the formula so far evolved is, every village to produce all its necessities and a certain percentage in addition for the requirements of the cities.

Further, the "message of the spinning wheel is much wider than its circumference. Its message is one of simplicity, service of humanity, living so as not to hurt others, creating an indissoluble bond between the rich and the poor, capital and labor, the prince and the peasant."<sup>26</sup> The *charkha* restores the villages to their rightful place and abolishes distinctions between high and low.

Actually, Gandhi's propagation of *charkha* can be traced to his actual encounter with the situation of the poor. He discovered that there were numerous *Harijan* families that subsisted on spinning. Thus *Khadi* is the poor person's staff of life. It helps the poorest, including the *Harijans*, who are the most helpless among the poorest. They are so because many occupations which are available to the others are not available to the *Harijans*.<sup>27</sup> That is what urged Gandhi to promote the *charkha* as the symbol of Indian nationhood.

*Charkha* for Gandhi is intimately connected to the village life. Ever since Gandhi entered Indian public life in 1915, he had been pleading for a new deal for the village. The acute pressure on land and the absence of supplementary industries had caused chronic unemployment and underemployment among the peasants whose appalling poverty never ceased to weigh upon Gandhi's mind. His advocacy for the spinning wheel was derived from its immediate practical value as a palliative. The All-India Spinners' Association, to which he had given a good deal of his time during the years of political quiescence, had in a period of ten years extended its activities to 5,300 villages, and provided employment to 220,000 spinners, 20,000 weavers and 20,000

---

<sup>24</sup> Cf. SW, VI, p. 385.

<sup>25</sup> SW, VI, p. 385.

<sup>26</sup> SW, VI, p. 386.

<sup>27</sup> Cf. SW, VI, pp. 389-390.

volunteers and disbursed more than 20,000,000 rupees in Indian villages. These figures may not seem impressive today in the context of large scale state-sponsored planning, but they represented solid work on the part of an organization often against heavy odds.

Nobody knew better than Gandhi that the All-India Spinners' Association had only scratched the surface of the problem of rural poverty, but he began to think and plan for the revival of the village economy as a whole. His *Harijan* tour had revealed to him how, with the decay of village industries, *Harijans* had sunk deeper and deeper into poverty; the reform of untouchability was thus linked with the economic amelioration of these unfortunate people. The revival of village industries thus acquired a new urgency.

The *swadeshi* cult, which insisted on the use of articles made in India and had swayed the country during periods of intense political excitement, received a new twist in the 1930s. It was not enough, argued Gandhi, that an article should be of Indian origin; it was equally important that it should be made in a village. He appealed to town-dwellers to examine each article of daily consumption which was manufactured in India or abroad, and to find a substitute for it from the village. The broom could replace a brush; a tooth-stick of a tree for a tooth brush; hand-pounded rice for factory polished rice; handmade sugar for factory sugar, and handmade paper for the products of the paper mills. Village products might sometimes cost more, but they distributed wages and profits among those whose need was the direst. For nearly 150 years, the cities had drained villages of wealth and talent. "For the city dweller," wrote Gandhi, "the villages have become untouchable. He does not know them; he will not live in them, and if he finds himself in a village he will want to reproduce city life there. This would be tolerable, if we could bring into being cities which would accommodate thirty crores [300,000,000] of human beings."<sup>28</sup>

So Gandhi could unashamedly proclaim: "*Khadi* to me is the symbol of unity of Indian humanity, or the economic freedom and equality and, therefore,...in the poetic expression of Jawaharlal Nehru, the livery of India's freedom."<sup>29</sup> Within this background of the poverty of the villages and the possibility opened up by the *Charkha*, Gandhi could boldly assert: "The spinning wheel is an attempt to produce something out of nothing."<sup>30</sup>

Such a change of attitude towards the *charkha* is difficult and demanding. This needs a revolutionary change in the mentality and taste of many. Easy though the non-violent way is in many respects, it is very difficult in many others. The revival of the *charkha* cannot take place without an army of selfless Indians with intelligence and patriotism, working with a single mind in the villages to spread the message of the *charkha* and bring a ray of hope and light into their drab eyes. At the same time, Gandhi is of course realistic enough to know that *charkha* and *khadi* alone are not sufficient. "Now I feel that *khadi* alone cannot revive the villages. Village upliftment is possible only when we rejuvenate village life as a whole, revive all village industries and make the entire village industrious."<sup>31</sup>

### *The Ideal: Simple Village Life*

Rural economics: The Bombay session of the Indian National Congress in October 1934, authorized the formation of the All-India Village Industries' Association under Gandhi's guidance. This Association, 'unaffected by and independent of the political activities of the Congress,' was

---

<sup>28</sup> Nanda.

<sup>29</sup> SW, VI, p. 385.

<sup>30</sup> SW, VI, p. 389. See also <http://gandhi.virtualave.net/>.

<sup>31</sup> SW, VI, p. 391.

to work for the revival and encouragement of the village industries and the moral and physical advancement of the village. The resolution was an index of the new orientation that Gandhi was giving to his own activities and those of the Congress.

Since eighty-five per cent of the population of India lived in villages, their economic and social resuscitation was a *sine qua non* for freedom. Gandhi described the exploitation of the village in the interest of the town as a species of violence. The growing gap in economic standards and social amenities between the village and the town had to be bridged. This could best be done by volunteers from the towns who spread themselves in the countryside to revive dead or dying rural industries and to improve standards of nutrition, education and sanitation. Gandhi expected these public-spirited men and women to support themselves on 'a village scale'; if they put on their work, a price which villages could not sustain, village economy would face bankruptcy. Voluntary work alone could overcome the financial hurdle which made official programs of rural uplift a snail-paced affair.

Gandhi felt that the villagers could be educated out of this inertia by bands of selfless workers 'infiltrating' into the villages, helping the villagers to revive village industries, running village schools, improving sanitation and popularizing a balanced diet. Labor and material were available in the village; they had only to be harnessed in its service.

*Transforming Villages:* "How to turn waste into wealth," was how Gandhi summed up the objects of the All-India Village Industries Association to Lord Farringdon who visited him. Gandhi explained that his program did not cover rural indebtedness, because "it requires state effort. I am just now discovering things people can do without state aid. Not that I do not want state aid. But I know I cannot get it on my terms."

Among the things which villagers could do, but often failed to do, was to keep their villages clean. Gandhi attributed this to the complex of untouchability: "to the fear of touching our own dirt and, therefore, of cleaning it." He exhorted everyone to be his own 'scavenger', to join in a campaign to keep village tanks, wells and streets clean, and to remove the cause for that reproach of Lionel Curtis that Indian villages were 'dung heaps.'

Nutrition was another problem on which Gandhi wrote and spoke. Nutrition took on a new urgency as a problem of the Indian masses when he realized (with something of a shock) that apart from their poverty their food habits were responsible for their undernourishment. The deficiency in vitamins was inexcusable, when green leaves were available for the asking. He appealed to the Indian scientists to pursue research into Indian diets in the context of Indian conditions:

It is for you to make these biological experiments. Don't say off-hand that Bengalis need half a pound of rice every day and must digest half a pound. Devise a scientifically perfect diet for them. Determine the quantity of starch required for an average human constitution. I would not be satisfied until I have been able to add some milk and fat and greens to the diet of our common village folk. I want chemists who would starve in order to find an ideal diet for their poor countrymen. Unfortunately our doctors have never approached the question from the humanitarian standpoint, at any rate from the poor man's standpoint.<sup>32</sup>

---

<sup>32</sup> As a practiced cook, Gandhi wrote on the modes of cooking which did not destroy the nutritive value of foods and on the superiority of hand-ground wheat and hand-polished rice to the factory products. "The textile mills," he explained, "had brought unemployment in their wake, but rice and flour mills have also brought in undernourishment and disease." See Nanda.



It was obvious to Gandhi that rural India could not be transformed without the help of the urban intellectuals. To make the country village-conscious, he advised Congress to hold its annual sessions in villages. The Faizpur Congress was the first to be held in a village; Gandhi noted that the session was free from the scramble and hustle inevitable in big towns, that village hedges could be a better substitute for barbed wire, and exhibitions of village handicrafts could entertain as well as instruct.

He interpreted every problem in terms of the needs of the village. The educational system had always struck him as inadequate and wasteful. The vast majority of the people had been denied the rudiments of education; but even those who went to village primary schools soon unlearned what was taught to them because it had little to do with their daily lives and environment.

Work in the villages was an arduous and slow affair; it was ‘plodder’s work’, as Gandhi put it. It did not earn banner headlines in the press and did not seem to embarrass the Government. Many of Gandhi’s colleagues did not see how this innocuous activity could help India in advancing to the real goal of political freedom. Gandhi was accused of side-tracking the main political issue. His answer was: “I do not see how thinking of these necessary problems (of village uplift) and finding a solution for them was of no political significance and how any examination of the financial policy of the Government has necessarily a political bearing. What I am asking the masses to do is such as can be done by millions of people, whereas the work of examining the policy of our rulers will be beyond them. Let those few who are qualified do so. But until these leaders can bring great changes into being why should not millions like me use the gifts that God has given them to the best advantage? Why should they not clean their doors and make of their bodies fitter instruments?”<sup>33</sup>

*Socialistic Economy:* Gandhi’s picture of the ideal Indian village was of a ‘republic’, independent of its neighbors for its vital wants, yet interdependent in other ways, growing its own food and cotton and (if surplus land was available) money crops. As far as possible, its activities were to be done on a co-operative basis; it was to have its own theater, school and public hall; elementary education was to be free and compulsory; an elected *panchayat* was to decide disputes; guards selected by rotation from a register were to police the village.

The image of this ‘perfect democracy based on individual freedom’ could be dismissed as utopian, but to Gandhi it was the only form a non-violent society could take. He did not care what label was applied to his ideas. Indian socialists, who by 1935 were a strong wing within the Congress, sometimes criticized him. Gandhi claimed that he was a socialist long before many Indian socialists had avowed the creed. “But my socialism,” he wrote, “was natural to me, and not adopted from any book. It came out of my unshakable belief in non-violence. No man could be actively non-violent and not rise against social injustice wherever it occurred.”

He did not accept the inevitability of class war or of violence; he believed his non-violent technique could end social injustice no less than foreign rule. By eschewing force, his socialism did not become a pious futility; in spite of its humanitarian and ostensibly gentle methods, it had revolutionary implications. Unlike capitalists and socialists, he considered property as an evil; he saw the unreality of the debate about ownership of property which had little relevance for millions of people who were no more than at a subsistence level, if not below it. Addressing the women of India, he exhorted them to remember that millions of men have no property to transmit to posterity.

---

<sup>33</sup> It is interesting to note that the first reaction of the Government to Gandhi’s village uplift work was to consider it a well laid plan to revive civil disobedience on an unprecedented scale with the support of the rural masses; a circular was in fact issued to the Provincial Governments by the Government of India in 1934 to be on their guard and to carry on counter-propaganda in the villages.

“Let them learn from them that it is better for the few to have no ancestral property at all. The real property that a parent can transmit to all equally is his or her character and educational facilities.”

Coming to his economic vision, he tolerated the institution of property, not because he loved it or considered it essential for the progress of humanity, but because he wished to abolish it through a non-violent technique. Gandhi would have vested the ownership of property neither in the individual nor in the state, but in God. Those who possessed property were thus to consider themselves as trustees; but they were not to be its primary, let alone exclusive, beneficiaries. No one was to keep more to himself than he needed; everyone was to work according to his or her capacity and to receive according to his or her real need. This theory of trusteeship might seem a rationalization of the privileged position of the princes, landlords and business magnates. In fact, it was a radical theory which called for voluntary sacrifices from the ‘haves’ in the interest of the ‘have-nots.’

A model landlord of Gandhi’s conception

would at once reduce much of the burden the farmer is now bearing. He...will reduce himself to poverty in order that the farmer may have the necessaries of life. He will study the economic conditions of the farmers under his care, establish schools in which he will educate his children side by side with those of the farmers. He will purify the village well and the village tank. He will teach the farmer to sweep his roads and clean his latrines by himself doing this necessary labor. He will throw open without reserve his own gardens for the unrestricted use of the farmer. He will use as hospital, school or the like, most of the unnecessary buildings which he keeps for his pleasure.<sup>34</sup>

How were the propertied few to be persuaded to subordinate their own greed to the good of the community as a whole? The first step was to reason with the rich; if argument failed, non-violent non-cooperation was to be invoked. Just as no government could survive for long without the cooperation (willing or forced) of the people, economic exploitation was impossible without the active or passive acquiescence of the exploited.

Gandhi did not seek refuge from hard realities in the safety of a rigid doctrine. His ideas were evolved in response to the social and economic conditions around him. He had once criticized Indian socialists, but as years passed the latter saw that their ideas were present in the Gandhian programs, though sometimes under a guise which they did not readily recognize. Gandhi was not a theorist, but a practical man, dealing with practical problems. In pre-independent India, he had to function without the help of the Government and often in the face of its opposition. The problems of poverty, disease, ignorance and inertia are too serious a problem to be postponed to a distant date.

It was all a question of perspective; those who had learnt to think of India in terms of the economics they learnt at the university were not always able to appreciate the real problems of India. As early as 1911, Keynes, while reviewing the work, *Economic Transition in India*, wrote: “Sir Theodore Morrison [the author of the book] argues too lightly from the West to the East without a full enough consideration of the deep underlying factors upon which depends the most advantageous direction of the resources of the nation....The mills of Bombay and Calcutta figure too much in the public eye.”<sup>35</sup>

---

<sup>34</sup> Nanda.

<sup>35</sup> Nanda.

Keynes went on to say that these mills hardly influenced the general well-being of India which could be improved only by applying the brains and the capital of new India to her fields and villages. The central idea in Gandhi's mind was to relieve the grinding poverty which stalked the village; he shrank from the idea of further pauperizing the village for the greater prosperity of a few big towns. Rather than turn the wheels of a few gigantic plants, he wished the hundreds of thousands of cottages in the countryside to hum with activity, to cater to their own needs, as well as to send their wares to the towns. If in Switzerland and Japan work and wages could be carried to thousands of cottages, why could it not be done in India?

In one important respect, conditions in India differed from those in other countries; an alien government had neither the incentive nor the organization to undertake radical changes in the country's economy. When Gandhi had torn himself away from politics to work in the villages, the Government even suspected him of an astute and deeply laid plan to prepare the rural masses for a countrywide civil disobedience campaign. For Gandhi, it was no strategy, but the essence of his life for the villagers.

Gandhi could look into the heart of the villagers. "In the case of the Indian villages, an age-old culture is hidden under an entrustment of crudeness. Take away the encrustation, remove his chronic poverty and his illiteracy and you have the finest specimen of what a cultured, cultivated, free citizen should be."<sup>36</sup>

#### *The Goal: Basic Necessities for All*

The primary goal of Gandhi's insistence on the village life was to provide the basic necessities for all. Such a possibility was ruled out in the Indian cities. Gandhi contends: "I have no historical proof, but I believe that there was a time in India when village economies were organized on the basis of such non-violent occupations, not on the basis of the rights of man but on the duties of man. Those who engaged themselves in such occupations did earn their living, but their labor contributed to the good of the community."<sup>37</sup>

If Gandhi asked for a return to the villages, it is not for any nostalgic reason but for the sole purpose of making them self-supporting, self-sustaining, and self-developing. He did foresee that in the villages some extra materials needed for cities would be produced. But he would never imagine that villages (or even nations) would be totally bought up to produce only items for the cities as in the case of the 'Banana republics.'

He imagined a simple life style in the villages. At the same time the villages will be hygienic, clean and healthy. The village *panchayats* will be able to take up the works needed to maintain villages free from dreaded sicknesses.

It is to be noted that Gandhi himself practiced this simple life and he could meet the basic necessities of life by himself. He narrates, in his autobiography, the interesting incident of how he learned to shave and cut his own hair himself. Gandhi also learnt cooking as part of his simple and self-supporting life style.

In this section the main concerns manifested by Gandhi are: socialistic economy, meeting the basic necessities of all, spontaneous, creative interaction and transforming village life.

---

<sup>36</sup> *Dreams*, p. 91.

<sup>37</sup> *SW*, VI, p. 395.

## Conclusion: Viable vs. Vicious Village

As we assumed, the Takers civilization and the global village as its technological marvel is not viable in the long run. It is vicious and venal. It had led to the destruction of the Leavers' culture and to the destruction of the tribal and village communities. It leads to a monolithic and uniform pattern. It has led to the brink of total destruction.

It is both a vicious and venal way of life. It also brings the other cultures into its powerful grasp. Any community or culture that does not fit in with its preconditions and goals is not allowed to exist.<sup>38</sup> Either one has to swim with it or is forced to drown. To that extent it is also venal. It perpetuates a corrupt and a self-destructive system on the assumption that if it does not work now, more of it will work later. The phenomenon of unlimited growth, through which it attempts to achieve a harmonious society, is based on a false or even sinister attempt to refuse to see the consequences of one's way of life.

On the other hand, because the Gandhian village is not that convenient and comfortable it is vulnerable, but obviously it is also viable. The village set-up where diversity and cooperation are stressed, may not be able to bring in all facilities. To that extent it is vulnerable to the temptations offered by the technological conveniences. But the village community as envisaged by Gandhi is life supporting, self-sustaining and community fostering. Therefore, it is viable.

At the same time I do not and cannot agree with all the assumptions of Gandhi. In this essay no attempt is made to justify Gandhi's vision of a village economy. There are many elements which are utopian, misguided and outdated. But we do affirm that the basic vision which Gandhi fosters is much more sound and viable than the vision that the global village fosters. We cannot simply go back to the village or the tribal culture advocated by Gandhi. But without giving serious thought to the concerns introduced by Gandhi for the poor, underprivileged Leavers, no viable civilization can be built and sustained. Today the simple symbols of common salt, *charkha* and *sevagram*, may not evoke that same profound impact which they once did, but what they stand for can be ignored only at the very risk of losing our human nature. The global village has to take a radically different turn, keeping with the Gandhian concerns of village life, if it has to have any future existence.

Some of the cherished concerns of Gandhi that we have pointed out in this essay are: identification with the "least, lost and lowest," interest in the needs of an individual, giving priority to the basic needs of the people, respecting the persons in the system even when opposing the system, simplicity of life, significance of symbols, need-based technology vs. need-creating technology and realistic assessment of the human situation without giving up hope. Further, he stressed a socialistic economy, meeting the basic necessities of all, spontaneous and creative interaction to transform village life, welfare for all, a religious basis for life, a holistic outlook on life and cooperation through networking. We can also notice in him: openness to change, joy in life, the conviction that truth is freedom and the integration of politics with religion. Only a village based on these concerns can be Gandhian and viable.

---

<sup>38</sup> Details can be found in Quinn, *Ishmael*. We cannot elaborate here due to paucity of space.

## **Part IV**

### **Cultic Consequences**



## ***Sevagram* and *Sarvodaya*: The Relevance of Gandhian Symbols for a Viable Future**

*Kuruville Pandikattu*

I have no more influence with God than you have. Suppose a crow sits on a palm tree at the moment when the tree falls to the ground. Will you imagine that the weight of the bird brought down the tree?--*M.K. Gandhi*

Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, the father of the nation, has become for Indians a powerful symbol representing mainly the ordinary and powerless people. In this article I want to study two ‘seemingly outdated’ but still powerful symbols of Gandhi: *Sevagram* and *Sarvodaya*. *Sevagram* is an *ashram* (hermetic) type of living together where everything was shared, the people had a common goal and they lived in utter simplicity. The philosophy behind *Sevagram* was *Sarvodaya*, the welfare for the whole. It was a welfare without in any way belittling the individual, a specially the poor and the powerless. These have been key paradigms used by Gandhi during the freedom struggle to give the people an ideal to strive for and a symbol to live for. The symbolic significance of these two practical notions is beyond our full grasp. They were definitely powerful symbols for the Indians of 50 years ago, and there were millions who lived this philosophy and realized fulfilled and meaningful lives through these symbols.

### **The Viable Future: *Sevagram***

In this article, I look into the viable future as visualized by Gandhi in terms of the symbol of *Sevagram*. (Its earlier name is *Segaon* and was adopted by Gandhi for his village or *ashram* life). It might again be pointed out that we are not speaking of *Sevagram* as a model for the future. Admitted that *Sevagram* is outdated, we can look for the profound symbolic significance that *Sevagram* radiates to a fundamentally viable vision of village and human life. The concern behind the project of *Sevagram* is valid today as is its principle, namely, “the individual is supreme.”<sup>1</sup>

Gandhi has acknowledged how the passage in the *Sermon on the Mount* – “Whosoever shall smite thee on the right cheek, turn to him the other also” – had gripped him when he first read it as a student. Though this may point to an assumption that his was a Christian interpretation of the *Gita*, this is an unjustifiable step. If you grant him the initial bold leap in which Kurushetra becomes the human heart, all the rest of his interpretation is within the framework of the Upanishads and the text of the *Gita*. His reasons for making this bold leap were all based upon his perception of self-evident truth (i.e., self-evident to him) as shown by the long study of the *Gita* itself.

It was foreign to Gandhi to preach what he did not practice; he decided to settle in a village. He could have gone to his native Gujarat, but he had a number of devoted workers in that province. Maganwadi, near Wardha, was suggested, but it was a large village and did not present the

---

<sup>1</sup> Shriman Narayan (ed.) *The Selected Works of Mahatma Gandhi* (Ahmedabad: Navajivan Publishing House, 1968). Vol VI, p. 438. (Abridged as SW).

difficulties which workers would face in small and undeveloped villages. His choice eventually fell upon *Segaon*, which was also situated near Wardha but had only a population of 600 and lacked such bare amenities as a good road, a shop and a post office. Here, on some land owned by his friend and disciple Jammalal Bajaj, Gandhi occupied a one-room hut. Those who came to see him during the rains had to wade through ankle-deep mud. The climate was inhospitable; there was not an inhabitant of this village who had not suffered from dysentery or malaria. Gandhi himself fell sick, but was resolved not to leave *Segaon*. He had come alone; he would not allow even his wife to join him. He hoped he would draw his team for the village ‘uplift’ from *Segaon* itself, but he could not prevent his disciples (old and new) from collecting around him. When Dr. John Mott interviewed him in 1937, Gandhi was in the solitary hut, but before long a colony of mud and bamboo houses grew up around it. Among its residents were Professor Bhansali, who had roamed in the forests naked and with sealed lips, subsisting on margosa leaves; Maurice Frydman, a Pole, who became a convert to the Gandhian conception of a handicraft civilization based on non-violence; a Sanskrit scholar who was a leper and was housed next to Gandhi’s hut so that Gandhi could take care of him; a Japanese monk who (in Mahadev Desai’s words) “worked like a horse and lived like a hermit.” No wonder that Vallabhbai Patel called *Segaon* a ‘menagerie’. Gandhi referred to it as the ‘Home for Invalids.’

*Sevagram* (as *Segaon* was renamed) was not planned as an *ashram*; Gandhi never conceived it as such and did not impose any formal discipline upon it. This motley group, consisting of men and women of vastly dissimilar temperaments and attainments, bound to him by varying degrees of respect or affection and by the common ideal of service to the village, constituted a human laboratory which gave him, according to Mahadev Desai, exercise in the practice of *ahimsa* (non-violence) in the domestic field. Its successful practice would mean its automatic extension to the political field. That is why he always longs to get back to his laboratory in order to be free for more self-examination and more experimentation. That difficult instruments make his immediate task more difficult is true, but it is also true that they make him all the more fit for the larger task.

Before long, *Sevagram* became a center of the Gandhian scheme of village welfare. A number of institutions grew up in and around it to take up the various strands of economic and social upliftment. The All-India Village Industries’ Association, with its headquarters at Maganwadi, supported and developed such industries as could easily be fostered in the villages. These industries required little capital and did not require help from outside the village. The Association set up a school for training village workers and published its own periodical, the *Gram Udyog Patrika*.

To rid India’s 700,000.00 villages of poverty, disease and ignorance was a colossal task and required a multi-sided effort. Fostering village industries could create employment and pump purchasing power into the villages; it could also shake the villagers out of their lethargy. Gandhi wrote:

The 400 adults of *Segaon* can easily put ten thousand rupees annually into their pockets if only they would work as I ask them. But they won’t. They lack cooperation; they do not know the art of intelligent labor, they refuse to learn anything new.<sup>2</sup>

Gandhi had acted keeping in tune with his ideal village life, when he founded his *ashram* on 25th May 1915 in Ahmedabad. He was adamant in making this *ashram* open to all: “I should take

---

<sup>2</sup> B.R. Nanda, *Mahatma Gandhi – A Biography*. As found in <http://web.mahatma.org.in>.



the first opportunity of admitting an untouchable candidate to the *ashram* if he was otherwise worthy.”<sup>3</sup>

The *ashram* was a laboratory in which Gandhi experimented with himself and others. It was also a military academy, if the term may be used, for training men and women for a war without violence. Early in 1915, he had told C.F. Andrews that he did not anticipate an occasion for *satyagraha* for five years. Nevertheless, in his *ashram* a band of young men and women were being trained in the moral and emotional controls essential for a *satyagrahi*, so that the group did not give way to hatred or violence, even under provocation. The *Sabarmati Ashram* was to do for the *satyagraha* struggles of 1920 and 1930, what the Phoenix and Tolstoy Farm had done in South Africa. It was also to provide men and women for constructive activities which, between spells of *satyagraha*, built up the nation’s morale.

The *Ashram* has wider significance for the life of the individuals. It looks after the physical, psychological, intellectual and spiritual needs of the people. Gandhi speaks of the *ashram* ideal of education.<sup>4</sup> For Gandhi, *Sevagram* was a place for all, and political transformation was the main nerve of his *ashram* life. It was totally united with the life and aspirations of the ordinary people. It was in no way a secluded place where people tried to reach God through individual penance and ascetic meditation. It was the center of India’s freedom struggle and pulsated with the mood of the ordinary people of India.

### **Sarvodaya or the Welfare of All**

*Sarvodaya* is the principle that guided *Sevagram*. The word *Sarvodaya* was coined by Gandhi. It is a compound of two Sanskrit words: *Sarva* which means ‘All,’ and *Udaya* which means ‘Upliftment or Welfare or Prosperity’. Therefore *Sarvodaya* means the ‘Upliftment or Welfare or Prosperity of All.’

Gandhi used the word *Sarvodaya* to describe the principles he felt should guide us in our efforts to build ourselves, our families, our communities and nations. He had arrived at these principles of a *Sarvodaya* society on the basis of his studies, his observations and his experiments with truth and non-violence. He felt very strongly that the soundest foundation on which societies should be built were the qualities of truth, love and compassion in both our personal and our public lives.

Gandhi first used the word *Sarvodaya* in a booklet which he published in his native Gujarati after he read John Ruskin. That essay, *Unto This Last*, was based on a parable from the Gospel according to Matthew (20:1-16) concerning the owner of a plantation and his hiring of laborers to work in his vineyard. In his parable Jesus made the master of the vineyard declare: “I will give unto this last even as I give unto thee.” The emphasis of Ruskin’s essay, as interpreted by Gandhi, is certainly that the ideal society is one in which there is concern for the welfare of all: ‘unto this last’, that is the neediest or the poorest of the poor. This is the foundation for his *Sarvodaya* movement. Its main features are trusteeship, economic equality and networking.

*Trusteeship*: The theory of trusteeship, elimination of exploitation in every shape or form; a classless society which offers no privileges by the birth or wealth or talent; mutual cooperation being the driving force of motivation and behavior; and above all, securing the welfare of all without any distinction of race, religion, sex or political affiliation: these may be said to be the highlights of the *Sarvodaya* society envisioned by the Mahatma.

---

<sup>3</sup> SW, II, p. 589.

<sup>4</sup> M.K. Gandhi, *India of My Dreams* (Ahmedabad: Navajivan Publishing House, 1992), p. 199.

In other words, human values, individual development that is always consistent with its use for the development of society; promotion of altruism to the highest degree; integration of the individual with society; and lifting the whole human society to the highest level of existence where love and fair play will play the most crucial roles. These are the predominant characteristics of the *Sarvodaya* ideal.

A Guyanese author, Arnold Apple, summarizes the same vision of society when he writes:

We must be able to close the gates of unfairness, racism, untruthfulness and selfishness. To think that we are equal in every respect is indeed a misguided thought! But we must find a system to give every person the right initiative and opportunity to perform to the fullest in his or her capacity – a system to make us seek out and discover new attitudes in which we could move to transform our selfish talents into usefulness, and eventually a progressive nation.

*Sarvodaya*, then, is the application of the principle of non-violence in the transformation of societies from their present forms which are mostly exploitative of and unfavorable to the disadvantaged, toward more balanced, inclusive and egalitarian forms in which can be enshrined the principle of social justice for all.

*Economic equality*: “Economic equality is the master key to non-violent transformationary independence,” wrote Gandhi.

Working for economic equality means abolishing the eternal conflict between capital and labor. It means leveling down of the few rich in whose hands is concentrated the bulk of the nation’s wealth, on the one hand, and the leveling up of the semi-starved naked millions, on the other. A non-violent system of government is clearly an impossibility so long as the wide gulf between the rich and the hungry millions persists.<sup>5</sup>

The most disadvantaged sections of the community being the economically, physically and mentally poor, it is obvious that no egalitarian society could evolve without the poor taking part in the evolutionary process. And for this sector to take part, the focus must be put on raising their status to an acceptably decent level.

However, as it should be for all the other sectors of society, if an acceptable level of existence is to be reached and maintained for the disadvantaged sector, it is imperative that it should be self-sustainable through their participation in their own management. Otherwise, they will continue to be dependent on others – a state in which true liberation or empowerment could never take place.

The *Sarvodaya network*: During his lifetime, Gandhiji never allowed *Sarvodaya* organizations to be formally instituted. His thinking was that once you served people, as ‘*sevaks*’, within the *Sarvodaya* philosophy there was no need for institutionalization. But since his demise, *Sarvodaya* organizations have been established (some 40 of them) worldwide – on all the continents – genuinely helping people towards building new societies from the ‘grass-roots’ up. These are now being connected into a *Sarvodaya* network with headquarters in Bangalore, India.

“The path to this new society and better life,” writes Dr. A.T. Ariyatne, head of the largest *Sarvodaya* organization,

begins with the awakening of individuals, families and communities to their own potential. A major aspect of this awakening is helping people to understand that they can make and carry out

---

<sup>5</sup> See URL <http://www.sarvodaya.org>.

their own development plans to meet their own needs, and that they do not need to be mentally and physically dependent on what is handed down to them by distant and other agencies outside their spheres.<sup>6</sup>

At the operational level, the most successful *Sarvodaya* programs have most often been those which, apart from being self-created and self-managed, have employed practical hands-on, learning-by-doing methods, including a lot of income generation, skills training and conscientisation; rather than the theoretical “talk-shop” or workshop approach. And they have always exercised the utmost respect for the cultural mores of the people involved, whether their ethics come from world faiths such as Hinduism, Buddhism, Christianity, Islam, Judaism, etc. or any other traditional religion.

The Credo of the International Institute of Rural Reconstruction (based in the Philippines), as articulated by its founder, Dr James Yen, encapsules a methodology that is very much in consonance with *Sarvodaya*:

Go to the people  
Live among them  
Learn from them  
Plan with them  
Work with the people  
Start with what they know  
Build on what the people have  
Teach by showing, learn by doing  
Not a showcase but a pattern  
Not odds and ends but a system  
Not piecemeal but integrated approach  
Not to confirm but to transform  
Not relief but release.<sup>7</sup>

To sum up, some of the dominant Gandhian concerns that we see in *Sarvodaya* philosophy are: welfare for all, a religious basis for life, a holistic outlook of life and cooperation through networking.

### **The Relevance of Gandhi: The Lone Pilgrim**

Having seen briefly some of the significant practical and philosophical insights of Gandhi, we are in position to study the relevance of Gandhi as a person and a mass leader. Though his vision and life is exemplary, he lived as a loner, pursued a pilgrim’s way and gave up his life for a cause dear to his heart! Even in the *ashram*, he dared to have his individual dreams and convictions. He was a human being set apart. His relevance can be found also in his ‘lonely’ life with deep convictions, in spite of the fact that there has been no other human being in history who had such a massive following during his or her life time. There were thousands of people for whom Gandhi was a symbol for God and for whom they would easily give up their own lives.

---

<sup>6</sup> See hyperlink <http://www.sarvodaya.org>. The author is speaking of the situation in Sri Lanka.

<sup>7</sup> Peter Lauchmonen Kempadoo. The author is Guyanese, at present settled in Britain after working along *Sarvodaya* lines in Africa for the last ten years. Hyperlink <http://www.sarvodaya.org>.

Gandhi is obviously not an ordinary mortal. Within five years of his return from South Africa, Gandhi became the dominant figure in Indian public life. By 1920, most of the front-rank politicians had joined his banner and the others had practically ceased to matter. Rarely had a political conquest been more spectacular or more complete. During the next three decades there were periods when his opponents wrote him off as a spent bullet. But this proved to be a case of the wish being father to the thought; Gandhi staged a resounding come-back at a moment of his own choosing and with his influence undiminished.<sup>8</sup>

Part of the explanation for his meteoric rise and enduring influence lay in the impact which he made upon the imagination of the Indian masses. The symbol or myth of 'the Mahatma' had its practical inconveniences; it turned his tours into a terrible ordeal for him, but it also made his prestige independent of the immediate success or failure which attended his movements.

There were other reasons for this pre-eminence. The struggle in South Africa had matured him; he had outgrown the diffidence which had dogged him as a student in England and a young lawyer in India, and had taught him to combine tremendous confidence with a disarming humility. Those who came under his spell and changed the very texture of their lives included men and women of vastly dissimilar talents and temperaments: great lawyers and parliamentarians like C.R. Das and Motilal Nehru, humanists like Madan Mohan Malaviya and Rajendra Prasad, realists like Vallabhbhai Patel and Rajagopalachari, idealists like Jawaharlal Nehru and Jayaprakash Narayan. They saw in his non-violent technique the only practical alternative to speech making and bomb throwing, between which Indian politics had so far ineffectively oscillated. They turned their backs upon personal comfort and professional ambitions and spent the best part of their lives in trains or in British prisons. They did not share all his ideas on politics and economics; few of them shared his religious outlook, but they were tied to him by a deeply emotional bond. He was not only the leader, but the *Bapu*, the father who deserved affection and respect. With his immense appeal to the masses, and his peculiar relationship with the Congress leaders, Gandhi symbolized in his own person the basic unity of Indian nationalism over a quarter of a century, thus providing a prophylaxis against the fatal tendency of nationalist movements towards schism. With other political parties, he stressed the points of contact rather than those of conflict; he did not ridicule or denounce those with whom he differed. With the three Liberal leaders, Tej Bahadur Sapru, M. R. Jayakar and Srinivasa Sastri, he corresponded frequently, often thinking aloud with them and seeking their candid reactions "Your truthfulness," he wrote to Srinivasa Sastri, "is more important to me than your cooperation." If he could not develop a similar equation with the Muslim League leaders, it was not for want of trying.

*Truth as Freedom:* The real significance of the Indian freedom movement in the eyes of Gandhi was that it was waged non-violently. He would have had no interest in it if the Congress had not adopted *satyagraha* and subscribed to non-violence. He objected to violence not only because an unarmed people had little chance of success in an armed rebellion, but also because he considered violence a clumsy weapon which created more problems than it solved, and left a trail of hatred and bitterness in which genuine reconciliation was almost impossible.

This emphasis on non-violence jarred on Gandhi's British and Indian critics alike, though for different reasons. To the former, non-violence was a camouflage; to the latter it was sheer sentimentalism. To the British, who tended to see the Indian struggle through the prism of European history, the professions of non-violence seemed too good to be true. Their eyes were riveted on the stray acts of violence rather than on the remarkably peaceful nature of Gandhi's

---

<sup>8</sup> Adapted from the Epilogue of Nanda, *Mahatma Gandhi*.

campaigns. To the radical Indian politicians who had browsed through the history of the French and Russian revolutions or the Italian and Irish nationalist struggles, it was obvious that force would only yield to force, and that it was foolish to miss opportunities and sacrifice tactical gains for reasons more relevant to ethics than to politics.

Gandhi's critics were too prone to apply to his non-violent campaigns yardsticks suitable to violent warfare. *Satyagraha* was not designed to 'seize' any particular objectives or to 'crush' the opponent, but to set in motion forces which could lead to his conversion. In such a strategy it was perfectly possible to lose all the battles and win the war. In fact, victory or defeat inadequately describe the object of a *Satyagraha* campaign. Its object is peace, honorable to both parties.

The battles for Indian freedom under Gandhi's leadership were thus waged on the moral, or the psychological front. "Even under the most adverse circumstances," he wrote in January 1920, "I have found Englishmen amenable to reason and persuasion, and as they always wish to appear just, it is easier to shame them than others into doing the right thing." The process or conversion was twofold. Indians no less than the British needed a change of heart. Gandhi said many hard things about the British rule in India, but he said harder things about the evils which divided and corroded the Indian society from within.

The final consummation in 1947, the transfer of power, was due to the interaction of numerous national and world forces, but there is no doubt that the timing and the method of British withdrawal were influenced by what Gandhi had said and done for a quarter of a century. In retrospect, it would seem that the three major *Satyagraha* campaigns in 1920-22, 1930-32 and 1940-42 were so well-spaced that they gave time for second thoughts and for that conversion of the British conscience. With the Indian independence in August 1947 it was not only that the Indian felt a load fall off his back, but also the British felt really free for the first time.

*Religious Search:* Though his role in the political liberation of India inevitably loomed large in the eyes of the world, the mainspring of Gandhi's life lay not in politics but in religion. "What I want to achieve," he wrote in his autobiography, "what I have been striving and pining to achieve these thirty years is to see God face to face, to attain *moksha*. I live and move and have my being in pursuit of this goal." His deepest strivings were spiritual. Finding him in a political deputation, Montagu, the Secretary of State for India, had exclaimed, "How have you, a social reformer, found your way into this crowd?"

Gandhi explained that participation in politics was only an extension of his social activity: "I could not be leading a religious life unless I identified myself with the whole of mankind, and that I could not do so unless I took part in politics. The whole gamut of human activities today constitutes an indivisible whole. You cannot divide social, economic and purely religious work into watertight compartments." He did not know, he said, any religion apart from human activity; the spiritual law did not work in a field of its own, but expressed itself through the ordinary activities of life. To be truly religious, one did not have to retire to the Himalayas nor shrink into the security of a home or a sect.

The dissociation between politics and religion, between state rule and ethics had lasted so long that honest people revolted against any mixture of the two. Truth, charity and love are considered virtues applicable only in the domestic and social spheres. In politics expediency seems to be the prime mover. Gandhi's whole career was a protest against this double morality. He did not divorce the sacred from the secular. His interest in politics was derived from the fact that he had developed a technique *satyagraha* which sought to introduce the spirit of religion into politics. The question

was often asked by Western observers whether Gandhi was a saint or a politician. The answer to which is that he was a saint who did not cease to be one when he entered politics.

Gandhi himself considered the word 'saint' too sacred to be applied to him. He was a humble seeker after truth, who had caught "only the faintest glimmer of that mighty effulgence." He was only conducting experiments with some of the eternal truths of life, but could not even claim to be a social scientist because he could show no tangible proof of scientific accuracy in his methods nor such tangible results of experiments as modern science demands. He made no claims to infallibility, and let all the world know when he was groping in the dark. If he thought or spoke of himself as if he were an instrument of God, it was not as a chosen instrument with a special revelation of God's will. "My firm belief," he said, "is that He reveals himself to every human being, but we shut our ears to the still small voice within." When someone represented him as an incarnation of Lord Krishna, he described it as a sacrilege. He had often to restrain his admirers when their adoration outran their common sense. During one of his tours, the inhabitants of a village told him that his auspicious presence had made the village well miraculously fill with water. "You are fools," he reproved them, "beyond a doubt it was an accident. I have no more influence with God than you have. Suppose a crow sits on a palm tree at the moment when the tree falls to the ground. Will you imagine that the weight of the bird brought down the tree?"

*Open to Change:* His humility was not a cultivated virtue, but sprang from a ceaseless struggle for self-mastery in which he remained engaged from his childhood to the last day of his life. "For him," wrote his secretary Mahadev Desai, "the struggle with the opponent within is keener than with the opponent without." He described himself as an average man with less than an average ability. "I admit," he remarked "that I am not sharp intellectually. But I don't mind. There is a limit to the development of the intellect but none to that of the heart." One cannot resist the impression that, in exalting the goodness of the heart at the expense of mere intellectual brilliance, Gandhi tended to foster the idea of his own intellectual mediocrity. He did not care much for book learning, but his occasional imprisonments helped him to catch up with his reading, and what he read he turned to good account. His autobiography and his history of *satyagraha* in South Africa are proofs of a retentive memory, and both his colleagues and opponents bore testimony to his keen intellect. Nevertheless, it is a fact that he considered reasoning a poor guide beyond a certain point, unless it was controlled and directed by his intuition.

The truth he sought was not a static but a dynamic one which endlessly continued to unfold its myriad facets. When charged with inconsistency, he retorted that he was consistent with truth and not with the past. He went on modifying, correcting and enlarging his ideas in the light of fresh experience. One can discern a process of evolution even in his daily prayers; beginning with recitations from Hindu and Christian scriptures in South Africa, there came to be incorporated later, verses from the *Zend Avesta*, *The Koran*, and Buddhist and Japanese scriptures. A few hours before his death he wrote out his last exercise in Bengali, a language which he had started learning a year earlier so that he could serve the riot-torn Bengal more efficiently. Till the end he retained the zeal and humility of a student. He was a seeker.

Since he was continually elaborating his ideas on every subject, it was easy to confront him with his own earlier pronouncements on caste, machinery or *Khadi* and point out the discrepancies. In the glare of the ruthless publicity in which he lived, every one of his gestures and words was public property, but he willingly shared with the world even an insignificant thought, if it happened in a dream to flash across his mind. What he wrote of Tolstoy is equally true of him. "Tolstoy's so-called inconsistencies were a sign of his development and passionate regard for truth. He often

seemed inconsistent because he was continuously outgrowing his own doctrines. His failures were public; his struggles and triumphs private.”

Rabindranath Tagore once aptly described Gandhi as essentially “a lover of men and not of ideas.” Though he loved to reduce all problems to his moral algebra, Gandhi did not ram his opinions down anybody’s throat. “Never take anything for a gospel truth,” he warned, “even if it comes from a Mahatma.” *Hind Swaraj*, his first political testament, included a scathing attack on modern civilization and all its appurtenances of schools, railways and hospitals, but Gandhi no more tried to foist this philosophy on his followers than he compelled them to change into the loin cloth. Agatha Harrison has recorded how he used to lecture her on the evils of tea drinking, but when she accompanied him on his tours, tea was invariably served to her at 4 p.m. Thousands of people in India and abroad who met him or corresponded with him treasured small acts of courtesy and affection for which, in spite of all his preoccupations, he was never too busy.

He aspired to identify himself with ‘the least, lowliest and the lost’. He used a stone instead of soap for his bath, wrote his letters on little bits of paper with little stumps of pencils which he could hardly hold between his fingers, shaved with a crude country razor and ate with a wooden spoon from a prisoner’s bowl. All this austerity, while it may have satisfied some of his own inner needs, was primarily a means to an emotional identification with the Indian masses whose poverty and misery always haunted him; it provided the motive power for all his political, social and economic activities; it gave him his unique hold over the people, and it also sometimes created barriers between him and the town-bred Indian intelligentsia.

*Joy and Non-violence:* Gandhi’s asceticism sat lightly on him; it did not make of him a spoilsport. He had the gaiety of a child. Every one of his visitors could expect to be entertained by a joke or two. “Do you suffer from nerves?” he was asked by a woman visitor. “Ask Mrs. Gandhi,” straight came the reply, “she will tell you that I am on my best behavior with the world but not with her.” “Well,” continued Mrs. Miles, “my husband is on his best behavior with me.” “Then,” retorted Gandhi, “I am sure that Mr. Miles has bribed you heavily.” Asked why he was uncharitable to those who drank, Gandhi answered: ‘because I am charitable to those who suffer from the effects of the curse.’ “How many children have you,” he asked a sailor. “Eight, sir, four sons and four daughters.” “I have four sons,” said the Mahatma, “so I can race with you half-way.” He could expect mirth out of the most unpromising situations. In September 1932, when the Hindu leaders met in Yeravda prison under the shadow of his Pune fast, he sat at the center of the table and chuckled, “I preside.”

Gandhi devoted the best part of his life to one crucial problem: how to perfect and extend *ahimsa* (non-violence) in human relationships. On several occasions he declined invitations to tour Europe and America as he saw the absurdity of preaching non-violence abroad before there was a successful demonstration at home. And when at last the British decided to transform Indo-British relations on a basis of equality, as Gandhi had long urged, and a bloodless revolution was in the offing, India was caught in a vicious chain of communal fanaticism and bloodshed. Gandhi saw the fabric of national unity, which he had cherished, tear into bits before his eyes. Even as he struggled to guide the forces of violence into the paths of peace, he was haunted by a deep sense of failure. His popularity had not diminished. He was hailed as the Father of the Nation. The leaders of the Government paid him homage. He continued to draw huge crowds which shouted “Victory to Mahatma Gandhi”; these words had always grated on his ears but now they cut him to the quick. For there could be no victory for him when parts of India were given over to fear and violence. The tragedy stemmed from several causes, some of them rooted in recent Indian history and others

in a political-cum-religious movement which had temporarily unhinged the minds of men. Gandhi lived long enough to witness two spectacular triumphs of his method; his fasts shamed Calcutta and Delhi into peace. And his death achieved what he had tried so hard in his last days to achieve, the return of sanity to the Indo-Pakistan sub-continent.

For Gandhi, however, the validity of non-violence was independent even of his own success or failure. His criticisms of Western materialism and militarism in *Hind Swaraj* were made six years before the outbreak of the First World War, when Europe was at the zenith of its prestige and power. These criticisms may have appeared quixotic fifty years ago; today they seem prophetic. By not spurning material progress at the cost of moral values, and by irrevocably renouncing violence, Gandhi took a line in direct opposition to the two dominant ideologies of the twentieth century: capitalism and communism. He visualized and worked for a society which would provide for the essential needs of the community (and no more), and in which the decentralization of economic and political structures would minimize the incentives for exploitation within and conflict without. Such a society could, he believed, dispense with the coercive apparatus of the modern state and depend upon non-violent techniques not only to maintain order, but also to protect itself against external aggression. Merely utopian?

It is difficult to say whether Gandhi's dream will come true. Nations, like individuals, are tempted to continue along the beaten path, the convenient way, even though it may end in a blind alley. Gandhi knew the difficulties of translating his non-violent dream into a world of reality, but he refused to compromise on what he held to be the fundamentals. To the last he affirmed that even good ends do not justify dubious means; that our real enemies are our own fears, greed and egoism; that we must change ourselves before we can change others; that the laws of the family, of truth and love and charity, are applicable to groups, communities and nations; and above all, that "non-violence is the law of our species, as violence is the law of the brute." To those who are charged with the destinies of nations, all this may sound a very desirable but a very distant ideal. Yet, in the thermo-nuclear age, if civilization is not to disintegrate into a mass of torn flesh and molten metal, the premises of Gandhi have an immediate relevance.

Finally, here we are impressed by some of the weighty Gandhian concerns, like: openness to change, joy in life, the conviction that truth is freedom and the integration of politics with religion.

### Conclusion

A song from Tagore, which Gandhi liked to hear, expressed some of his anguish and symbolized the person of Gandhi:<sup>9</sup>

#### *Walk Alone*

If they answer not to thy call, walk alone;  
If they are afraid and cower mutely facing the wall,  
O thou of evil luck,  
Open thy mind and speak out alone.  
If they turn away and desert you when crossing the wilderness,  
O thou of evil luck,  
Trample the thorns under thy tread,  
And along the blood-lined track travel alone.

---

<sup>9</sup> Nanda.



If they do not hold up the light when the night is troubled with storm,  
O thou of evil luck,  
With the thunder flame of pain ignite thine own heart,  
And let it burn alone.

Gandhi was always on the way; he was a loner; he was a leader with a mass following. He dared! And he dared to walk alone! And even when he dreamt and dared alone he had the philosophy *Sarvodaya* in his heart and the practices of *Sevagram* in his hands to guide his destiny.



10.  
**Symbol of Peace:  
Religion through the Prism of Gandhi's Life and Vision**

*G. Lazar*

My life is an open book!--*M.K. Gandhi*

Gandhi was an obscurant. He would have been a misfit in modern India. He detested science and abhorred modernity. He hated industry. He would have made India a nation of 900 million *khadi-weavers*. His faith in non-violence would have persuaded him to disband the armed forces. Gandhi's India would not have tested the nuclear device in Pokharan or the ballistic missile. Gandhi is no longer relevant. He had no idea of the compulsions of statecraft and diplomacy.

These are some of the carping criticisms of Gandhi that one often hears these days. But on the emergence of a new millennium, a close look at his last days, shows that the Mahatma was as much a realist as he was rooted in his ideals of truth and non-violence – a perfect blending of realism and idealism that occurs in man only once in many centuries. Gandhi needs no praise; he needs to be demythologized.

This paper is an incomplete attempt to come to terms with the religious philosophy of Gandhi and to see further how this philosophy continues to serve as a symbol of peace. As is well known, Gandhi aimed at much more than winning political independence: he fought for the betterment of the people in every respect – ethically, economically and spiritually. Hence, one of our main concerns in this discussion is to view the relevance of the Gandhian concept of God for modern society. In this attempt we shall adopt a critical and “somewhat irreverent” attitude to Gandhi, in order to demystify him.

### **A Question of Perspective**

Gandhi took an integrated view of life, and tried to weave insights, derived from different disciplines, into a single unified approach. The kind of questions Gandhi asked nearly eight decades ago are the ones which now face both the under-developed and post-modern societies caught in a deep upsurge of confusion and disillusionment. Since Gandhi was not a futurologist, there must be some explanation as to how he anticipated the threats to humanity that emanate from technological determinism, the plundering of nature to assuage the greed created by consumerism and vulgar hedonism, structural violence and alienation. Gandhi's anticipation of the coming problems of humanity was not based on empiricism or deviations from either prefixed ideal positions or prejudices. He was able to ask, it seems, these questions, because he tested and judged every aspect of human activity on a scale of certain values and ethical norms.

The central Gandhian values were not derived from any metaphysical system, despite numerous interpretations to the contrary. They were derived from his own philosophical ideas which he arrived at as a result of his historical, spiritual and material knowledge and experience. Gandhi's values thus reflect his understanding of human nature, of social and production relations, of man's constant struggle against forces which tried to push him down into one kind of oppression or another, and of his attempts to rise above his existential situation. Gandhi was not a system-builder. On the other hand, he wanted to form a framework for arriving at concepts and values, so

that many a system could be built upon them for the immediate present and for the many future stages of development in the unfolding or fulfilling of human destiny. This is the central fact about Gandhi, and any system or model based on the Gandhian approach, by definition, is based on his framework of concepts and values.

One of the crises facing the world today is the crisis of values, and no prevailing social order is free from it. In some countries the crisis is reaching a breaking point; in others it may seem less serious because it is kept suppressed by force. One indication of this crisis is the sudden, massive and rather dangerous return to organized and codified religions, even though history tells us that organized religion has not provided solutions to human crises. Science, which tried to replace religion, opened new vistas for humanity but is now faced with its own crisis, because of its one-sided understanding of reality and its appropriation by a few. Both organized science and organized religions are failing the world, and this provides an occasion for us to view Gandhi afresh since he developed his own scientific practice and also distilled an ethical religion or value system from all major religions, rendering their canonical and dogmatic theologies and customary injunctions utterly superfluous. Thus by his new moral dimension to science and religion he has provided us with answers for the multiple crises of the day.

## **Gandhian Thought**

### *God and Truth*

Gandhi went through an evolutionary process of change in his own life. His ontology, epistemology and method merged into a single, unified process. This process can be identified with his search for truth. Gandhi did believe in God, but he introduced a remarkable innovation by reducing God to a tentatively definable concept, something which all earlier metaphysical systems had failed to do. Indeed, he made God into an imprecise but relevant instrument. Ontologically, he reduced God to Truth, a fundamental shift from his earlier position in which he tried to approximate Truth to God. The search for both relative and absolute truth was now his epistemology. *Satyagraha* and non-violent practice became the linking method and technique.

In arriving at his ontology, Gandhi made a major departure from the past. He ignored the whole debate of the past and looked instead for a common denominator for which he found support, on the one hand, in other religions, particularly Islam and Christianity and on the other in life's experience and practice. About the latter he said: "Truth and Life in a sense are one and the same. I should give the same definition for Truth as I have given for Life." This was to be the basis not only of his ontology but also of his ethics. What Gandhi accepted was that mind and matter have their own dialectics, and can, without contradiction, absorb the theory of evolution or matter progressing into mind. For example, *Chitta Vritti* ordinarily means modification of mind. But, as defined by Patanjali, it means that human experience in which consciousness is modified by matter. Gandhi short-circuited the conflicting philosophies by adopting an entirely novel approach. His approach was to merge ontology, epistemology and method into a single set of concepts which, in their dynamics, could be transformed into values. Concepts and values in Gandhi became coterminous through a dialectical process. Briefly, Gandhian concepts may be said to have the following characteristics: they are normative, they are dialectical, they are dynamic and evolutionary, they are relative as well as correlative, and they are scientific.

According to Gandhi, "Truth means existence of what we know and what we do not know. The sum total of all existence is absolute Truth or the Truth. The concepts of Truth may differ. But

all admit and respect Truth. That truth I call God.” Secondly, he said: “Even the atheists who have pretended to disbelieve in God have believed in Truth. The trick they have performed is that of giving God another, not a new, name. His names are Legion, Truth is the crown of them all.”<sup>1</sup>

In discussing Truth as a method, Gandhi had to go to great length in putting forward various ways to realize Truth, the most important of which was *satyagraha* or Truth force. However, he introduced what may be called a method within a method, namely, non-violence, which to Gandhi was the method of discovering and legitimizing the practice of *satyagraha* (holding to truth). He also held that non-violence was one constructive process in the midst of incessant destruction.<sup>2</sup> It was the true method by which physical reality revealed itself, whether it is in harmony or in conflict with non-physical reality. Ontologically, for Gandhi, the highest aim of every Hindu, or for that matter every human being, is *Moksha*, namely, final deliverance or liberation from this world and assimilation with the final Truth. This is a beaten track of every version of Hindu philosophy. Gandhi, however, gave the very path to *Moksha*, that is, *Dharma* (righteousness), an even higher place than to *Moksha* itself. He said: “I cannot consider anything dearer to me than *Moksha*. Yet, even that *Moksha* I would renounce if it were to conflict with truth and non-violence. In all these three things I only followed truth.”<sup>3</sup> This is an extremely significant turn that Gandhi gave to Hinduism.

### “Truth” and Society

Gandhi’s principal aim was to place man at the center of all schemes of things, all values, all actions, and all philosophies. For Gandhi the centrality of man permeated the entire canvas, leading from ontology to human concern with the most ordinary needs or of the deepest intellectual and spiritual striving. It is man’s total experience, his awareness of moral responsibility and service of others that have produced values. Man’s will is a guarantee as well as the power through which these values can be made manifest in his behavior. It is, therefore, the incarnation of human freedom and autonomy as Gandhi understood it. He goes on to articulate this philosophy in a sociological set up:

It is a tragedy that religion for us means today nothing more than restrictions on food and drink, nothing more than adherence to a sense of superiority and inferiority. Let me tell you that there cannot be any grosser ignorance than this. Birth and observance of forms cannot determine one’s superiority and inferiority. Character is the only determining factor. God did not create men with the badge of superiority or inferiority; no scripture which labels a human being as inferior or untouchable because of his or her birth can command our allegiance; it is a denial of God and Truth which is God.<sup>4</sup>

In this context, we can see that Gandhi was more worried about the growth of the whole person and the society than of a particular sect or religion.

---

<sup>1</sup> *Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi* (Hereafter *CW*) (New Delhi: The Publications Division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, India, 1970), vol. 3, pp. 359-60.

<sup>2</sup> It must be noted that Gandhi’s final value is *not* non-violence. Whatever his disclaimer and arguments, he in fact always preferred violence to cowardice – without exception. Cf. Sheila McDonough, *Gandhi’s Response to Islam*, New Delhi: D. K. Printworld (P) Ltd., 1994, pp. 83-96.

<sup>3</sup> *CW*, 25, p. 27.

<sup>4</sup> Mahatma Gandhi, *Life of Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi*, III (Hyderabad: Academy of Gandhian Studies, 1983), p. 343.

We read further:

India cannot cease to be one nation because people belonging to different religions live in it. The introduction of foreigners does not necessarily destroy the nation; they merge in it. A country is one nation only when such a condition obtains in it. That country must have a faculty for assimilation. India has ever been such a country. In reality, there are as many religions as there are individuals; but those who are conscious of the spirit of nationality do not interfere with one another's religion. If the Hindus believe that India should be peopled only by Hindus, they are living in a dreamland. The Hindus, the Mohammedans, the Parsis and the Christians who have made India their country are fellow countrymen, and they will have to live in unity, if only for their own interest. In no part of the world are one nationality and one religion synonymous terms; nor has it ever been so in India.<sup>5</sup>

Thus, Gandhi gave the Hindu system and society some characteristic jolts and thereby imparted to it powerful social dimensions, which brought him into conflict with Hindu fundamentalists. Gandhi's assassination was the climactic act of this fundamentalism. In his appeal before the Punjab High Court at Shimla in May 1949, Gandhi's assassin, Nathuram Godse, argued,

When the top rank leaders of the Congress with the consent of Gandhi divided and tore the country – which we consider as a deity of worship – my mind became full with the thoughts of direful anger. I do say that my shots were fired at the person whose policy, view of religion and action have brought rack and ruin and destruction to thousands of Hindus.<sup>6</sup>

No other leader has devoted so much time and attention to the problem of Hindu-Muslim unity as Gandhi who held communal unity as almost an article of faith, and he always maintained that “*Swaraj* (self-rule) was impossible without Hindu-Muslim unity.”<sup>7</sup> However, but for a brief period of Hindu-Muslim unity during the Khilafat-cum-Non-Cooperation Movement, the communal harmony that Gandhi so assiduously labored for, eluded him. Despite all his efforts, the canker of communalism grew more vigorous and resulted in the partition of the country.

However, it is indeed a travesty of the very word ‘Hindu’ to describe Gandhi as anti-Hindu. As Jawaharlal Nehru was to remind his countrymen, Gandhi was “the greatest living Hindu.” He pointed out the supreme irony that “it was one of the votaries of this demand for a Hindu state who killed the greatest living Hindu.”<sup>8</sup> Though Gandhi described himself as a *Sanatani* (eternal) Hindu, his sources of inspiration extended beyond Hinduism to other faiths and non-religious philosophical influences like Thoreau, Ruskin and Tolstoy. His original interpretation of God helped him to reach out to ordinary people. Since Muslims shared many elements of a common culture with Hindus, the Hindu idiom did not constitute a drawback.

Those who pillory Gandhi as anti-Hindu,<sup>9</sup> forget that, in the winter of 1946-47, the site he chose for his *prayog* in fashioning *ahimsa* as a weapon to fight communalism, was not Bihar,

---

<sup>5</sup> Mahatma Gandhi, *Hind Swaraj or Indian Home Rule* (Mapusa, Goa: Other India Press, 1991), p. 46.

<sup>6</sup> Kathija Shakir, *Peace and Politics* (Mumbai: Popular Press, 1971), p. 74.

<sup>7</sup> *CW*, 13, p. 306.

<sup>8</sup> Nadvi Ahmed, *Indian Independence* (Lucknow: Sat Press, 1965), p. 57.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. *Autobiography*, Introduction: ‘What I want to achieve – what I have been striving and desiring to achieve these thirty years – is self-realization, to see God face to face, to attain *Moksha*. I live and move and have my being in pursuit of this goal.’ Edwards, in his *The Myth of Mahatma, Gandhi, the British and the Raj* (1986), comments that “Gandhi’s life was a Hindu life, and his message was Hindu also. Hindu morality is centered upon the self and self-

where the victims of the carnage were Muslims, but Noakhali, where Hindus faced a dreadful assault on their faith. Gandhi's choice of Noakhali invited criticism from Muslim propagandists, who alleged that he had ears only for the suffering of Hindus. During his *padayatra* (pilgrimage by foot) in Noakhali Gandhi was confronted with hostile posters demanding that he go to Bihar. Gandhi countered that there was no need to prove his secular *bonafides* by going to Bihar. He went to Bihar when the need arose. What had taken place in Noakhali was not merely a communal riot; it was an assault on the religious freedom and cultural identity of Hindus. Gandhi's answer to the assault was to uphold the right to practice one's religion, including adherence to visible symbols of faith.

### *Vision of a New Society*

Any researcher will be amazed by Gandhi's acute sensitivity to religious identity, and yet his remarkable freedom from bias and bitterness. He invited the Hindus to recite *Ramanama* (Lord Ram's name), and sing *Ramdhun* together as a way of banishing fear. Pyarelal, Gandhi's secretary, encouraged the fear-stricken residents of Karatkhil to recite *Ramanama*. Women who were afraid to wear *sindhur* or bangles in public welcomed Gandhi with *aarti* (the Indian style of welcoming a guest). Slowly, the Hindus of Srirampur began to show signs of life, temple bells were heard and a group from the neighboring villages came to visit Gandhi, singing *namasankirtan* (singing of God's name). Gandhi's healing touch extended to Muslims. In Muraim, the local religious leader, in whose house Gandhi lived, told local Muslims that Gandhi had come to free them of the stain of having shed Hindu blood. Gandhi's way was different from and went beyond the efforts of the secularists who invoke the universality of religion, composite culture and syncretic religious traditions such as *bhakti* and *sufi*. Gandhi and other national leaders were responsive to the religious susceptibilities of the Muslims. In March 1947, Gandhi toured the devastated villages of Bihar. He was shown the well into which priceless religious manuscripts and rare Oriental texts had been thrown by rioters. He stood in silence, with his head bowed. When someone offered him a drink of water, he said, "I cannot even breathe this air, which is so full of sin, let alone drink anything."<sup>10</sup>

At one stage, Jawaharlal Nehru suggested to Patel that the government should rebuild the mosques in old Delhi which were converted into temples. Gandhi opposed the purification campaign undertaken by Hindu organizations among the Meos in the wake of the communal carnage that followed partition. Gandhi's way to communal harmony could be described as being in the religious mode. His secularism was nourished by his faith – its roots went deep, to its universalistic and humanist well. When Gandhi said that religion and politics were indivisible – and that if politics were divorced from religion, he, for one, would have nothing to do with it – he meant that his *dharma* was not an organized religion but morality, which informed all human actions, including those in the political sphere.

---

realization." Perhaps one could speak of an inherent tension between the ideal of self-realization and communal vision, p. 358.

<sup>10</sup> D.K. Oza, *Voluntary Action and Gandhian Approach* (New Delhi: National Book Trust, 1991), p. 59.

## Relevance of Gandhian Philosophy

Gandhi's actual significance for the political independence of India is ambiguous,<sup>11</sup> but he certainly became a national symbol. A portrait is often drawn of him with hagiographic features,<sup>12</sup> but very critical assessments have also been put forward<sup>13</sup> and it would be unwise to neglect them. *Ahimsa* was an age-old and generally accepted principle in India. It meant both physical abstention from doing harm and spiritual non-violence in thoughts and words. Gandhi widened the concept by applying it also to politics, economic life and social institutions. In the following analysis we look for the extent to which this spirituality of Gandhi was successful.

On August 1, 1921 – the day Tillamook died – the Central Khilafat Committee had, under Gandhi's presidentship, organized an all-India strike. With that, the non-cooperation movement was launched. The main issue before it was the redress of the Khilafat wrong – the dethronement of the Chahalgiri in Turkey to be reversed – whereas the Punjab atrocities and winning of *swaraj* were subordinate issues. The Ali brothers were primarily concerned with Khilafat, not so much with the other two. Nevertheless, Gandhi seemed to have achieved a miracle in the union of hearts. The Hindu's wholehearted, unquestioning plunge into the Khilafat struggle moved the hearts of many Muslims. It was reinforced by Haiku Ajmal Khan's appeal to them to "refrain from acts calculated to wound the susceptibilities of their compatriots. We are, and should be, fully cognizant of the fact that cow-killing seriously annoys our fellow countrymen." By accepting to be the president of the All-India Khilafat Conference, Gandhi was trying to bring back the Muslims into the national mainstream. In this process, he also persuaded the Congressmen to support the Khilafat Movement because it was not just internal to the Muslims, but it was a movement of all the people of India. He was quite successful in that.<sup>14</sup>

Hindu-Muslim unity was, however, short-lived.<sup>15</sup> The Khilafatists were rabid and unprincipled communalists. About mid-1921, there was the Moplah rebellion in Kerala and serious communal riots at Kohat. About the latter, Gandhi confessed: "I am carrying a snake in my pocket." As an apostle of *ahimsa*, he could not have killed it, but could have removed its fangs. By not doing that, he allowed the communal virus to spread in the body politic in the years that followed. Ambedkar regretted that, "certain Khilafat leaders were so misguided as to pass resolutions of congratulations to the Moplahs on the brave fight they were conducting for the sake of religion." Annie Besant was so appalled as to have written: "...we do not want to see another specimen of the Khilafat raj in India."<sup>16</sup>

Gandhi did feel sad, but did not act insofar as Moplah atrocities were concerned. But he abruptly suspended his Non-Cooperation in February 1922 when, in violation of *ahimsa* 21 policemen were done to death at Chauri Chaura, a village in Uttar Pradesh. Gandhi's decision to suspend the *satyagraha* shocked Lala Lajpatraj and Motilal Nehru, who were in jail. They thought it would mean a setback to the freedom movement, which it did. The Government, on the other

---

<sup>11</sup> Shakir, *Peace and Politics*, p. 74.

<sup>12</sup> This tendency is visible in Hick's forward to Chatterjee's *Gandhi's Religious Thought* (1983), but Chatterjee's fine book, itself, concerned with 'identifying essential structures' of Gandhi's thought, (pp. ix-xii) also lacks any criticisms of Gandhi.

<sup>13</sup> Edwards (1986: pp. 258-60) speaks about Gandhi's maimed personality, how he lacked ordinary human love and caused incalculable damage to the cause of the poor.

<sup>14</sup> Thomas Antony, *Mahatma Gandhi and the Communal Problem* (New Delhi: Indian Social Institute, 1983), p. 5. See also B. Krishna, "Gandhi: Triumphs and Failures" *The Hindu* (July 26, 1998), p. 4.

<sup>15</sup> Antony, p. 9.

<sup>16</sup> Oza, 1991, p. 27.



hand, felt much relieved. The Viceroy, Lord Reading, publicly confessed that the government had been “baffled and confused,” while the Governor of Bombay (Mumbai), Leslie Wilson, admitted:

Just a thin spindly shrimp of a fellow he was, but he swayed 320 million people and held them at his beck and call....He was their god....First it was Tilak, then Gandhi....He gave us a scare. His program filled our goals. You can't go on arresting people forever, you know – not when there are 320 million of them, and if they had taken his next step and refused to pay taxes, God knows where we should have been! Gandhi's was the most colossal experiment in the world's history, and it came within an inch of succeeding.<sup>17</sup>

Gandhi allowed such an hour of victory to slip from his hands. He suffered his defeat in two ways; first, his giving up of the earlier boycott of legislatures. He yielded to C.R. Das and Motilal Nehru to fight assembly elections in 1926 and conduct parliamentary work on behalf of the Congress. Second, an estranged Mohammed Ali used ungentlemanly language when he said, “However pure Gandhi's character may be, he must appear to me, from the point of view of religion, inferior to any character...according to my religion and creed, I hold an adulterous and a fallen Muslim to be better than Mr. Gandhi.”<sup>18</sup>

The tide of Pan-Islamism, set in motion by the Khilafat, showed its face in poet Iqbal's demand at the Allahabad session of the Muslim League in 1930, when he said: “I would like to see Punjab, the North Western Frontier Province, Sind and Baluchistan amalgamated into a single State. Self-government within the British Empire or without the British Empire, the formation of a consolidated North-West Indian Muslim State appears to me to be the final destiny of the Muslims, at least of North-West India.” He further stated: “I confess to be Pan-Islamist. The mission for which Islam came into this world will ultimately be fulfilled: the world will be purged of infidelity and worship of false gods, and the true soul of Islam will be triumphant.”<sup>19</sup>

The Round Table Conference of 1929 was Gandhi's Waterloo. He erred in going to London as the sole spokesperson of the Congress, pinning hopes on the appeals from British statesmen. There he was cornered by the chosen few from among the Muslims who asked him to justify how he could speak on behalf of their community, while Mauna Shasta Ali, former Khilafat leader, warned the Hindus: “If the Hindus don't meet our demands this time, we're going to make war on them. We ruled the Hindus once. We at least don't intend to be ruled by them now.”<sup>20</sup> The British Government planned to announce the Communal Award – this time the Scheduled Castes were to be favored, as were the Muslims in 1909. In disgust, Gandhi returned home empty-handed, while the government armed itself for letting loose repression.

Gandhi failed to checkmate Jinnah's dangerous moves. Jinnah had no influence with the Muslim Premiers of Punjab, Sind and Bengal. Even when Fall Hue from Bengal had proposed the Pakistan resolution, he had later turned anti-Jinnah; while Ghulam Hussain Hidayatullah, Sind Premier, had opposed the resolution. Gandhi did not capture an opportunity to form an anti-Jinnah front along with them. That was against his spirit of compromise as against confrontation. He ploughed his lonely furrow. The landed Gandhi in a complex situation in 1942, which exerted pressure on him for action. There were the Communists and other Leftists who favored support for

---

<sup>17</sup> Keer Dhanajay, *Mahatma Gandhi: Political Saint and Unarmed Prophet* (Bombay: Popular Prakashan, 1973), p. 415.

<sup>18</sup> Hassan Mohibbul, “Mahatma Gandhi and Indian Muslims,” *Mainstream* (August 15, 1969), pp. 35-42.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.* p. 41.

<sup>20</sup> A.G. Noorani, “Muslim Grievances,” *Radiance*, 20 (1969), pp. 11-15.

the war in view of Russia and Britain having become allies. On the other hand, there were lurking fears that Japan might occupy India. In April 1942, the first Japanese bombing of India took place and there was seizure of the Andaman Islands.<sup>21</sup>

The Hindu fundamentalists insisted that Gandhi was appeasing the Muslims and was surrendering the Hindu interests to them. But, did not Gandhi know that the movement he was leading and the leaders who were with him believed or followed what he had been saying about the relationship of the Congress with other groups and political parties? He even wrote, referring to the problems of the minorities and particularly of the Muslims,

Hindus who claim that they are the most educated, should understand that since they oppose all the demands of the Muslims, the Muslims consider the former as their enemies and join hands with the British. On the other hand, if the Hindus sympathize with them, the Muslims would believe in the Hindus, brotherhood would also develop. Hindus lose nothing by not opposing the demands of the Muslims. The inner meaning of the concept of *ahimsa* is to accept when the minorities are really weak.<sup>22</sup>

On his release from prison in 1944, Gandhi committed a great blunder in his talks with Jinnah, when all his colleagues were in jail. This boosted Jinnah's prestige amongst the Muslims in two ways: as a wrecker, and as the Quaid-e Azam, Jinnah came on level with Gandhi, the Mahatma. The Gandhi-Jinnah talks had serious repercussions. Immediately Jinnah acquired the status of sole spokespersonship.

Later, the repercussions were to be seen at the Simla Conference called by the Viceroy, Lord Wavell, in June-July 1945. Jinnah gained in three ways. First, he secured parity between the Muslims and caste Hindus. Gandhi had first "threatened to ban the conference unless the stipulation of parity between the Hindus and Muslims was removed."<sup>23</sup> At the conference, when Azad stated that "the Congress did not object to the parity proposal,"<sup>24</sup> Gandhi compromised by remaining silent. Second, Wavell's refusal to concede the Unionist Muslims of Punjab a separate representation on the proposed Executive Council, caused the demise of the Unionist Party and opened the way for the League to step in ultimately to form the government. Third, in calling off the conference, Wavell again played into the hands of Jinnah. According to H.V. Hodson: "Many people, including some of his official advisers, thought he was wrong to accept Mr. Jinnah's veto without even a struggle. Wavell's sudden abandonment of his plan was the decisive move that made the Partition of India inevitable."<sup>25</sup>

From then on India moved towards that inevitable end. The high-powered Cabinet Mission failed to reverse that, though it unsuccessfully tried to preserve India's territorial integrity under its grouping scheme. Jinnah was adamant to have his Pakistan, no matter even if it were, "moth-eaten and truncated." Gandhi, on his part, tried to save India's unity by asking Lord Mountbatten to hand over India to Jinnah and quit; whereas Jinnah's demand was, "Divide and Quit." Sensing the difficult situation Mountbatten wanted to save the country from being engulfed in a

---

<sup>21</sup> Noin Shakir, *Khilafat to Partition : A Survey of Major Political Trends among Indian Muslims 1919-1947* (New Delhi: Kalamkar, 1970), pp. 87-93.

<sup>22</sup> Fathullah Mujitabai brings out these aspects very vividly in his *Aspects of Hindu Muslim Cultural Relations* (New Delhi: National Book Bureau), pp. 87-98.

<sup>23</sup> Robinsaon Das speaks to this effect in his monumental, *The Morality of Partition* (Calcutta: New Wave Press, 1959), p. 87.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.* p. 78.

<sup>25</sup> As cited in Ram Barua, *Peace and Politics in India* (Nagpur: Navjeevan, 1967), p. 67.

conflagration. He had found India in March 1947 like a “a ship on fire in mid-ocean with ammunition in the hold.” Before Britain got engulfed in that, Mountbatten transferred power by August 15, 1947, instead of June 1948 as Attlee had announced.

Gandhi was the saddest man in the whole of the sub-continent. He found himself “floundering in darkness.” Sadly he remarked: “My life’s work seems to be over.” Partition was the hour of his defeat. According to his secretary, Pyarelal, he seemed to be “consumed by the feeling of helplessness in the face of surrounding conflagration.”<sup>26</sup> He was “literally praying that God should gather him into His bosom and deliver him from the agony that life to him had become.” One day Gandhi said: “Don’t you see, I am mounted on my funeral pyre?”

When independence finally came, Gandhi absented himself from the celebrations in Delhi to be in Calcutta fasting and working there to quell the sectarian violence following partition. Lord Mountbatten came to regard Gandhi as the greatest person he had ever met: “His life was one of truth, toleration and love... India, indeed the world, will not see the likes of him again perhaps for centuries.” Many sympathized, not only because of the evidence of his life, but from what he said and wrote. “To see the all-pervading spirit of truth face to face one must be able to love the meanest of creatures as oneself.”<sup>27</sup>

### **The Symbol of Peace**

Today, through industrialization and urbanization, individuals, families and communities have become fragmented. Displacement, caused by dams, mines and energy plants, has made homelessness a characteristic of this century. The renewal of communal forces and their rapid violent rise in the militant garb of *Hindutva* strike at the very root of Indian democracy. Caste ideologies and divisions have been sharpened in the last 52 years, resulting in increased violence on Dalits and other religious minority groups. Politics has been polluted with corruption, corroding public life at all levels.

Gandhi came into prominence on the Indian national scene in 1920 and, since then, was in effect the guiding force behind the anti-imperialist struggle. Hence, Gandhi’s understanding of, and approach to, many of the problems were of momentous consequence. In the following analysis a critical attempt is made to show how Gandhi’s understanding of religion enabled him to bring peace and harmony in India.

It is true that the upper caste among Hindus took advantage of the facilities available in the colonial context. After the establishment of the universities in the country in 1857-58, they tried to take advantage of this, too. In the 1870s, it looked as though different spheres of public life in India had been dominated by these so-called forward communities. In fact, those who took advantage of the facilities available within the colonial situation years after 1857 found the presence of these people in the services that were available for the Indians more overwhelming, because when the newly educated people approached the powers-that-be, the attitude of the people who were already holding on to position was not very sympathetic. So they thought they were looked down upon.

In their interpretation of history, a few national writers saw a Golden Age during the so-called Hindu period, and interpreted all that was considered to be very dark and backward during the medieval period as having occurred under the rule of the Muslims. They made use of symbols like Shiva, Ganesha and Shivaji (a local Hindu ruler of Maharashtra) to whip up the national sentiments

---

<sup>26</sup> See “Congress Crisis and the Muslims,” *Radiance*, 30 (November, 1969), p. 12.

<sup>27</sup> As cited in Ram Barua, *Challenges of Poverty and the Gandhian Answer* (Bombay: Jeevan Press, 1978), p. 98.

of the Indians. Of course, these symbols were appealing to the caste middle classes of this country, who were then playing a very important role in Indian affairs. But at the same time, the use of these symbols also sent certain signals which could not be accepted by the others who did not belong to this tradition. Hence they developed a feeling that they could not enthusiastically participate in this kind of a nation-building. Though militancy increased in Indian national politics, the Congress, the base of the nationalist movement, could not expand until Gandhi entered the scene.

Gandhi was deeply sensitive, and his philosophy helped to cement the gap that had occurred by then. When he took over the leadership of the Nationalist movement in India, he thought that these social groups in India, which had been going along different paths, had to be brought together if the movement were to become truly anti-colonial and nationalist. So the three struggles that he launched, namely the Champaran movement, the Ahmedabad mill strike and the Kheda *satyagraha*, were all calculated to feel the pulse of the Indian society. He was able to understand better than his predecessors, and he was emboldened to launch the Khilafat and the non-cooperation movements.

When Gandhi launched the “Quit India” movement, he did not favor the idea of a separate state for the Muslims. It was only after the negotiations with the British Government for the transfer of power started in 1944 that there were more communal clashes in the country. Nobody, whether it was the leaders of the Muslim League or the leaders of the Hindu *Matts*, had any quarrel with Gandhi insofar as religion was concerned, because Gandhi’s interpretation of religion and particularly of Hinduism was remarkable. Except for the fundamentalists, nobody could call Gandhi a non-Hindu, though Gandhi proudly called himself a *Sanatani* Hindu. That was how he was acceptable to all communities and people of all faiths. The Hindu fundamentalists complained that Gandhi was appeasing the Muslims and was surrendering the Hindu interest to them. On this regard he wrote:

Hindus lose nothing by not opposing the demands of the Muslims. The inner meaning of the concept of *ahimsa* is to accept defeat when the minorities are really weak. Opposition kindles in them a sense of opposition and hatred. I know that the Congressmen are not one with me when I say this.<sup>28</sup>

It is a fact that the Congress was not with him, insofar as his views regarding the relations of the Congress and the Hindus with the Muslims were concerned. The attitude of the Congress towards the Dalit organizations in India was similar. Due to this, many of the issues raised by the Dalits and Muslims and other lower castes had been sidelined at that time. But one cannot overlook the fact that it would have been impossible for the Muslims to come into the mainstream of Indian politics without the healing touch of Gandhi.

Gandhian ideals changed from time to time, and were evolutionary. For instance in 1921, Gandhi did not want to enter into any controversy with regard to the sacredness of untouchability in the Hindu *shastras* (Hindu customs). But, in 1940, he declared, “If there is any *shastra* that would sanction untouchability, I would not call it a *shastra*, nor would I call it ‘*Dharma*’, rather I would call it ‘*Adharma*’.” It may seem that he was an upholder of the caste system and the *varna*, but there is a lot of evidence to show that he rejected all this. He very clearly said that

---

<sup>28</sup> Imtiaz Ahmed, *Gandhian Perspectives* (Madras: Sea Publication, 1972), p. 54.

“there is no *varna* today, and if I had that power today, I would declare that we are all Hindus and have the same *varna*.”<sup>29</sup>

On the level of ethics, Gandhi’s contribution was unique and remarkable. He attempted and achieved what no one could do before. He transformed the so-called eternal values of the religion into relative truths of ethical principles and put them together as an ethical religion. By doing so, he removed the distinction between religions as such and projected ethical laws through morally justifiable social instruments into the realms of social action. When Gandhi found Hindu religion justifying untouchability, he rejected those scriptures which justified it. He said that either such scriptures had to be rejected or it had to be admitted that someone introduced interpolations into the original texts which made them unreliable.

The strongest element in the Gandhian approach was the unity between theory and action. It was held that difference between mental and physical labor should be removed or at least narrowed. So Gandhi took up spinning. If non-violence and truth were fundamental doctrines, he objectified these concepts by launching *satyagraha*. If brotherhood was a universal principle, he formulated it into action by serving the poorest of the poor. As if equality and simplicity were laudable principles and an answer to poverty, he adopted the loincloth. In this way Gandhi showed that without right action there is no right precept. The cynicism and intellectual pessimism of the present day reveal helplessness in action, even when principles and precepts seem quite clear. Gandhi provided a revolutionary synthesis between the word and the act.

Commenting on the works of Gandhi, E.M.S. Namboodripad, in his *The Mahatma and the Ism* says: “The magic of this man was to talk in the language of the people, of the suffering masses, in their own way.”<sup>30</sup> As Gandhi said: “To the hungry man, God comes in the form of bread.” He understood the language of the people. And he translated his message into this language in the same simple way, without any loudmouthed proclamation, or written thesis. He told the people, “Don’t fight the British on the battlefield. All you have to do is, don’t sit and count the stars, but use the energy you have in your fingers to ply the *charka* (spinning-wheel).” So simple a message! There was no distance between thought and action in this person. Besides, he was so open, he could very well say, “My life is an open book!”

Gandhi’s last fast, begun on January 12, 1948, was as much a political action as it was moral. He was profoundly unhappy with the continuing communal atmosphere in Delhi and he suspected that the government was aggravating it by refusing to pay the Pakistan Rs. 55 crore owed from the cash balances of Partition. Moreover, there was drift in the Nehru government with Patel opposing the transaction. Gandhi realized that he alone could bridge the breach. On the 16th Patel gave in and the cabinet decided to transfer the money “as a gesture of goodwill.” An inter-communal peace committee was set up under the direction of Rajendra Prasad and Maulana Azad and by the 18th it could convince the Mahatma that the necessary change of heart had taken place in Delhi to enable him to break his fast.

On the 20th evening he was back on the lawns for the prayer meeting. A bomb exploded, shattering a wall and breaking a few windowpanes. Gandhi continued his meeting as if nothing had happened. “Bapuji, a bomb exploded,” someone cried. “Really? Perhaps some poor fanatic threw it. Let no one look down on him.” Later he told Lady Mountbatten that he thought “military manoeuvres must have been taking place somewhere in the vicinity.”

---

<sup>29</sup> D. Ramachandran, *Gandhi and Cultures* (Hyderabad: Elements Publications, 1976), p. 10.

<sup>30</sup> E.M.S. Namboodripad, *The Mahatma and the Ism* (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 1982), p. 46.

In his assassination on January 30, 1948 God appeared to have answered his prayer and made him a martyr. And a grateful people conferred on him an endearing, lifelong title: Father of the Nation.

With all his blunders and failures, Gandhi was a great man – the greatest this century has produced. The godlike image that the Bombay Governor Wilson had seen in him during the Non-Cooperation movement in the 20s survived till the end of his life. He cast a hypnotic spell and possessed a magnetism. Gandhi taught us that once we embrace the concept of brotherly love – a love that knows not color, nor race, nor nationality, nor gender, nor class – the enemies of peace and justice would automatically eradicate themselves. It is true that the battles of Gandhi were for the heart of the human race, for a new interpretation of religion!

Albert Einstein said of him: “Generations to come, it may be, will scarce believe that such a one as this ever in flesh and blood walked upon this earth.”

### **Conclusion**

Some time ago, the challenges of the twentieth century were summed up by George Orwell in his unforgettable bestseller, *1984*, and Alvin Toffler in his, *Future Shock*. The warnings that Orwell and Toffler gave to the world in terms of a grim fantasy have become almost a reality. According to a few scientists, about 80 of those predictions have already been realized. An emergent siege mentality, political hysteria and unbridled terrorism have been seen in places like Northern Ireland, Kosovo, Kashmir and East Timor, thus making the strongest parallels between modern society and the world of *1984* and *Future Shock*.

Without being judgmental, one can aver that Gandhi’s religion transcended Hinduism, Islam or Christianity. The physical and the metaphysical benignly blended in his erudite expositions. Religion for him was nothing if not self-realization. Truth was his religion and *ahimsa* the only way of its realization. It is a paradox of our times that the supply of a commodity as scarce as truth always outstrips its demand? He was a practical idealist who deftly demonstrated that the practice of goodness could deliver the goods. He frankly admitted that there could be limitations to the development of the mind, but none to that of the heart. For him peace did not mean the absence of violence, it meant the absence of conditions which lead to violence. The need today is for a positive, creative relationship between religion, politics and secularism – of the kind one associates with Gandhi. Could such a relationship not contribute towards evolving a culture that could challenge the growing communal ethos?

# Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi

## 1869-1948

### Milestones in His Life

1869 Born October 2nd in Porbandar, Gujarat, India. The youngest of three sons. Father: Karamchand. Mother: Putlibai.

1883 Married as a child to Kasturbai (both 13 years old).

1888 Sailed for England to study law in London.

1891 Returned to India as lawyer. Began practice in Bombay and Rajkot.

1893 Sailed for South Africa to settle a case for an Indian firm. At arrival found himself subjected to color discrimination. Therefore, battled for the rights of Indians

1894 Drafted the first Indian petition to a South African government. In May, the Natal Indian Congress was established.

1899 Organized an Indian ambulance corps for the British in the Boer War.

1901 Sailed for India to bring over his family.

1902 Returned to South Africa at the request of the Indian community.

1904 Established the weekly journal *Indian Opinion*. Organized the community, Phoenix Farm, near Durban.

1906 Organized the first small campaign for the Indian immigrants in Transvaal.

1907 Campaigned against The Black Act.

1908 January: Sentenced to two months imprisonment in Johannesburg. (Gandhi's first time in jail). Summoned to consult with General Smuts in Pretoria. February: Attacked and wounded by Indian extremist for settlement with Smuts. August: Smuts broke the agreement. Indians burned their passports in a second campaign.

1909 February: Sentenced to three months' imprisonment in Volkrust, Pretoria. July: Sailed for England to present Indians' case in the Parliament.

1910 Established Tolstoy Farm, near Johannesburg.

1913 September: Campaigned against nullification of marriages not celebrated according to Christian rites. Campaigned for the rights of mineworkers in Transvaal. November: Arrested, but released in December with expectations of a compromise.

1914 Returned to India.

1915 Began his struggle for Indian independence. Established *Satyagraha* Ashram, near Ahmedabad.

1917 Moved the Ashram to new site on Sabarmati River. Launched the first *Satyagraha* campaign in India – for the rights of peasants on indigo plantations in Champaran. Refused to leave the area, arrested in Motihari, but the case is withdrawn.

1918 February: Led the strike of mill workers in Ahmedabad. Agreement with the mill owners after Gandhi's three-day fast. (Gandhi's first *Satyagraha* in India). March: *Satyagraha* for the peasants in Kheda. April: Organized nationwide *hartal* – mourning celebration with fasting and prayer, suspension of all working activity for one day – against the Rowlatt Act. Fasted for three days in penitence for violent riots by Indian activists. Became editor of two Indian weekly journals: the English edition of *Young India* and *Navajivan* in Gujarati.

1919 April 6: At a public meeting in Amritsar, over a thousand Sikhs were massacred by British military, under the command of General Dyer. The Indian National Congress declared the day as a National Memorial Day.

1920 Elected president of All India Home Rule League. A resolution for a nationwide *Satyagraha* campaign was passed.

1922 Fasted for five days as penance for violent riots in Bardoli. Arrested on charge of sedition. Sentenced to six years imprisonment in Yeravda.

1929 Arrested for burning foreign clothes in Calcutta. Indian National Congress session in Lahore in December declared January 26 as National Independence Day.

1930 March 12: The Salt March was launched from Sabarmati Ashram. April 6: Gandhi officially broke the Salt Act by picking a handful of salt in Dandi. Arrested in Karadi. Hundreds of thousands were arrested.

1931 January: Released with 30 other Congress leaders. March: The Gandhi-Irwin Pact signed, and the civil disobedience ended. August: Sailed for the Second Round Table Conference in London. December: Returned to India. The campaign renewed.

1932 Arrested in Bombay and detained in Yeravda Prison without trial.

1933 The weekly journal *Harijan* is established. Gandhi launched a 10 months campaign for the untouchables. Kasturbai imprisoned for the sixth time in two years.

1934 During the summer, three separate attempts on Gandhi's life were made.

1940 Launched campaign against India being compelled to participate in World War II. 23,000 imprisoned within the year.

1942 Meeting with Sir Stafford Cripps on limited Indian independence. The British proposal was rejected by the Indian Congress. The last great *Satyagraha* campaign launched, *Quit India*. Gandhi and Kasturbai imprisoned with other Congress leaders in Aga Khan Palace.

1943 Fast for 21 days as penance for deadlock between Viceroy and the Indian leaders.

1944 February: Kasturbai died in prison, 74 years of age. March, Gandhi released (total time in prison during his life: 2,338 days). September: Talks with M.A. Jinnah in Bombay on Hindu-Muslim unity.

1946 Begin a four months' walking tour in East Bengal to quell communal rioting over Muslim representation in the provisional government.

1947 March: Conference with Lord Mountbatten and M. A. Jinnah. May: Gandhi opposes Congress decision of a division of the country into India and Pakistan. August: Began a "fast until death" as penance for communal riots in Calcutta. India's independence is celebrated without Gandhi presence.

1948 January 20: A bomb exploded at a prayer meeting in Delhi. January 30: The Mahatma assassinated at a prayer meeting at Birla House by Nathuram Godse, a Hindu extremist.



## List of Contributors

*D. George* wrote his doctorate on Gandhi and is active in social involvements in Madhya Pradesh.

*G. Lazar* is an Indologist (*Vaishnavism*) with further specializations in Phenomenology and Islam. He teaches at the Department of Indian Philosophy at Jnana-Deepa Vidyapeeth, Pune.

*G. Joseph M.* wrote his doctorate on Gandhi and teaches Philosophy at Karamathur College, Madurai, Tamil Nadu.

*G. Karuvelil* is actively interested in religious language and teaches at the Department of Systematic Philosophy at Jnana-Deepa Vidyapeeth, Pune, Maharashtra.

*G. Pattery* of Shanthiniketan, West Bengal, is active in an enriching dialogue between philosophy and nature.

*J. I. Fernando* is the Head of the Department of Philosophy at Karamathur College, Madurai, Tamil Nadu, and specializes in Heidegger and technology.

*K. Pandikattu* has two doctorates and teaches physics and philosophy at Jnana-Deepa Vidyapeeth, Pune.

*M. J. Kujur* is an anthropologist and specializes on tribal issues. He is pursuing his doctoral studies at Delhi School of Economics.

*S. Vazhapilly* has specialized in phenomenology and on Lonergan. He taught at Gujarat Vidya Deepa, Ahemadabad.

*About the book:* Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi needs no introduction. There has been a revival of Gandhi in recent times. This book is an attempt to rediscover his relevance for the contemporary culture. Ten scholars from different parts of India came together to critically and creatively analyze the present context of the world and to bring forth the relevance of Gandhian vision and message for today's world. The mythic significance of Gandhi is studied, his symbolic value explored and his social relevance emphasized.

*About the Editor:* Kuruvilla Pandikattu (b. 1957) secured his Masters in Physics. Later on he turned his attention to philosophy and theology, securing two doctorates and winning several awards. He was invited to Honolulu, Hawaii, by the East-West Philosophers' Conference to present a paper on Gandhi's vision for relating technology and science.