

CHAPTER 14

GANDHI'S CONSTRUCTIVE PROGRAMME : AN EXAMPLE OF POPULISTIC PATTERN OF MODERNIZATION

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GANDHI in many ways was a modernizer : but a populist modernizer if one may use such a phrase. K. Ishwaran in a recent work defines 'a populist community' as a peasant community that "elects to preserve its local identity, essentially the core culture". Such a society changes but it follows what Ishwaran calls the "populistic pattern of modernization", that is, it accepts change only at the periphery, the core-culture stays intact.¹ Taking the cue from Ishwaran, we may say, that Gandhi followed the populistic pattern of modernization. He knew that the Indian masses could be prepared for change only if the core-culture was kept intact and changes were gradually brought about; first, at the periphery, from where they could slowly percolate to the core centre. Such a pattern of modernization would over many years bring about a change in the core-culture itself but this would be so slow and gradual as to be almost imperceptible. At any given time the people would not feel or experience drastic changes in core-culture.

Gandhi's populistic pattern of modernization is illustrated

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in this brief essay with reference to his Constructive Programme, the main planks of which were communal amity, removal of untouchability, *khadi*, small industries, village sanitation, education and propagation of Hindi.

Gandhi began developing his Constructive Programme since 1922 after his suspension of the Non-cooperation Movement and retirement from active politics. For several years he kept writing about it in the *Harijan* and *Young India*. However, it was only in 1941 that he, for the first time, presented his concrete programme for the benefit of Congressmen in the form of a booklet, *Constructive Programme : Its Meaning and Place*.² Gandhi revised this booklet in 1945 when he added one more item viz. improvement of cattle. Gandhi's Constructive Programme was a programme for modernization, in the sense, that it was a programme for the construction of new values and institutions and sought to bring about consciously directed social change.

Building A Modern Secular National Society

Gandhi was profoundly interested in Hindu-Muslim unity and made it one of the central planks of his Constructive Programme because of his ultimate concern for building a national and secular society; not in the Western sense of separation of religion from politics, but in the classical Indian sense of equal respect for all religions. That Gandhi's concern for Hindu-Muslim unity stemmed from his concern for building a modern national society is clear from several statements he made. As early as 1920, Gandhi warned his countrymen : "Divided we must remain slaves. This unity cannot be a mere policy to be discarded when it does not suit us. We can discard it only when we are tired of *swaraj*. Hindu-Muslim unity must be our creed to last for all time and under all circumstances."

As a populist modernizer, Gandhi was not prepared to accept the Western model of secularism wherein religion is totally separated from public life and essentially made a citizen's private affair, because that would involve serious tampering with the core culture of the country's inhabitants, all of whom whether Hindus, Muslims or Christians viewed religion as inextricably linked with all aspects of social life.

Therefore, what Gandhi sought to do was to bring the two major communities, Hindus and Muslims together by emphasising identity of interests and by propagating the doctrine of equal respect for all religions. What is debatable is whether Gandhi himself really emphasised the identity of interest. *Khilafat* was certainly not something common to both communities. Gandhi wrongly thought that the average Indian's ingrained religiosity would make Hindus and Muslims unite to fight the Western threat to the traditional Islamic institution of *Khilafat*.³

Gandhi wanted religion to serve a moral purpose. This is why he constantly urged both the communities to distinguish between true religion and irrelevant rituals, superstitions and dogmas. To illustrate Gandhi interpreted the Hindu concern for the cow, not as religion, but as an expression of non-violence with regard to sub-human life and as an economic measure to augment milk production. Here, again we see a populist strategy to effect modernization; he desired Hindus and Muslims to develop common eating and drinking habits on non-religious grounds. In the booklet on Constructive Programme he speaks of cow-protection and improvement of cattle as a national problem and not as an issue in religion; though it is true that he also at times appealed to the Muslims to give up cow slaughter voluntarily out of respect for Hindu religious sentiment.

On the official plane, Gandhi did succeed in making a dent and India was declared a secular State of his concept. The Indian Constitution thus makes the Indian State accord equal legal recognition to all religions; secondly, it also makes the State responsible for social reform and for purging Hinduism of such age old evils and superstitions as untouchability etc.

A modern national society, however, demanded not only Hindu-Muslim unity, it also required the abolition of untouchability and the breaking down of traditional caste barriers. As in the case of Hindu-Muslim unity, so in the case of caste divisions, Gandhi sought to give the impression that he was fully respecting the core culture while working for reform at the periphery. This is clear from the following steps in his

strategy : Firstly, he swore that the *shastras* did not sanction untouchability. If any one could prove that they did, he said, he was prepared to renounce Hinduism itself. Thus Gandhi sought to give the impression that he was leaving the core culture of Hinduism in tact. Secondly, while denouncing untouchability by word and deed—he himself adopted a *Harijan* girl, voluntarily chose to live in a *Harijan basti*, vigorously campaigned and conducted *satyagrahas* for temple entry by *Harijans*; he simultaneously swore by *varnashram dharma*. He interpreted *varnashram dharma* as a convenient and helpful division of labour which never sanctioned the multiplicity of castes, feelings of superiority or inferiority nor the pernicious practice of untouchability.

The populist method of modernization is clearly seen in Gandhi's desire to separate the 'inessentials' of the caste system from its fundamentals and from his rejecting the former while opting to retain the latter. The essential of the caste system is the *varna* system, the very broad four-fold division of labour on the lines of the natural division of men according to their '*gunas*' (innate qualities) and heredity skills. Gandhi showed his respect for the core culture by saying one should earn his livelihood by following '*swadharma*' (the profession according to one's *guna* and heredity skill) but sought to bring about peripheral change by saying that one could perform the task of any *varna*, if one felt inclined to do so but should avoid making it the means of his livelihood.⁴ The inessentials of the *varna* system, according to Gandhi were the multiplicity of castes that had mushroomed over the ages, the false notions of superiority and inferiority that had come to be associated with the *varnas* and the ban on inter-dining and inter-marriage. All these Gandhi claimed were subsequent developments and should, therefore, be discarded. In the *Young India* of 6th October 1921, Gandhi spoke of the ideal society in which there would be complete freedom of inter-dining and inter-marriage among the four *varnas*, but of course no compulsion.

Gandhi's populist method of modernization had one merit which all the other city based reform movements led by the Western educated lacked; namely, Gandhi, for the first time succeeded in reaching the rural masses and by talking to them in their own language and idiom succeeded in getting them

psychologically involved in the untouchability removal campaign. Even the renaming of the untouchables—the *acchuts*, the *antyaj*, the *asprishya* and *paharia*—as 'Harijans' (Children of God) was part of a clever populist strategy. That Gandhi would have gradually worked from this to the next step of reduction of multiplicity of castes and encouraging inter-caste marriages, without which a truly modern national society is difficult to emerge is clear from the fact that he gave his personal approval to such marriages and blessed his own son's marriage outside his caste. And, from the fact that towards the end of his life Gandhi insisted that none of the inmates of his *ashram* could get married while living in the *ashram*, unless one of the parties to the marriage was a *Harijan*.⁵

Building a Modern Agro-industrial Village Economy

The third major plank of Gandhi's Constructive Programme was *khadi* and cottage industries. Gandhi's stand regarding *khadi* and cottage industries had been interpreted as indicating an anti-modern trend by the advocates of large scale industry; while the truth is that Gandhi stood for an appropriate technology, one that would best suit India's contemporary as well as future needs and requirements. An appropriate technology should in the first place eliminate, not generate, human misery. A technology that produces unemployment cannot do this and to that extent Gandhi put up a stiff opposition to machines. Similarly he was opposed to machines (technology) that made it easy for a few to exploit many or made for gross inequalities, making few rich and impoverishing many. Once convinced that new machines would not have these effects, Gandhi welcomed them. This is why he praised the Singer Sewing machine (a new technology in his time) and considered its presence in every home a welcome development. Similarly, he announced that he had no objection to electrification if it brought light to every village home.

It may be mentioned here that today the West has begun to experience the adverse effects of indiscriminate labour saving industrialization as the latest report of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development reveals: The report notes, that there is little hope in sight for millions of young, unemployed persons in Europe, *despite signs of an*

economic recovery. "The problem of high youth unemployment is here to stay for several more years", it says.⁶ OCED first identified the problem in 1977. OCED rightly fears that as the unemployed young move into their twenties, the sociological spin-off of an uncontrolled adult unemployment problem could be crippling and take its toll in the form of frustration, violence, and crime. What is more disturbing is the fact that the nature of unemployment, as OCED points out, has changed in the last eight years. Even better educated and trained European youth are without jobs and their participation in the labour force is dropping in all the countries.⁷

Gandhi stated clearly that if poverty and unemployment of the Indian agricultural masses could be eradicated through more advanced technology, without causing exploitation and inequality, he would have no objection to such technology.⁸ That Gandhi had no doctrinaire approach to machines and that his ultimate commitment was to a modern Welfare State in which all citizens could live with dignity, is clear from the stand he took in 1939 on the occasion of the controversy regarding economic planning for India. Meghnad Saha (of the Congress National Planning Committee) made out a case for building a powerful base of heavy industries which would be 'the root and stem' of the economic structure while medium and cottage industries would constitute merely 'the branches and leaves' of the economy. While the two Gandhian economists J.C. Kumarappa and Das Gupta suggested economic development mainly on basis of cottage and small industries till 'the time when all available human power is employed.' When the dispute was referred to Gandhi, he advised the preparation of two separate alternative plans by the two wings provided both aimed at a definite standard of living for all, and added, "If it were discovered that the Kumarappa-Das Gupta plan involved an inordinately long time or expense in comparison with the other plan then before he retired, he would love to save all the wood used for manufacturing spinning wheels, at least for use as domestic fuel."⁹

The fact that big industries may not always bring prosperity to the immediate environment is clear from the case of Bihar which has the heaviest industrial base in the country and is yet the poorest of its States, while Punjab which has hardly any

heavy industries and has opted for small and medium industries, is the most prosperous State.

Gandhi had the foresight to realise that a rural India characterised by abysmal poverty and enforced idleness of millions of peasants could be saved only by seeking to rebuild the ancient Indian villages into modern agro-industrial societies. *Gobar* gas plants, tube-wells and village industries like *khadi*, soap-making, paper making, tanning, oil-pressing (making use of modern developments in solar energy etc.) is what India needs for its modernization. And what Gandhi sought to promote through developing 'the *khadi* mentality' was precisely the idea of decentralization of production and distribution of the necessities of life so that employment and a minimum standard of living could be ensured to all.

He pleaded for the halt of the growth of megapolis and concentration of industries in cities, only to prevent the decay of the country-side. He was not opposed to re-grouping of villages as per a pre-determined optimum size and for establishing 'radial towns', from where power, roads and other services could radiate to the country-side.

Secondly, Gandhi wanted to drive home the simple truth which modern economists like Schumacher have been emphasising, namely, that infinite growth is not possible in a finite environment. One cannot have limitless growth if one goes on indulging in an indiscriminate use of exhaustible (non-renewable) material resources like coal, oil, metals, forests etc.¹⁰

To the extent, Gandhi worked for the evolution of an agro-industrial civilization which would firstly generate profitable and meaningful employment for all and secondly would forestall the evils of environmental pollution and disturbance of the ecological balance, he was modernist.

Similarly Gandhi's idea of trusteeship, from which emerged J.P.'s idea of the Responsible Company, which works under the joint trusteeship of workers, consumers and managers, is in keeping with the modern developments in capitalist economies. Gandhi's drive towards a trusteeship economy is the only way to give capitalism a human face and to make capitalism and capitalist economic development acceptable to the masses.

Village Sanitation

Two other aspects of Gandhi's Constructive Programme were also concerned with changing the traditional habits of society. They related to village sanitation and basic education.

Gandhi's shrewd observance soon made him realize that while the Hindu had a very high sense of personal hygiene he woefully lacked the sense of social hygiene. Thus he would unfailingly take a daily bath but dirty the village tank or well round where he did so; similarly he would keep the interior of his house spik and span but would not mind littering the village with filth and dirt. Whenever he got the opportunity, Gandhi would make villagers aware of this and urge them to keep their surroundings clean. He always insisted that the most important aspect of volunteer service was to clean villages of dirt and filth and teach villagers sanitary habits.

Basic Education

Gandhi believed that to create a new outlook amongst Indians, it was necessary to change to method of education. Education must, firstly, be an activity concerning the whole of man including his body; secondly, it must be relevant to his environment; thirdly, it must be at least partly self-supporting and be able to meet a part of its own expense. It must be based on bodily labour and be centred round some profit-yielding handicraft. Fourthly, as a general rule schools should be co-educational.

In the *Harijan* issue of 9th October 1937, Gandhi elaborated his idea of an education relevant to the environment thus; "My plan to impart Primary Education through the medium of village handicrafts like spinning and carding etc., is thus conceived as the spear-head of a silent revolution. . . . It will provide a healthy and moral basis of relationship between the city and the village. . . It will check the progressive decay of our villages and lay the foundation of a juster social order. . . and everybody is assured of a living wage and the right to freedom."

Relevant education would not ignore abstract theories. But it would guard against a lop-sided development likely to be produced by mere book education, by teaching the young an

honest and useful vocation, dignity of labour and the merits and virtues of living truthfully and honestly.

The present Government is much concerned with reforming the educational system and it has brought out a paper "The Challenges of Education—A Policy Perspective" outlining its thinking on the subject. A careful perusal of this paper indicates considerable commonality between the views of Gandhi and contemporary thinking, especially in the realms of inculcating in the young dignity of labour, educating students in correct political and moral values, in vocationalising education, in promoting adult education and in making educational a life long learning process.

The importance of manual labour and the dignity of labour, Gandhi sought to propagate through his doctrine of bread labour. In the *Harijan* issues of 29th June 1935, Gandhi asks, "May not men earn their bread by intellectual labour?" and answers, "No. The needs of the body must be supplied by the body. . . Obedience to the law of bread labour will bring about a silent revolution in the structure of society." By bread labour Gandhi meant the recognition of the necessity of some physical exertion even for mental workers so that they could perform some productive function in a spirit of service to the community. The idea that education should be associated with bodily labour has also been strongly supported by such modern philosophers as Dewey and educationists like Montessori.

"My adult education means, first, true political education", said Gandhi and explained this as teaching the villager the evils of foreign rule and making him aware of the strength in collective non-violent action against foreign oppression.

While some may accuse Gandhi of introducing politics in education, the necessity of a correct political bias in education cannot be denied even today. Modern India would do well to see that the spirit of democracy and such political values as secularism, equality, fraternity are imbibed by the students during the course of their education in school and college.

Similarly of what avail is the knowledge of history of distant lands, if the students still continue with the age-old evil practices of child-marriage and dowry. Perhaps no other contemporary leader had so thoroughly grasped, as Gandhi

had, the significance of education in changing social values and attitudes.

Working for a National Language

The last plank of Gandhi's Constructive Programme was the propagation of Hindustani. Gandhi realized that the quickest way to modernize, change or reform a people is by propagation of ideas through their own language and in an idiom familiar to them. That is why he put so much emphasis on the mother tongue. But Gandhi's keen desire to build a national society also made him realize that a country as diverse and linguistically divided as India, could survive only if it developed a *lingua franca*, a common national language. The Government of India's Policy perspective paper "Challenges of Education", also hints at several places of the need to develop a common medium of higher education in the interest of greater mobility of teachers and students.¹¹ One may only caution here against an undue haste in the abolition of English. The considerable role English has played in the modernization of India by inspiring such ideals as rule of law, constitutionalism, liberty, equality and nationalism has yet to be fully appreciated.

Conclusion

Gandhi's Constructive Programme can be viewed as an example of the populist pattern of modernization. Through this programme, Gandhi sought to modernize and change a vast and over-populated country, overwhelmingly agricultural and abysmally poor with a huge volume of unemployment and under-employment, oppressed politically and exploited economically as a colony by a mighty imperial power. Almost entirely illiterate, the people were dangerously divided by social evils like casteism, communalism, untouchability, labour and peasant unrest and linguistic controversies. Gandhi's Constructive Programme bore the mark of this given situation and sought to change it. More than any Western educated Indian liberal, Gandhi succeeded in bringing liberal values in India's socio-political life.

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3. M.M. Sankhder argues that Gandhi's concern for the minorities "overshot its mark with the result that an inbuilt prejudice against Hindus was brought to the surface for political ends", vide *Gandhi, Gandhism And The Partition Of India*, (New Delhi, Deep and Deep Publications, 1932).
4. *Young India*, November 24, 1927 and October 20, 1917 and *Harijan*, March 6, 1937.
5. *Young India*, October 6, 1921; October 21, 1927 and November 24, 1927.
6. Vide *Times Of India*, Bombay, November 7, 1985. p. 8 (current topics).
7. *Ibid.*
8. Vide N.K. Bose, (ed.), *Studies In Gandhism*, (Calcutta, Indian Associated Publishing Ltd., 1947), chapter 2.
9. *Ibid.*, pp. 219-21.
10. Also see Ramashray Roy, *Gandhi Sounding In Political Philosophy*, (New Delhi, Chanakya Publications, 1984) for the view that the conventional idea of unlimited progress has become irrelevant and that Gandhian ideas are adequate to meet the complex problems the world is facing today.
11. Vide *Challenge Of Education : A Policy Perspective*, (New Delhi, Ministry Of Education, 1985).