

THE RELEVANCE OF MAHATMA GANDHI TO CONTEMPORARY INDIA

*Adi H. Doctor**

It is over three decades since Mahatma Gandhi left our midst leaving behind a prolific mass of literature on every aspect of life—political, social, economic, ethical. There are many who think it rather odd that we should still consider it worthwhile to debate the relevance of Gandhian ideals to contemporary India. I for one think the exercise is worthwhile, if for no other reason, than for the fact that the present ruling party and government have chosen to swear by Gandhi and implement his programmes. Because of this it is necessary, first of all, to understand what Gandhi stood for. I intend to relate and assess the relevance of major Gandhian ideals to contemporary India under two broad heads: Gandhi's political ideas and Gandhi's economic ideas.

Gandhi's Political Ideas

Gandhi's ideal state was "the anarchist state in which men are naturally good and hence need no external government—they govern themselves without any governmental agency. Thus in 1931 Gandhi said, "Political power means capacity to regulate national life through national representatives. If national life becomes so perfect as to become self-regulated, no representation becomes necessary. In such a state everyone is his own ruler. He rules himself in such a manner that he is never a hindrance to his neighbour. In the ideal state therefore there is no political power for there is no state."¹ Earlier in

*Dr. Adi H. Doctor is Head of the Department of Political Science, Bombay University Post-Graduate Centre for Instruction and Research, Panaji, Goa, India.

1921 Gandhi wrote, "Let the people purify themselves. Let them cease to indirectly participate in the evils of the state and it will disappear by itself."²

Thus in Gandhi's ideal state people would be so good and pure that there would be no need for a state to maintain peace and order.

Now it is quite obvious that we need not labour too long to debate this ideal state of affairs. It will never come about. It presupposes that there is a definite, continuous and gradual evolution of man towards good and hence a day will come when all evil in man will be eliminated and obviously when that day comes no government will be required. As against this belief of Gandhi I am tempted to quote Vivekanand who said, "Everywhere we have to move through this contradiction that wherever there is good there must also be evil . . . they must go together for they are not contradictory, nor two separate existences, but different manifestations of the same unity. ." Once we admit that man for a very long foreseeable time will continue to be an admixture of good and bad impulses, we have to admit of the need for restraints and that means the need for the state or government.

Even Gandhi later admitted that the anarchist ideal was not practicable. Hence he modified his stand by asserting that while the totally non-violent or stateless society was the ultimate ideal, the realizable or immediate ideal was the "predominantly non-violent state" or the state that governed least. This is of course the *laissez faire* ideal so dear to the former Swatantra party members. But why was Gandhi against the state and against an extension of its functions? He cites many reasons. First of all, the state gives no place to conscience.³ The government is based on majority rule but says Gandhi, "In matters of conscience the law of the majority has no place." Conscience to Gandhi was a higher court than the highest court in the land and "hence obedience to it was the law of our being." In the place of the state's forcible restraint, Gandhi believed in the enlightened and willing submission to social restraints. Secondly, Gandhi quarrelled with the democratic principle of majority rule on the ground that wisdom is not born of mere numbers. "Swaraj will be an absurdity," he once wrote, "if individuals have to surrender their judgement

to a majority."⁴ In *Hind Swaraj*, Gandhi condemned the parliament as a sterile woman and a prostitute—'sterile woman' since parliament could conceive of no good policy on its own accord, and 'a prostitute' since it had no real master.⁵ And in keeping with this condemnation Gandhi also attacked parties, elections and legislation passed by parliaments. To Gandhi parties divided people and bred mutual distrust; elections merely deceived people and were availed of by self-seekers to capture power. As to legislation by parliament, it was not worth the paper it was printed on since no law could be really effective without a prior conversion of hearts. But if hearts were converted then where was the need for legislation? It was similar logic that made Gandhi see not much value in a Declaration of Human Rights. "Unless we become manly and fearless," he said, "no number of rights showered upon us can secure us our liberties."⁶

The trouble with the Gandhian critique of parliamentary democracy is that it is based on a number of false assumptions regarding the state, modern legislation, parties and elections. In the first place the state need not be viewed as an artificial imposition. Rather the state is the culmination of man's ethical evolution. Primitive man was egoistic, aggressive and self-seeking, with the passage of time man learnt, partly from bitter experience and partly from intelligence, to reconcile his will with that of others in the interest of a common good. We may call this the social will or the wills of individuals reconciled in the common good. Now Gandhi may believe that such a will is capable of running administration and maintaining law and order without the instrumentality of an agent like the government. But to me at least, and I presume to most of us, the absurdity of this is quite clear. The social will needs to be implemented through the agency of government and where necessary the government will have to restrain individuals acting against the social will. In other words, to most of us government is a moral, responsible agent of society, created by it for its own convenience and for carrying out its own will. So viewed the state and government are neither artificial nor imposed on us. Nor need we fear an increase in government functions or powers provided these have been entrusted to government by us after rational consideration.

For instance a function like man-power planning can only be entrusted to the state.

Similarly Gandhi's opposition to modern legislation by parliament is based on many ill-conceived assumptions. It is true that law cannot make men moral since morality is a matter of inward choice. Yet this does not make law superfluous. Law is required to create the conditions or the climate in which it is possible for men to live a moral life and to exercise free moral judgement. For instance a law providing compulsory education is necessary to produce a society of intelligent men who can think and decide issues for themselves. To Gandhi parliamentary government based on majority rule is necessarily coercive. But this also is a half-truth. In western democracies, today, majority decisions are not based on simple brute majority; they are taken after giving due consideration to the minority or opposition point of view and after accommodating it as far as is possible. Very rarely is a bill passed 51 against 49 as Gandhi claims is the case. Gandhi wanted to give the majority principle only a limited role—it should not apply in matters of conscience, morals and religion. But this view of Gandhi raises more problems than it solves. One can leave a man to act exclusively according to his individual conscience where his act affects only himself and none else. But how can a man be left free to decide matters according to his individual conscience in case of acts which affects others. For instance, if one claims it a matter of conscience to have two wives and unlimited children? Or, to take an even more extreme example, should an African tribal be allowed to offer a human sacrifice on grounds of his conscience or religion? In other words, there is also a thing like the moral will of the community, what Ernest Barker calls, "the common conviction" and there is no other way of ascertaining society's moral will save by finding out what most people consider moral.

Like government, Gandhi considers parties too as artificial and unnatural. They are accused of artificially dividing people. But more often than not, parties follow natural divisions in society. In every society we have conservatives, radicals and moderates and parties the world over have tended to follow these divisions. Furthermore, as long as men continue to

differ in their opinions and in regard to the solutions they suggest to different problems, they are bound to group differently to achieve their objectives. Parties, so understood, have their roots in the natural tendency of like minds to unite in order to achieve by common endeavour a common goal.

In fact it is through parties alone that democracy can work. In place of parties, Gandhi wants decisions to be taken unanimously. A unanimous decision presumes that there is only one real solution to a problem which is rarely the case. In such a situation to insist, as Gandhi does, on mass participation and identity of interests is in effect, to invite tyranny and conformity. To illustrate, when the British Labour party leader wanted nationalization and the British Conservative party leader wanted free enterprise, neither was more patriotic than the other. Each had his own view of the national welfare. Now to ask them to rise above parties is in fact asking them to be untrue to their convictions.

Once we accept different views and solutions to socio-economic problems, elections become a natural method of ascertaining whose solution should become operative. In this sense elections are not "a sop in the eye", nor is Gandhi correct in asserting that they bring forth no material change in the condition of the people. After all was it not elections that enabled the people of Kerala to have a communist administration? And, again, was it not elections that enabled them to dispense with it? Or, to take a very recent example, was it not the election held in 1977 that enabled the people to remove the Indira Gandhi government and have an end put to emergency rule? And again was it not elections that enabled her government to come back to power?

Not only is Gandhi's criticism of parliamentary democracy built on unfounded assumptions but the alternative policy he suggests is, I think, inherently unworkable and will fail to achieve its own objective viz: the maximum freedom for each individual. Gandhi claimed that his predominantly non-violent state would be a decentralized state in which the village would be the key unit. Each village would be near self-sufficient and would be governed by a unanimously elected panchayat which in turn would take all decisions unanimously. The *panchas* of all the villages would come together and unanimously elect

the members of the *thana* or *taluka panchayat*; these in turn would unanimously elect the members of the district *panchayat* and so on till we reach the highest rung of the ladder—the national *panchayat*. The higher *panchayats* are expected to exercise advisory powers and moral authority. The real powers belong to the village or *Gram panchayats*.

Now let us picture how this system will work. Much will depend on the size of the village. But even assuming a manageable size (say a thousand people), will it be possible for all the villagers to unanimously select the five *panchas*? The village is not the happy family that Gandhian visionaries imagine it to be. It is torn assunder by caste and factional considerations. Can one imagine a *Harijan* being unanimously elected? Even, if for the sake of argument, we presume that there are no caste considerations dividing villagers, there will still be differences among the villagers as to who is the best man deserving to be unanimously elected as the *pancha*. In other words, unanimous election will reduce conflict to the level of personalities and introduce into politics a violence and bitterness which more impersonal politics would avoid. These difficulties visualised in the unanimous election of the village *panchayat* will multiply in the case of the elections of the *taluka*, district, state and national *panchayats*, for here the electorate will no longer be the simple face to face village community.

Finally, it can be argued that Gandhian “Gram Rajya” need not really maximize freedom; rather the effect may be just the opposite. As Zimmerin argued, the smaller the unit the greater the strangle-hold on the individual. This may well happen in the case of the village *panchayat* especially since the *panchayat* decision will have the halo of unanimity. Secondly, the village *panchayat* will be the executive, legislature and judiciary all rolled into one—a fact more likely to make for tyranny of the village *panchayat* over individuals and groups. Experience has shown that separation of powers and institutional safeguards are necessary to protect individual liberties.

To me the entire Gandhian theory of the state appears to be a philosophy of protest. Gandhi protests against the entire political structure as we see it today. He questions the very

foundations of parliamentary democracy viz., the principle of majority rule and its corollaries of parties, elections and law-making. Although I have argued against the Gandhian theory and have tried to show that Gandhi's criticism of parliamentary democracy is based on ill-conceived assumptions and that the alternative polity he proposes is not likely to achieve its objectives any better, I would, nevertheless like to conclude by stating that there is nevertheless a lot we can learn from the Gandhian critique of modern democracy. In the light of Gandhian criticism we can improve the actual working of parliamentary democracy. But to learn from Gandhian criticism of parliamentary democracy is one thing; to throw it out for a dubious substitute quite another.

Gandhi's Economic and Social Ideas and their contemporary relevance

The Gandhian economy is built on the principle of "Simple living, High Thinking." The Gandhian theories of both production and distribution are derived from this principle.

Gandhian Theory of Consumption or Limited Wants

'According to Gandhi, happiness is not only "bodily welfare." In *Hind Swaraj*, Gandhi writes, "Civilization in the real sense of the term, consists not in the multiplication of wants but in the deliberate and voluntary reduction of wants. This alone promotes real happiness and contentment and increases capacity for service. The mind is a restless bird. The more it gets, the more it wants and still remains unsatisfied."⁷ In the *Harijan* issue of 11-9-46 Gandhi states that high thinking is inconsistent with "the complicated material life based on high speed imposed on us by mammon worship." In a letter to Pt. Nehru, Gandhi wrote, "We can realise truth and non-violence only in the simplicity of village life. The essence of what I have said is that man should rest content with what are his real needs and become self-sufficient."⁸ Gandhi even catalogued man's real needs viz., adequate food, clothing, housing and education. To a starving man we cannot talk of God and *ahimsa*, says Gandhi. Every human being must satisfy his basic material wants. It is seeking after more than the minimum required that Gandhi opposes. Such greed

destroys human values like honesty, high thinking etc. It is the same greed that has led to increased and more production which in turn has resulted in exploitation, state control and centralism.

An economy based on Simple Living or Limited Wants, Gandhi further claims, would neither invite aggression nor itself be tempted to commit aggression.

To those who accept "Simple Living" or subsistence living, as the highest value, what Gandhi says is certainly relevant. The question is how many would accept the principle of an Economy of Limited Wants? Limiting wants would mean limiting production and this is fully in keeping with the Gandhian principle of labour-intensive decentralised production. Are we prepared for this? Is it possible in today's competitive world to live and run a subsistence economy when other nations are constantly raising their standards of living and increasing production? Secondly, not everyone would accept the Gandhian contention that high thinking is possible only in the context of simple living. Bertrand Russell once observed, "Nothing improves the moral level of the community as much as an increase of wealth... the harshness of the general outlook from the Rhine to the Pacific at the present day is very largely due to the fact that so many people are poorer than their parents were."⁹

Gandhian Theory of Production

Gandhi, in general, was opposed to large scale production and mechanization for in his opinion this leads to exploitation of man by man. Industrialization is the outcome of man's greed for more and more profits, according to Gandhi. The machine by rendering men unemployed deprives them of livelihood; by reducing work to a mechanical performance it drives out all creative instincts and destroys man's initiative. These evils according to Gandhi are "inherent" in industrialization. In one of the *Harijan* issues of 1940, Gandhi wrote, "Pandit Nehru wants industrialization because he thinks that if it is socialised, it would be free from the evils of capitalism. My own view is that the evils are inherent in industrialization and no amount of socialization can eradicate them."¹⁰

^ Gandhi was opposed to centralized production for another

reason too. It led to the exploitation of the village by the city or urban centres. Cities with better earning prospects drained the villages of their local talent and skill. Further, in comparison with the product of large units of production, the comparative cruder villages very naturally stood to loose. Hence the ideal system of production was a decentralised one in which the emphasis would be on the village being self-sufficient and manufacturing only for use and not for trade. The village could use machines but these (like the "Singer" sewing machine) should not displace labour nor reduce man to an automation. It was the same logic that made Gandhi assert that he was not opposed to electrification of villages.

The question of how far Gandhi's views on production are relevant, can only be answered with reference to the economic and moral values we subscribe too. Classical economic opinion is that small or village industries may provide more immediate employment and goods, but only a moderate increase in the standard of living. On the other hand, centralised or big industries, after the gestation period provide a higher standard of living which in turn leads to more demand for goods. This requires still more increased production which in turn generates employment, but one would opt for large industries only if one wanted an ever increasing standard of living. Since Gandhi considers any production beyond the maintenance or subsistence level as harmful, he naturally opposes industrialization. You have to decide which option you would like to make. To me at least, it is clear if you opt for a simple decentralized economy based on production for use, you will naturally lack the power that goes with accumulation of goods and thus be condemned to a permanently poor place in the comity of nations. Gandhi thinks such simplicity and self-sufficiency will not invite aggression and thus ensure peace. I think it may do the contrary. A poor and weak nation is more likely to invite aggression than deter it. Of course, in case there is aggression the Gandhian remedy is to meet it with pure non-violence which always conquers.

Gandhi's view that automation and exploitation are inherent evils of industrialization is also open to challenge. There is the other side of the picture which Gandhi failed to see. Drudgery in work arises largely due to lack of interest

in work. Such interest can be created by making the workman realise his role in the total process of production. Secondly, making the machine ready and "minding" it can be quite interesting and certainly requires intelligence. Other methods are also available for reducing drudgery in work viz., improving workshop conditions, reducing hours of work, making provisions for a fuller and more interesting life outside the factory. By reducing hours of work, machines can provide more time as well as release more energy for creative works in art and literature. J.B. Priestley has opined that some people may consider the machine a very interesting thing to work with. Only says Priestley, "We do not hear much about the delight in the machine, though we evidence enough of it, simply because the machine minded are not as a rule very good at expressing themselves in words."¹¹

Finally, it is important to note that automation and drudgery can characterise a non-mechanical society too. For example, a man who mechanically and unfeelingly makes *chappatis*, I think, is no different from the man who minds a modern bakery.

Coming next to exploitation, I do not think it is fair to state that it is inherent in industrialization. Exploitation can characterise a rural or simple economy as much as an urban, industrially developed economy. In fact as someone observed, exploitation can begin with the *rickshaw* and vanish with the airplane economy. If exploitation means that workers are better off in smaller units of production than in larger units, experience does not prove this as true. Studies made by Dhar and Lydall indicate that workers in smaller units were paid for less than in bigger firms. Exploitation, it must be remembered is a mentality and so long as it prevails there will always be some people seeking to benefit at the cost of others. And this has nothing to do with industrialization. Farmers in India are exploited by intermediaries who buy from them at low prices and sell at higher prices in the market—a form of exploitation which has nothing to do with the machine.

To conclude, if industrialization and mechanization degrade man to the level of an automation, reduce work to a drudgery and exploit man, then these evils are more due to the socio-economic environment which favours *laissez faire*

and un-regulated capitalism. We must guard against crediting to mechanization the incidental products of its abuse or of its use under a policy of drift.

Gandhian theory of Distribution and Trusteeship

In his early writings Gandhi, following Ruskin emphasised the concept of absolute equality. In his book *Sarvodaya* (Gujarati translation of Ruskin's *Unto the Last*), Gandhi claimed that no work or profession is superior or inferior to any other; and that since all "works" are equally necessary for the maintenance of society, all workers, whether lawyers or scavengers, should receive equal payment.

Later Gandhi came round to accepting a concept of equality which could be compared to the Marxian concept of "from each according to his ability to each according to his need." Gandhi, now no longer insisted on absolute equality but on a "living wage" which would ensure the worker a decent home, a balanced diet and sufficient khadi to cloth himself with. Beyond this minimum, differences were to be permitted only on the basis of differing needs. To calculate needs Gandhi relies on commonsense. In the *Harijan* issue of 31 August 1936 Gandhi writes, "Let no one try to justify the glaring inequalities between the prince and the pauper by saying that the former need more . . . Just as it would be preposterous if an ant demanded as much food as an elephant; in like fashion if a man demanded as much as another with a wife and four children that would be a violation of economic equality." In return for getting a living wage (based on needs) every worker was duty bound to do some work. This is what Gandhi meant by "bread labour"—a term he borrowed from Tolstoy. In other words, no man was to be given meals free. Bread was always to be in return for some labour. But how much labour? Gandhi's advice was to "accept nothing less than a living wage for nothing more than eight hours of work"¹²

I for one would personally not quarrel with any of the above Gandhian ideas regarding equality. I would however like to indicate two aspects of the Gandhian theory of equality which are not acceptable to me. Firstly, Gandhi insists that the eight hours of work (in return for bread or living wage)

must include physical labour and Gandhi advocates that everyone must do agricultural work. In "Yerwada Mandir" Gandhi even desired every man to do his own scavenging.¹³ Secondly, when Gandhi says each one must contribute according to his ability he relates ability to "varna", which means that each man, for the purpose of earning his livelihood, follows the hereditary and traditional calling of his forefathers.¹⁴ What I would particularly object to is the following statement of Gandhi: "A *shudra* has as much right to knowledge as a *Brahmana* but he falls from his estate if he tries to gain his livelihood through teaching."¹⁵

While on the subject of the Gandhian theory of distribution one must also refer to his theory of trusteeship. Gandhi says I enunciated this theory when the socialist theory was placed before the country in respect of the possessions held by Zamindars and ruling chiefs."¹⁶ The trusteeship principle according to Gandhi is: "Enjoy thy wealth by renouncing it." Explaining it further Gandhi observed "it means, 'Earn your crores by all means but understand that your wealth is not yours; it belongs to the people. Take what you require for your legitimate needs and use the remainder for society.'"¹⁷

I for one am no supporter of communism nor even large scale nationalization, nevertheless I feel, as many others have, that Gandhi here was acting as the spokesman and apologist of big business. There are many reasons why one is tempted to say this. Firstly, how are we to ensure that the trustee will keep only that much from "his crores" as he needs? Secondly, the theory requires a one sided trust—labourers are required to repose complete confidence in the wisdom of the trustee and to accept that all that the trustee does is in the interest of the beneficiary. This is rather difficult to expect. After all we remember how in 17th century England considerable exploitation of serfs went on under the banner of trusteeship.

Whether the trusteeship doctrine was an apology for capitalism or not, there is no doubt that big business has reacted most favourably to it. Thus M. R. Masani approves of it because it is "an attempt to secure the best use of property for the people by competent hands."¹⁸ Similarly K. M. Munshi feels that trusteeship will reduce the need for what he

terms "the oppressive and expropriatory" tax policy of today as also the need for modern planning.¹⁹ The main grouse one can have against the Munshi thesis is that it seeks to replace modern socialistic planning and the present system of taxation by philanthropy and charity.

Gandhi's theory of Varnashram

Gandhi, as I said at the very beginning, was a prolific writer. I have till now spoken on various aspects of his political and economic ideas. But Gandhi has also opined on several social problems of the day—family, education, sex, untouchability, *varnashram*, etc. Of Gandhi's various social ideals I intend only to refer to his theory of *varnashram*.

Gandhi's work for the untouchables, I think, cannot be questioned—though Ambedkar felt that on the whole Gandhi had not done much for his kinsmen. The Harijan Sevak Sangh which he founded did render yeoman's service by starting schools and hostels (though segregated) for Harijan boys and girls; by digging separate wells for the Harijans who previously had to walk many miles to get water; by starting dispensaries in *harijan bastis*, etc. Equally credit must be given to Gandhi for the remarkable success his "temple entry" campaigns achieved.

After doing so much for Harijan welfare if Gandhi still comes to be considered by some as "reactionary" or "conservative" the answer is to be found in his views regarding *varnashram*. Gandhi's views on *varnashram* are summed up in a small booklet with the title "Varnashram dharma" published by the Navajivan trust. Gandhi begins by claiming *varnashram* to be "a discovery of the Hindus" and asserts that it has "universal application." He observes "*Varna* is intimately, if not indissolubly, connected with birth and the observance of the law of *varna* means believing on the part of us all of the hereditary and traditional calling of our forefathers in a spirit of duty."²⁰ By not living upto his *varna* a man, says Gandhi, will be doing violence to himself and becomes a degraded being, a *patita*."²¹ Gandhi was once asked the question, "Can a man follow the profession of his heart?" His reply was "The only profession after his heart should be the profession of his fathers." To another question

posed to Gandhi, his rejoinder is equally revealing. The reporter asked Gandhi, "If a *shudra* has all the qualities of a *Brahmin*, can we not call him a *Brahmin*?" Gandhi's reply was "Not in this birth. It is a good thing for him not to arrogate a *varna* to which he is not born. It is a sign of true humility."²²

However, to be fair to Gandhi it must be admitted that he did not go round preaching *varna-dharma* as he did preaching abolition of untouchability. Thus when it was brought to his notice that his defence of *varna-dharma* was strengthening the hands of orthodoxy, Gandhi replied "I have gone nowhere to defend *varna-dharma*, though for the removal of untouchability I went to Vaikom. I am the author of a Congress resolution for the propagation of *Khadi*, Hindu-Muslim unity, removal of untouchability, the three pillars of *swaraj*. But I have never placed establishment of *varnashram dharma* as the fourth pillar."²³

Notes

1. *Young India*, 2-7-32.
2. *Young India*, 23-2-21.
3. *Young India*, 15-12-21 and 18-3-19.
4. *Young India*, 8-12-21.
5. *Harijan*, 5-1-42.
6. *Young India*, 13-3-20.
7. Gandhi, *Hind Swaraj*, Navajivan, Ahmedabad, 1958, p. 61.
8. Cited in Dhebar, *Lectures on Gandhian Philosophy*, Annamalai University, Annamalai University, p. 40-41.
9. Bertrand Russell, *Power, A New Social Analysis*, London, Unwin Books, 1960, pp. 279-280.
10. *Harijan*, 29-2-40.
11. Preface to *Man and Machine*, ed. by H. Williams, p. ii, London, George Routledge and Sons, 1935.
12. Gandhi cited in Khar, *Economic and Industrial Life and Relations*, Vol. I, Ahmedabad, Navajivan, 1957, p. 104.
13. Yerwada Mandir, p. 15.
14. *Young India*, 20-10-27, cited in *Varnashram Dharma*, Ahmedabad, Navajivan, 1962, p. 9.
15. *Varnashram Dharma*, p. 15.
16. M. K. Gandhi, *Trusteeship*, Ahmedabad, Navajivan, 1960, p. 5.

17. *Harijan*, 1-2-42.
18. M. R. Masani, *Socialism Reconsidered*, p. 64.
19. K. M. Munshi, *Construction of Society through Trusteeship*, Bombay, Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, 1960.
20. *Varnashram Dharma*, *op. cit.*, p. 6.
21. *ibid.*, p. 14.
22. *ibid.*, p. 15 and 17.
23. *ibid.*, p. 21.