

## THE LEGACY OF GANDHI: A 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY PERSPECTIVE

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## The Gandhian Legacy of Hindu-Muslim Relations

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The great historian Eric Hobsbawm described the 20<sup>th</sup> century as the century of extremes. Economic growth through burgeoning industrialisation, scientific breakthroughs in the fight against disease and rising standards and human survival, the end of colonial domination, and the spread of democracy were some of the outstanding achievements of that period, but, on the other hand, bloody wars, two of them known as world wars, fought in the name of nationalism and racist ideologies, killed altogether 110 million people (35 million in World War I and 75 million in World War II). Also, despite enormous economic growth and end of colonialism poverty and poverty-related other forms of human degradation continued to afflict the wretched of the earth most of whom were found in Africa, Asia and Latin America. The 20<sup>th</sup> century ended without the extremes being eliminated or a middle path getting established. One cannot deny, however, that the 20<sup>th</sup> century epitomised the leadership of the West. That leadership became a fact of history from at least the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century when European powers completed their expansion into Asia and Africa, while in the 20<sup>th</sup> century those empires received severe blows emanating from within the Western civilisation.

Mahatma Gandhi lived and worked out his social and political philosophy in the 20<sup>th</sup> century although his long stay in South Africa began already in the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. He faced discrimination and racism in that British colony and later developed novel methods of challenging the abuse of power and authority. Among those methods the most famous is Satyagraha, or non-violent civil disobedience and resistance. It not only influenced the Indian freedom struggle but also struggles for national liberation and social emancipation in many other parts of the world.

These days one hears quite so often that the 21<sup>st</sup> century is going to be an Asian century. Such optimism is justified because after several centuries we find Asian societies exuding great dynamism and progress. East Asia, South East Asia, China and now India are emerging as engines of great economic growth and many hope that this contagion will spread westwards into the mainly Muslim-majority countries of west and central Asia. But a 21<sup>st</sup> Asian century characterised by economic growth and rapid industrialisation and urbanisation will be very different from Gandhiji's worldview of a good society constituted by self-sufficient villages based mainly on a natural economy. Rather his idyllic good society will be a sure casualty of the 21<sup>st</sup> century market economy Juggernaut impacting Asia. But one can wonder if it will suffice to pursue economic growth and become successful consumers of ever increasing gadgetry? In that case will this not be a century of extremes too or perhaps of contrasts between the successful and the failed; the haves and the have-nots; the powerful and the weak? Will it not then be a continuation of the Western century but with some Asian trappings?

After all, the 20<sup>th</sup> century bequeathed one of the most dangerous legacies of international terrorism. A well-trained, international network of Islamic warriors laced with jihadi ideology sponsored by the United States and Saudi Arabia was deployed against the Soviet Union in Afghanistan. Those jihadis then turned their guns against the West once Afghanistan was freed of Soviet occupation. It culminated in the terrorist attacks of 9/11 in the United States.

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Thousands of innocent lives were lost in that outrage. In some bizarre sense it unleashed a clash of civilisations, thus perpetuating societal dichotomies as in the past; but instead of class and race, 'civilisations' became the basis of polarisation. Such a situation is going to become even more complicated in the future as globalisation imposes increasing, cultural and religious heterogeneity on the world. How would two fellows living next door to each other deal with each other if they happen to belong to two different civilisations? Would even deadlier weapons and surveillance systems suffice to contain the threats posed by those who become civilisational enemies and threats? How will terrorism and minority bashing and killing be dealt with in the 21<sup>st</sup> century? One can go on and on to point out the limits of a worldview based on immutable and eternal tribal rivalries and conflicts.

### **Relevance of Gandhian Thought in our Own Times**

While answers to these questions can only be tentative we cannot escape the responsibility to take a position on the perennial question: are human beings intrinsically united or estranged in their essence. Perhaps the safe answer is: both. Human beings are capable of great sympathy and solidarity as well as deep iniquity and hostility. But a choice between humanism and tribalism will have to be made in order to make sense of the world around us and to prevent impending man-made disasters created by extremes and contrasts culminating in some terrible, irreparable catastrophe for the whole humankind. Nobody comes to my mind as a more appropriate source of inspiration and role model than Mahatma Gandhi.

### **Gandhi an Eclectic but Original Thinker**

Although born a Hindu and one who remained deeply spiritual in his approach to human relations Gandhi was not a dogmatic thinker. The influence of Tolstoy and his ideal of small Christian village communities, of Jainism from where he developed his firm commitment to non-violence, of the techniques and methods of peaceful civil disobedience that he witnessed in England during his stay in that country combined with his reading of Hindu, Islamic, Christian and other sacred scriptures to furnish an elaborate philosophy of social activism and reformism that was not a sum total of those diverse sources but a new, modern approach to politics and questions of social amity and justice. If Gandhi's moral and social philosophy is to be summed up in a few words it would be that human beings are intrinsically good and therefore through love and solidarity societal differences – cultural, religious, economic and political – can be transcended. However, he did not believe that goodness can prevail on its own; constant efforts have to be made to establish justice in society. Thus while declaring himself an orthodox Hindu he did not hesitate to reject untouchability as a great social evil within Hindu society. Much of his reform efforts were directed at the eradication of untouchability.

### **Hindu-Muslim Relations**

Given the challenges of cultural and religious diversity and the threats of terrorism that the 21<sup>st</sup> century will face, there are good reasons to believe that Gandhian social and political ethics will witness a revival and would need a new interpretation because massive injustices and grievances continue to haunt the destiny of humankind. Gandhi would probably define civilisation as the ability of people to live in peace in a just and fair social order, notwithstanding their differences in beliefs and cultural affiliations. On the other hand, barbarism to him would be a celebration of tribalism in its various garbs. All this can be verified by having a close and dispassionate look at how he approached Hindu-Muslim

relations. He employed a number of regular practices to enhance Hindu-Muslim understanding. He also took part in some political events to create better understanding between the two communities. It would be fair to say that his practices and efforts were motivated by two primary objectives: to bring British colonial rule to an end and to keep India united.

### **Equal Respect for All Religions**

The most important idea and practice that he introduced in his daily public interaction with people was to declare that all religions deserve equal respect. The correct wording for it is *Sarva Dharma Samabhava*. In its original Sanskrit meaning this Vedic adage stood for ‘all religions are equal and harmonious to each other’ and one can consider it the most original principle emanating from the Indic civilisation. In contrast, Middle Eastern monotheism has had great difficulty in accepting such an outlook. However, in the increasingly pluralist societies of the contemporary era equal respect for all religions is an imperative so as to create a sufficiently stable basis for social harmony. In the deeply religious and communitarian cultures of Asia *Sarva Dharma Sahabhava* needs very special emphasis since it corresponds more readily to the fact of strong religious affiliations and associations among individuals. However, as already noted, Gandhi did not imply by respect for all religions a dogmatic or uncritical approach to how established religion impacts on society and social relations. His struggle against untouchability as alien to the spirit of what he believed was Vedic Hinduism is ample testimony of his efforts at reform from within.

When he spoke about religion he had in mind the deepest moral and spiritual values such as truth and kindness within religious systems that he emphasised. With regard to Hindu-Muslim relations his morning sessions of public prayers are particularly significant. He began the day with recitations from the Bhagwad Gita, Quran, Bible and other sacred scriptures. Doing this was an exceptional way to demonstrate that all paths lead to the same God. Many Muslims who witnessed the morning prayers have admitted to the present author that they were deeply touched by the sanctity Gandhi accorded to the Quran. Thus Gandhi elevated *Sarva Dharma Sahabhava* the leitmotif of his social philosophy and gave it a dignity in his daily actions that did not exist in the past.

### **Statements on Hindu-Muslim Amity and Solidarity**

Gandhi was a prolific writer who wrote and spoke regularly on the need to build bridges between Hindus and Muslims. His statements cover a span of almost 50 years. Some of his quotes are given below and they represent two different contexts, one, when India was not partitioned and the other when India and Pakistan had come into being.

- If not during my life-time, I know that after my death both Hindus and Mussalmans will bear witness that I had never ceased to yearn after communal peace. (1921)
- My longing is to be able to cement the two [Hindus and Muslims] with my blood, if necessary. 1924)
- [Hindu-Muslim unity] has been my passion from early youth. I count some of the noblest of Muslims as my friends. I have a devout daughter of Islam as more than daughter to me. She lives for that unity and would cheerfully die for it. I had the son

of the late Muezzin of the Jama Masjid of Bombay as a staunch inmate of the Ashram. (1938)

- The lawlessness [of communalism] is a monster with many faces. It hurts all in the end, including those who are primarily responsible for it. (1940)
- If one side ceases to retaliate, the riots will not go on. (1946)
- My one aim with respect to the Hindu-Muslim question is that the solution will be complete only when the minority, whether in the Indian Union or Pakistan, feels perfectly safe, even if they are in the minority of one. (1947)
- The minorities must be made to realise that they are as much valued citizens of the State they live in as the majority to look to for justice. (1947)

### **Patriotism versus Nationalism**

An important distinction needs to be made between nationalism and patriotism although the two words are often used as interchangeables and in some situations the two can coincide. Patriotism is love for the land of birth and is an inclusive term. It is perhaps one of the most universal sentiments. It does not mean hatred of others. Gandhi was committed to such an understanding of the love for India. Thus he wanted an end to British rule but did not hate the British as a people. He could even envisage Englishmen settling in India and becoming a part of South Asian society, enriching its already very diverse pluralist social and cultural order. On the other hand, nationalism in its strong sense is essentially an ethnic term. It divides the world into different nations or tribes and assumes tension and conflict between them as inevitable. In the milder sense of course nationalism means the right of a people to exercise sovereignty and that can coincide with patriotism.

When it comes to Muslims, as argued above, Gandhi wanted to bring the Muslims into the patriotic anti-colonial struggle against the British. He recognised that Indian Muslims were in an emotional and religious sense affiliated with a universal community, but rather than hold this against them he tried to win them over by coming out openly in favour of the Khilafat Movement. The Khilafat movement (1919-24) originated in India in the aftermath of Ottoman Turkey's defeat in the First World War. The institution of Khilafat or caliphate was established in 632 following the death of the Prophet Muhammad. Thereafter, it symbolised continuity of Islamic political sovereignty. Sunni Muslims all over the world recognised the Ottoman sultan as their *caliph* – more in a symbolic and emotional rather than political sense. Thus, when the war broke out, Indian Muslims were confronted with a veritable moral and religious crisis: how to continue associating themselves religiously with the caliphate while simultaneously maintaining good relations with their British rulers. A way out was found by agreeing to remain loyal to the British on the understanding that the caliphate will be spared and suzerainty over the Muslim holy places in the Middle East continue to be vested in the Ottoman sultan. However, an Arab revolt in 1916, masterminded by British agents, under the leadership of Sharif Hussain of Mecca hastened the defeat of the Turks. The victorious allies now wanted to penalise the Ottomans severely by depriving them of their remaining non-Turkish areas. Among them, British Prime Minister Lloyd George was the most vengeful. Most crucially, the allies wanted to confer sovereignty over the holy lands on their Arab protégés. The Treaty of Sevres aimed virtually at reducing Turkey to an Anatolian rump state.

Indian Muslims felt cheated. They suspected that a sinister conspiracy against Islam and Muslims existed. Consequently many stalwarts stepped forward to mobilise support for Turkey. In 1919 some Western-educated Muslims as well as many ulama and some Sindhi pirs (spiritual divines) came together to establish the Khilafat Committee. The Muslim realised that without the support of Hindu leaders and masses they could not challenge British authority. They were therefore greatly pleased when Gandhi declared the Khilafat cause just and offered his support. He was invited to join the All-India Khilafat Committee that was set up in 1919. He served for a while as its president. Consequently, a genuine patriotic upsurge took place in which Muslims and Hindus joined ranks at all levels against colonial rule. Muhammad Ali Johar and his brother Shaukat Ali, Maulana Abdul Bari of Firangi Mahal, Mahmud Hasan of Deoband, Zafar Ali Khan and Abul Kalam Azad were some of the leading Muslims who took part in the movement. Some of them were incarcerated or confined to remote areas.

Civil disobedience, boycott of foreign goods, rejection of government grants, titles and employment were some of the tactics employed. However, Gandhi suddenly called off the support when in some areas violence was used by the protestors. From 1922 onwards the Muslim-Hindu alliance began to crumble and instead rioting took place in many places. The most well-known being the uprising of Muslim peasants called Moplahs against their Hindu landlords. Gandhi was attacked by liberal Muslims such as Jinnah who were opposed to mass politics and mixing of religion and politics, while rightwing Hindu leaders felt that Gandhi provided a popular forum to the ulema and thus conferred legitimacy on their radical type of Islamism.

### **Unity versus Separatism**

Individual Hindus as well as Muslims had talked of separate nationhood since the late 19th century but the first notable demand for the division of India on a religious basis was made by Hindus in the Punjab in the 1920s following the activism and radicalism of the ulema during the Khilafat Movement. Among prominent Muslims the first to demand a separate Muslim state was Allama Iqbal, who took up the issue at the annual session of the Muslim League in Allahabad in 1930. Only a year earlier, the Indian National Congress at Lahore had demanded independence for an undivided India. While much has been written on the separatist tendency among Muslims, especially the landed elites who felt threatened by the Indian National Congress's anti-feudal thrust one needs to bring into the picture the role of rightwing Hindu leaders and organisations. In 1923 the Hindu Mahasabha (founded 1915) leader Vinayak Damodar Sarvarkar threw up the idea of "Hindutva" — an ethno-cultural concept purporting to bring all Hindus into a "communitarian" fold. Non-Hindu Indians were urged to accept a Hindu cultural identity and declare that their prime loyalty was to India.

It is important to point out that until the mid-1930s separatist ideas from both Hindu and Muslim sources remained marginal and nobody took much notice of them. The 1930 (Allahabad) session of the Muslim League, for example, was so poorly attended that the organisers had to run around town to bring people to meet the quorum requirement (75) to adopt the resolutions. The stage for broad-based electoral politics was set by the Government of India Act of 1935. The 1937 elections resulted in a victory for Congress in six provinces and for regional parties elsewhere. The Muslim League did very poorly in the Muslim-majority provinces. The Congress then blundered by not extending a generous hand towards the Muslim League. For example in Uttar Pradesh where some informal understanding existed between the Congress and Muslim League to share power the Congress after

trouncing completely in that province demanded that Muslim Leaguers should first join the Congress before they could be considered for a ministerial post. Most scholars have noted that it was the beginning of the real rise of Muslim separatism.

It was in these circumstances that Madhav Saashiv Gowalkar, the leader of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS, founded in 1925) made a most provocative statement in 1938: “The foreign races in Hindustan must either adopt the Hindu culture and language – [they] must learn to respect and hold in reverence Hindu religion, must entertain no ideas but those of the glorification of the Hindu race and culture... or may stay in the country, wholly subordinated to the Hindu Nation, claiming nothing, deserving no privileges, far less any preferential treatment not – even citizen’s rights (*We, Our Nationhood Defined*, 1938).

The RSS adopted a semi-military style of organisation to instill “martial arts” among Hindus. Both the Hindu Mahasabha and RSS looked upon Muslims as the main threat to Indian unity. Conversions to Islam – as well as Christianity – were viewed with dismay.

Fascistic ideas gained ground among some Muslim groups too. Military drill and strict discipline were introduced by the militant Khaksar movement founded in the Punjab by Allama Inayatullah Khan Mashraqi in 1931. Ideologically, the Khaksars wanted to establish an Islamic state all over India. In practice, they remained anti-British rather than anti-Hindu or -Sikh. Another radical Islamic movement, the Majlis-e-Ahrar, founded in 1929 in the Punjab was loudly anti-British and a close ally of the Congress. It had a fairly large membership throughout the Punjab. The Ahrar never supported the division of India. Also, the Deoband ulema remained loyal to the Congress.

The Muslim League’s demand for a separate state assumed a mass character only in 1940 when the Lahore resolution was passed in an open public meeting:

No constitutional plan would be workable or acceptable to the Muslims unless geographical contiguous units are demarcated into regions which should be so constituted with such territorial readjustments as may be necessary. That the areas in which the Muslims are numerically in majority as in the North-Western and Eastern zones of India should be grouped to constitute independent states in which the constituent units shall be autonomous and sovereign.

Thereafter, the march towards a separate state became the main goal of the Muslim League which, as mentioned above, till 1937 had been no more than a party of the Muslim gentry seeking protection of their interests in a decentralised but united India.

If we place Mahatma Gandhi’s efforts to bring Hindus and Muslims together into a single anti-colonial front in the context of the politics of confrontation and ethno-nationalism that had grown at that time we can understand that he was confronted by very powerful forces loaded against him. He did however, very perceptively, warn many times that the partition of India will result in bloodshed because no division of the subcontinent would be acceptable to all communities.

## **The Quit India Movement**

Whereas Gandhi attached the greatest importance to the unity of India and to Hindu-Muslim unity as a prerequisite for it to happen it is a great irony of history that it was because of his colossal miscalculation in launching the Quit India Movement on August 9, 1942 that facilitated the partition of India. Gandhi believed that the British were about to be defeated by the Japanese who were advancing rapidly towards eastern India from Burma. Under the circumstances power should be handed over to Indians by the British and they should leave. The mass agitation that he launched was met with a firm and resolution response by the colonial government. The Viceroy Lord Linlithgow ordered the arrest of Congress leaders from top to bottom and not until the end of World War II were they released.

During this period the Muslim League, which had decided to support the war effort was able to disseminate its message of Pakistan among the Muslims. It was able to make breakthroughs in the key province of Punjab as well as in other Muslim majority provinces. The Muslim voters were convinced by the Muslim League that they would escape the humiliation of caste oppression as well as the economic tyranny of Hindu and Sikh moneylenders if they supported the creation of Pakistan.

## **The 1946 Election**

The provincial elections held in 1946 were fought by the Congress and Muslim League from two diametrically opposite platforms: the former wanted a mandate to keep India united while the latter stood for a separate and independent, sovereign Pakistan. The election results vindicated the contradictory claims of both parties. Congress secured 905 general seats out of a total of 1585 while the gains of the Muslim League were even more impressive. It won 440 seats out of a total of 495 reserved for Muslims. It is to be noted that Muslims in the Hindu-majority provinces also voted massively in favour of the Muslim League.

The post-war Labour Government of Clement Atlee sent a high-powered mission to probe the possibility of a rapprochement between the two adversaries. The Cabinet Mission Plan of 16 May 1946 recommended a loose federation and overruled the demand for Pakistan. The Muslim League reluctantly accepted the Plan, but the Congress rejected it. The factor that sealed the fate of unity was the eruption of large-scale communal violence following Jawaharlal Nehru's ill-considered press statement of 10 July 1946 in Bombay declaring that Congress would enter the Constituent Assembly 'completely unfettered by agreements and free to meet all situations as they arise'.

## **Compassion versus Revenge**

On 29 July 1946, the Muslim League leader, Mohammad Ali Jinnah gave the call to direct action to Muslims to protest the alleged anti-minority attitude of Nehru. On 16 August 1946, communal massacres, initiated by hotheads despatched by the Muslim League chief minister of Bengal, Hussain Shaheed Suhrawardy, took place in Calcutta, which left thousands of people, mostly Hindus, dead and homeless. The Hindus retaliated with great ferocity. More Muslims died in the counter-attack. At that critical juncture Mahatma Gandhi came to Calcutta and personally took part in preaching cessation of violence and revenge. His efforts bore fruit and peace returned to that bleeding city. The Great Calcutta Killings of August 1946 in which both Hindus and Muslims lost lives in the thousands transformed forever the nature of the Congress-Muslim League standoff from a constitutional imbroglio to a violent



communal conflagration that culminated in the subcontinent bleeding, burning and partitioned in mid-August 1947.

A Gandhi-Jinnah peace appeal was issued as early as mid April 1947, but it did little to change the situation on the ground.

Although Delhi was not administratively a part of Punjab its Muslims had to bear the fallout of the Punjab bloodbath. The late Dr Ishtiaq Hussain Qureshi, who retired as Vice-Chancellor of Karachi University and was a very keen supporter of the demand for Pakistan has written about what happened to thousands of desperate Muslims in Delhi who were surrounded by armed Hindus and Sikhs wanting to kill and loot them. The Muslims pleaded to Gandhi to save them. He promised to do his best. Dr Qureshi notes that most of the Muslims survived and concluded that Gandhiji must have kept his word.

### **The Assassination of Gandhi**

The partition of India shattered Gandhi's ideal of Hindu-Muslim unity. But that did not deter him from continuing to hope that the relations between the two communities can become friendly once again. He even declared that he will spend one month in India and one in Pakistan. However, relations between the two states became even more hostile when both made claims to the princely State of Jammu and Kashmir. A war between the armies of the two countries broke out in Kashmir. Consequently India refused to pay to Pakistan a sum of Rs.550 million that was due to the latter as its share of the treasury of the former colonial government. On 13 January 1948, Mahatma Gandhi commenced his fast to persuade the Indian government to release the assets due to Pakistan. That was considered treason by the rightwing Hindus and on 30 January 1948, Nathuram Godse, a Maharashtrian Brahmin, shot him dead in Delhi. Not only in India did that assassination result in great outpouring of grief but also in Pakistan. In the famous first person account of the partition of India, *Freedom at Midnight*, Larry Collins and Dominique Lapierre observe:

In Pakistan, millions of women shattered their baubles and trinkets in a traditional gesture of grief. In Lahore, now almost entirely Moslem, newspaper offices were swarmed with people clamouring for news (p. 512).

### **India-Pakistan Relations**

It is not difficult to conclude that Gandhi correctly anticipated that partition would create lasting enmity between India and Pakistan and sow discord between Hindus and Muslims. The successor states of India and Pakistan became not only rivals but also enemies who have up until now fought three major wars – in 1948, 1965 and 1971 – and both acquired nuclear weapon capabilities in May 1998. Both fought a limited war at Kargil on the Kashmir front in May 1999. Some people suspected that it could have escalated into a nuclear confrontation with irreparable devastation caused to South Asia and its people.

One can reasonably argue that the founding fathers of modern India tried to institutionalise the Gandhian vision of equal rights for all citizens and respect for all religions in the Indian constitution. Thus today more than 13 per cent of the Indian population of one billion consists of Muslims. In 1947 their percentage was slightly more than 11 per cent. But rightwing Hindus constantly intimidate the Indian Muslim minority blaming them for the partition of India. Periodically violent attacks on Muslims take place. In the case of Pakistan, privileging

Islam as the state religion has inevitably meant that non-Muslims felt they were second-class citizens. Most of the Hindus left for India after the partition from areas that became Pakistan. However, the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan has been reporting that the tiny Hindu minority in the Sindh province constantly faces the threats of forced conversions and from time to time it is subjected to violent attacks by the Muslims.

### **The Wagah-Attari Border**

Nothing epitomises the India-Pakistan and by that token Hindu-Muslim estrangement more graphically than the daily flag lowering ceremony at the Wagah-Attari border between Amritsar and Lahore. Before partition some people used daily to catch the early train from either of these cities, do their job or business in the other, and return. The distance is some 45 kilometres between them. The soldiers symbolically seal the border every night by ramming the iron-gates with a fierce bang to indicate that an impassable barrier exists between the two countries and their peoples. The whole scene acquires an even more bizarre character because crowds on both sides who watch this awe-striking spectacle add zest to the ceremony by nervous clapping and making hostile gesticulations towards each other.

### **A Change of Heart on the Way?**

In July 2001, President Pervez Musharraf visited India on the invitation of Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee to Agra to discuss peace. Musharraf had been the architect and mastermind behind the Kargil mini-war of May 1999. It had resulted in hundreds of deaths on both sides and generated considerable acrimony. Now, before going to Agra he paid the conventional visit to the Gandhi Samadhi in Delhi where in the visitors' book he wrote that Mahatma Gandhi's ideas on peace and unity of humankind were needed now even more than ever before. Invoking Gandhi's ideas was undoubtedly an admission of the realisation that there was no military solution to the disputes between the two countries.

### **Conclusion**

A revival of the Gandhian legacy on Hindu-Muslim relations is an imperative to save South Asia from the disaster of an armed confrontation between India and Pakistan that could involve the use of nuclear weapons. Such a war will render this region unfit for human habitation for centuries. But his message of peace and peaceful resistance to injustice is for all humanity and all societies can learn a lot from his idea of equal respect for all religions. Therefore, the Gandhian legacy on inter-communal relations deserves to be studied once again.

## Mahatma Gandhi's Influence on India's Foreign Policy

Rajiv Sikri<sup>3</sup>

It is widely believed, not without reason, that it was Jawaharlal Nehru who shaped India's foreign policy. After all, he was independent India's Prime Minister and External Affairs Minister for the first 17 years. Among all the leaders of India who fought for India's independence, he was the one who had genuine interest in, and considerable knowledge of, foreign affairs. What is often insufficiently appreciated is the influence of Mahatma Gandhi's thinking and philosophy on India's foreign policy.

The essential elements of Gandhi's philosophy were the concepts of non-violence, the importance of the moral dimension in the conduct of men as well as nations, and *satyagraha* or the struggle for truth, compassion and justice. All these principles continue to influence India's foreign policy even today.

India's foreign policy has its roots in its freedom struggle that was largely shaped by Gandhi's values. The defining characteristics of India's foreign policy in the first few decades after India's independence were unquestionably inspired by Gandhi. These were:

- non-alignment or the right to follow an independent foreign policy and to decide foreign policy issues on merit;
- moral, diplomatic and economic support for the struggle against colonialism, racialism and apartheid;
- non-violence and the quest for nuclear disarmament; and
- India's role as an international peacemaker.

India's position on world issues was informed by a rare moral clarity and courage which won India many admirers, made India the leader of the developing countries and gave it an influence in world affairs out of proportion to its real economic and political strength. Outsiders' perceptions of India were significantly shaped by Gandhi's message.

At a conceptual and intellectual level, India's freedom struggle, at least in the two or three decades or so before 1947, was not just about gaining India's freedom from British rule but part of a wider global anti-colonial movement. This internationalist aspect of India's movement for independence emanated from Gandhi's own defining experiences in South Africa. Just as Gandhi was deeply influenced by the blatant racism and widespread discrimination prevalent in South Africa, India's independence provided the inspiration for many other countries in Asia and Africa suffering under colonial rule.

It is, therefore, hardly surprising that, from the very beginning, India's foreign policy concerned itself, not only with India's narrow national interests, but also how it would impact other similarly placed Asian and African countries. India's economic and technical assistance

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to developing countries, now widely known as the Indian Technical And Economic Cooperation programme, was premised both on principles and the reality that the political independence of the newly-independent countries would be unsustainable without a matching economic autonomy.

It is perhaps inadequately recognised even today that the internationalist perspective in India's foreign policy did serve India's broader national interest. One of the key concerns of India was its survival as a united, sovereign and independent state. The odds were against India. Even many years after India became independent, skepticism was widespread. Would India have survived if it alone had been decolonised? There can be little doubt that the spread of the movement against colonialism and racism, leading to the emergence of large numbers of independent countries, buttressed India's own independence.

At the same time, there are many valid criticisms of India's foreign policy in the first few decades after India's independence. It was considered as naive and idealistic, divorced from ground realities. Among the mistakes that India made in its Gandhi-inspired and Nehru-directed foreign policy were the referral of the Kashmir issue to the United Nations in 1948, the '*bhai-bhai*' (brother-brother) policy towards China and the missed opportunity in Nepal to fully integrate it into the Indian security system.

Today, as India has become stronger and richer, it has become a 'wannabe' developed country, whose interests are seen to lie more with the developed countries than with the developing countries. More attention is understandably given to the G-8 and the P-5 than to the G-77 and the G-15. The Non-Aligned Movement has survived but is aimlessly adrift. Yet India should not forget its old friends. For it is from among the developing countries that India will get both the resources to fuel India's economic growth and the political support to fulfill its aspirations to become a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council. India's unique strength lies in its reputation as the leader of the developing countries and its potential of, once again, assuming such a leadership role.

The pride and self-respect that Gandhi engendered among the people of India gave India the courage to stand up and follow an independent foreign policy rather than submit to pressures to join one of the Cold War blocs. This has stood India well. It has consistently remained a defining feature of India's foreign policy for over six decades. The ongoing political and public controversy in India over the India-United States nuclear deal is essentially about whether India would continue to follow an independent foreign policy or whether it would be co-opted as a junior partner of the United States in the latter's wider strategic plans. So deep-rooted and widespread is the conviction that an independent foreign policy is the right policy for India to follow that no government in India can openly call for any change in approach. That is presumably why the Indian government continues to emphasise that this is a deal ostensibly only about civilian nuclear energy. The dilemma for the government is that there is no easy way to forge a strategic relationship with the United States without abandoning India's traditional principles of foreign policy that have been inspired by Gandhi.

It is harder to justify morality in foreign policy, particularly as many critics have argued that India itself has used strong-arm tactics in its neighbourhood. The realist or pragmatic school of foreign policy that holds sway in India – and the world – today scoffs at any suggestion that morality has a role in world affairs. They believe that power flows out of the barrel of a gun, and that, non-violence, as one critic has eloquently put it, is "a form of masochistic surrender". While there is substance to this criticism, morality cannot be wished away. It

continues to guide individual human behaviour. It remains a core principle of all religions. In politics and international affairs, it is a widely employed strategic psychological tool. The practitioners of *realpolitik* in all countries, including India, invariably rely on moral arguments – be it to persuade, to convince or to justify. The veneer of morality is what gives legitimacy to arbitrariness.

The virtual collapse of the movement for disarmament would seem to imply that the moral argument for pursuing nuclear disarmament has lost out. The Non-Proliferation Treaty has been indefinitely extended, and the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty has not come into force. India's former Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi's ambitious Plan for a Nuclear-Weapons Free World of 1988 has been given a quiet burial. A decade later, India went openly nuclear in 1998. India is now keener to get recognition as a nuclear-weapons power and have the right to conduct future tests than be a leader of the movement for disarmament. But the road ahead is neither simple nor clear. Nuclear weapons have not made India safer. They cannot counter either the spread of internal insurgencies or cross-border terrorism.

Nor is the world more secure. The Soviet Union collapsed despite its formidable arsenal of nuclear weapons. The largest nuclear power, the United States, feels insecure because North Korea has nuclear weapons and Iran is suspected of developing them. It is noteworthy that in January 2007, four United States veteran policy makers, Henry Kissinger, Sam Nunn, William Perry, and George Schultz, some of whom were nuclear hawks in the past, stated that, "Reassertion of the vision of a world free of nuclear weapons would be, and would be perceived as, a bold initiative consistent with America's moral heritage.

The effort could have a profoundly positive impact on the security of future generations. Without the bold vision, the actions will not be perceived as fair or urgent. Without the actions, the vision will not be perceived as realistic or possible. We endorse the goal of a world free of nuclear weapons and working energetically on the actions required to achieve that goal." Some time last year, the International Atomic Energy Agency Director-General stated that there were "no legitimate nuclear weapon powers". Perhaps there is reason for hope, howsoever slim it may be.

Moving from generalities to specific examples, one can look at two areas of India's foreign policy where Gandhi's policies and approach have had a lasting impact. The first is Pakistan. Gandhi, we know, was opposed to the partition of India. Critics have argued that he did not oppose it firmly enough, say by threatening a fast unto death as he did on other issues. Perhaps he realised the futility of it. As early as April 1940 he said, "I know of no non-violent method of compelling the obedience of Rs 8 crores (eighty million) of Muslims to the will of the rest of India, however powerful a majority the rest may represent. The Muslims must have the same right of self-determination that the rest of India has. We are at present a joint family. Any member may claim a division." But he insisted that Pakistan be treated fairly. Whereas many were arguing that after Pakistan's invasion of Kashmir, India should hold on to the Rs 55 crores (Rs 550 million) that India owed Pakistan, Gandhi went on a fast unto death to press his point. Ultimately the government relented. Such an attitude, seen again at the Simla Conference in 1972, has led Pakistan's rulers to conclude that India lacks 'a killer instinct' and that India is simply a flabby giant. This erroneous mindset has led to many avoidable conflicts and tragedies on the sub-continent. Gandhian morality does not seem to have served the interests of the people of the region.

Fortunately, of late, there is a growing sentiment among the people of the sub-continent that the partition of undivided India has hurt all – India, Pakistan and Bangladesh. There is recognition that the time has come to set aside differences and move towards mutually beneficial cooperation. Progress is slow, but encouraging. India's relations with Pakistan have never been better. India and Pakistan are seriously talking about building a pipeline to transport Iranian gas across Pakistan to India, something that was unthinkable a few years ago. No longer are cricket matches between India and Pakistan regarded as surrogate military battles. India is more relaxed and conscious of the need to be unilaterally generous to its neighbours. This does not mean that the sub-continent will overcome its divisions and be reunited. Perhaps it never will. But sometimes dramatic developments do occur. Gandhi's speech at his prayer meeting on 4 January 1948 may turn out to be prophetic. He said: "Mistakes were made on both sides. Of this, I have no doubt. But this does not mean that we should persist in those mistakes. For in the end we shall only destroy ourselves in a war and the whole of the sub-continent will pass into the hands of some third power. That will be the worst imaginable fate for us. I shudder to think of it." That is something to ponder over.

The second area where Gandhi's thinking had an enduring impact on India's foreign policy is Palestine. Gandhi's editorial in the *Harijan* of 11 November 1938 was a major policy statement that guides India's policy on Palestine to this day. The rights of the Palestinian people is a very sensitive political question in India and is one of the few specific foreign policy issues that figures in the Common Minimum Programme of the current ruling coalition, the United Progressive Alliance. Despite his sympathy for the Jews who had been subjected to discrimination and persecution for centuries, Gandhi was clear about the rights of the Palestinians. "My sympathy," he said, "does not blind me to the requirements of justice. The cry for the national home for the Jews does not make much appeal to me... Why should they not, like other peoples of the earth, make that country their home where they are born and where they earn their livelihood? Palestine belongs to the Arabs in the same sense that England belongs to the English or France to the French. It is wrong and inhuman to impose the Jews on the Arabs... Surely it would be a crime against humanity to reduce the proud Arabs so that Palestine can be restored to the Jews partly or wholly as their national home."

Gandhi's statement constitutes the nub of the problem that has defied solution for six decades. It is not merely a matter of deep global concern, but of real danger, that the Palestine problem has become more intractable than ever. Desperation among the Palestinians has increased, as has the insecurity of the Israelis. It is the principal issue that unites Muslims around the world and that led to the formation of the Organization of Islamic Conference. It is an issue which has spawned terrorism and al-Qaeda, created avoidable suspicion of Islam in the West and threatens to re-ignite the medieval conflicts between Islam and Christianity. The inability of the world to resolve the Palestine question is an important factor behind the ongoing conflicts and confrontations in Afghanistan, Iraq or Iran. Will the world ever have the courage to recognise this?

If there is one figure that the rest of the world associates with India, it is Gandhi. He may not have won a Nobel Peace Prize, but he has probably done more for the cause of peace and the image of India abroad than any other Indian. The eminent biographer of Mahatma Gandhi, B. R. Nanda, has rightly stated, "Mahatma Gandhi instigated, if he did not initiate, three major revolutions of our time, the revolution against racialism, the revolution against colonialism, and the revolution against violence. He lived long enough to see his success of his efforts in the first two revolutions..." Has the escalating level of violence in the world, which has brought suffering and misery to millions, finally awakened the world's conscience to the need

for a revolution against violence? The best tribute to Gandhi's contemporary relevance, and his lasting influence not just on India's foreign policy but on the world as a whole, is that today is being celebrated by the United Nations as the International Day of Non-Violence. Gandhi, it seems, *was* right, after all.

# Gandhian Economic Thought and Its Influence on Economic Policymaking in India

D. M. Nachane<sup>4</sup>

*“Gandhi enunciated his economic position in the language of the people, rather than that of academic economists. And so the economists never noticed that he was, in fact, a very great economist in his own right...” ....Schumacher (1978)*

## Introduction

Any attempt to understand Gandhiji’s economic ideas must be contextualised in the economic circumstances prevailing in the closing decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the early decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Briefly, these circumstances may be viewed as composing the following interrelated features

- (i) A highly neglected agriculture sector subject to frequent famines and droughts, resulting in an impoverished rural population.
- (ii) Decline of traditional textiles and other handicrafts in India. This decline was directly attributable to the series of measures passed by the British parliament in the 18<sup>th</sup> century to discourage the use of Indian textiles in Britain. These measures enabled the British textile industry to develop behind a tariff wall, unhindered by competition from Indian exports. By the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the technological superiority of British textiles enabled them to penetrate the Indian home market, seriously threatening the very existence of the handloom cottage industry in India. The decline in textiles triggered off a decline in several other cottage industries (oil crushing, for example). Unfortunately, this decline was not offset by compensation gains in agricultural productivity as had happened in Sri Lanka and Malaysia, for example, with the emergence of plantations. The displaced artisans thus simply swelled the ranks of agricultural wage labourers with an associated intensification of rural poverty. The starkness of this process explains both the emergence of Gandhiji’s ideas on *Swadeshi* as also the strong appeal this had for the general masses.
- (iii) Colonial neglect of infrastructure.
- (iv) Active discouragement to the emergence of Indian entrepreneurship.

Gandhiji’s views on economics have usually been termed as utopian by many (including Indian) socio-economic thinkers, and this characterisation has tended to evoke two diametrically opposite reactions among policymakers and the general population – the majority respect his views in so far as they are a reflection of his deep spirituality but tend to be extremely skeptical about their applicability to the real world; a small minority, however, see in this utopian view the only alternative available to a poor country to correct an

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economic situation distorted by a history of colonial exploitation. This paper tries to explore the substantial middle ground between these two extreme viewpoints.

### **Intellectual Influences**

There are several intellectual influences on Gandhiji, and below I present the ones I believe to be the most important ones in shaping his economic ideas:

- i) First and foremost there is in Gandhiji, a “pastoral romanticism” a la Rousseau and David Thoreau. This led him to a belief in the intrinsic goodness of all men, including one’s opponents.<sup>5</sup> The “non violent civil disobedience” movement that Gandhiji initiated in the 1920s was strongly influenced by Thoreau’s ideas and appealed to the “sense of fairness” of the British rulers.
- ii) Secondly, Gandhiji was very much enamoured by Ruskin’s heterodox doctrine that the wealth of a nation consisted, not in its production and consumption of goods, but in its people.
- iii) There was in Gandhiji a remarkable belief in the efficiency of truth and non violence, which most likely stemmed from his familiarity with the (later) writings of Count Leo Tolstoy, as well as his detailed knowledge of Hindu and Christian theology.
- iv) One does detect in Gandhiji’s writings elements drawn from the labour theory of value of Adam Smith and David Ricardo, which led him to emphasise labour as the primary source of economic value.
- v) Gandhiji was also to some extent influenced by the Marxian doctrine of egalitarianism, and its emphasis on the “exploitation of labour”. However the Marxist idea of a violent revolution was an anathema to him. He recognised the importance of class conflict, but sought to reconcile it within the framework of his new concept of *Trusteeship*, wherein corporations and industrial houses held profits in “trusts” for the social welfare of their workers and of the society in general.

It is hardly surprising that, with such a distinguished intellectual lineage,<sup>6</sup> Gandhiji’s economics transcended the purely technical aspects of traditional *value free* economics, and became instead an ethical charter of organising the productive resources of an economy. In an article in *Young India* (13 October 1921), for example, he *confessed* that he did not draw “a sharp line or make any distinction between economics and ethics”. He reiterated this position even more strongly in a later article, “True economics never militates against the highest ethical standards just as all true ethics, to be worth its name, must at the same time be also good economics....True economics stands for social justice; it promotes the good of all equally, including the weakest and is indispensable for decent life”. (*Harijan* 9 October

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<sup>5</sup> Gandhiji and his followers never regarded the British as “enemies”, only as opponents to their cause. This explains why the Indian Independence struggle involved far less bloodshed than other similar struggles, and also the friendly relations of post-Independent India with Great Britain and other Western powers.

<sup>6</sup> The phrase is not intended to suggest that in any sense Gandhiji was a follower or disciple of any of the doctrines mentioned above. Rather various components of these doctrines were selectively integrated in his overall philosophy, leading to a consistent system which was distinctly original, and in which all these doctrines co-existed in an almost felicitous harmony.

1937). For the modern reader, it is important to bear this orientation of Gandhian economics in mind, in order to fully appreciate the import of his various theories.

We now turn to a discussion of some of the essential features of Gandhian economics.

### **The Concept of Swadeshi**

Gandhiji's himself defined *Swadeshi* as "the spirit in us which restricts us to the use and service of our immediate surroundings to the exclusion of the more remote" (*Unnithan 1956 p. 54*). The *Swadeshi* movement that Gandhiji launched in the 1930s was the direct outcome of the visible decline of the handicrafts industry that he witnessed around him, and which he rightly blamed as the root cause of Indian rural poverty. The movement sought to buttress the declining demand for ancient crafts by boycott of European goods and thus, in effect, was a programme of the revival of village industries. The *Swadeshi* movement achieved its most explicit manifestation in the *Khadi* (home spun cloth) struggle, which drawing inspiration from Gandhiji's *Ahimsa* (non-violence) was elevated into a moral principle. Thus, *Khadi* at once became a propaganda weapon in the liberation movement with a strong moral appeal to Indian intellectuals, western sympathisers as well as the rural masses. Writing retrospectively, Zealey (1958) notes "At the time of its inception, the constructive programme on Khadi was indeed a stroke of genius... nationally, it provided a rallying symbol which the humblest villager could easily understand. Politically, it was a powerful weapon providing a means whereby a sense of united action could be expressed in concrete form. Economically it was whereby the formidable problem of rural under development could be turned to productive use." Thus Gandhiji's central economic concern is the protection of village crafts against further encroachment from foreign industry and the *Swadeshi* concept which embodied this concern becomes the progenitor of his entire thinking on economic issues.

It would possibly be unfair to attribute to Gandhiji, a position of complete denial of international trade and exchange. His intellectual stance seems to be closer to the modern theory of "trade among unequal partners" propounded by economists such as Pomfret (1988), which would argue for a less discriminatory trade regime against the Third World.<sup>7</sup> This is quite clear from the following extract from one of his articles, wherein he distinguishes between *isolated independence* and *voluntary interdependence*. "The better mind of the world desires today not absolutely independent states warring against one another, but a federation of friendly interdependent states. The consummation of that event may not be far off. ...I desire the ability to be totally independent without asserting the independence. Any scheme that I would frame, while Britain declares her goal about India to be complete equality within the Empire, would be that of alliance and not of independence without alliance" (*Young India, 26 December 1924, p.425*).

### **Views on Industrialisation and Technology**

Opposition to industrialisation is a very prominent feature of Gandhian economics, and here the influence of both Ruskin and Tolstoy (who themselves were deeply moved by some of the social displacement and labour exploitation excesses of the Industrial Revolution in Europe) is very discernible. But there was also a pastoral romanticism in this opposition, which gets reflected in an exclusive emphasis on the village community as an idyllic form of

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<sup>7</sup> Schumacher, for example, notes that the affluence of a small part of the world was pushing the rest of the world into the three concurrent crises of *resources*, *ecology* and *alienation*.

social existence to be preserved in its pristine form against all change. This led Gandhiji's to oppose all forms of modern industrialisation (whether foreign or domestic). This opposition to domestic industrialisation (on modern lines) was probably based on his empirical observation that even though considerable development of modern industry had occurred in British India over the fifty years 1881-1931, there was no appreciable increase in gainfully employed workers over this period – whatever increase in employment had occurred in the organised sector was counterbalanced by the fall in employment in the traditional sector. Gandhiji's antagonism to industrialisation (in the modern sense) finds expression in several of his writings. We reproduce two typical comments. The first is from *Young India* (1931) wherein he writes – “Industrialism is I am afraid, going to be a curse for mankind.” The second is from *Harijan* (1936), “Industrialisation on a mass scale will necessarily lead to passive or active exploitation of the villagers as the problems of competition and marketing come in.” Gandhiji's model of development was one in which every village produced all its necessities and a certain percentage in addition for the requirement of cities. But he is no obscurantist, and he recognises that a moderate amount of industrialisation may be necessary for a nation's survival. He therefore concedes the existence of heavy industry, only cautioning that “Heavy industries will needs be centralised and nationalised. But they will occupy the least part of the vast national activity which will be mainly in the villages.” (M. K. Gandhi (1941)).

This opposition to industrialisation sets Gandhiji apart from other nationalists of the period (as well as his mentors such as Mahadeo Govind Ranade and Gopal Krishna Gokhale) who saw large scale industrialisation as the only way out of mass poverty, and one of whose major criticisms against British Rule was the that the state was not proactive in promoting development.

Gandhiji's skepticism related to technology was a concomitant of his deep rooted antagonism to industrialisation. Firstly, there is in his writings a Luddite kind of view of technology as a factor inimical to employment. But his antagonism went considerably further than the usual “technology displacing labour” argument. To Gandhiji, technology was to be feared because it threatened the very basis of a dignified human existence. “In modern terms, it is beneath human dignity to lose one's individuality and become a mere cog in the machine. I want every individual to become a full blooded member of the society. The villages must become self sufficient. I see no other solution if one has to work in terms of ahimsa” (*Harijan* 1939, p. 439). This view led Gandhiji to oppose technology not only in modern industry but also in village manufacturing enterprises. He insisted that it was the governments duty “to encourage the existing industries and to revive where it is possible and desirable the dying or dead industries of villagers *according to the village methods*, that is, the villagers working in their pawn cottages as they have done from times immemorial.” (*Harijan* 16 Nov. 1934, p. 33).

Here again, one must guard against an extreme interpretation of Gandhiji's position. His main aversion was to the modern Western technology, which was essentially “labour replacing” and often “labour degrading”. But he was not opposed to technology per se. As a matter of fact, he set up two criteria for the appropriateness of technology – first that it should not be labour displacing (cf. “I have no objection if all things required by my country could be produced with the labour of 30,000 instead of that of 30,000,000. But those 30,000,000 must not be rendered idle or unemployed” *quoted in the chapter by M. R. Masani in D. G. Tendulkar et al. (1945) p. 88-89*) and second, that it should increase the general well being (cf. “*I welcome the machine that lightens the burden of millions of men living in cottages and*

*reduces man's labour*" *Ibid.*, p. 88). In a catch-phrase of the 1980s, he was really making out a case for "appropriate technology".

### **Dignity of Labour**

There is another important reason why Gandhiji assigned pride of place to the village crafts in his schemata for the economic regeneration of India – the influence on him of writers like Ruskin and Tolstoy who glorified the dignity of manual labour and extolled the moral superiority of self employment and independent work to wage employment. Writing in *Young India*, (2<sup>nd</sup> May, 1929) he deplored the concept of wage employment and said he was prepared to tolerate it only in those villages "where people are in perpetual want because they do not get enough from agriculture and because they have leisure". Gandhiji's apathy to wage employment was a natural reflection of his antagonism to the modern factory system of production. However he was not entirely opposed to production for the market as his advocacy of cooperation in marketing and raw materials purchase would serve to indicate.

### **Evils of Urbanisation**

Gandhiji's stand on urbanisation was a logical corollary of his views on industrialisation. He saw in the phenomenon an instrument of devastation of the idyllic rural way of life. To a large extent, Gandhiji's analysis of this phenomenon was typically perspicacious. The cities which emerged under British rule in India conferred virtually no benefit on the village economy of India. This is in sharp contrast to the situation in England and elsewhere in Europe (especially Holland) where the prosperity of the town had direct spillover effects on the village community (*see e.g. Adam Smith(1776)*). In the colonies on the contrary, what emerged was typically a dual economy (Lewis 1954) with a modern sector flourishing under the colonial ruler's patronage in the cities and a traditional rural sector largely isolated from any pervasive modernising effect of the urban sector. Indeed Amlan Datta (1989) (in a delineation of the economic conditions prevailing in British India) goes even further and says that the relationship was not even one of passive *non interaction* but *active exploitation* "the actual situation is in some respects, even worse. The city attracts to itself talent, capital and other resources from the rest of the country. By ruining old handicrafts, it upsets the natural balance between agriculture and village industry. Rural society is robbed of its potentially more progressive leaders, its economic life is disorganised and social cohesion is steadily undermined; the city afflicts the country with a peculiar sickness". Thus, whereas the Marxists theorised about the proletariat class being exploited by the capitalists, Gandhiji saw the city as a whole in the role of exploiter of the villages. In the city capitalists, liberal professionals and administrators as well as the industrial working class live at a higher standard of living than that of the rural masses – a standard based on the exploitation of villages. This perception enable us to throw light on a somewhat perplexing aspect of Gandhiji's philosophy viz. the scant sympathy he had for the urban based crafts and for the millions subsisting on a pittance in urban trade and services – all such people he extorted to return to their native villages.

### **Limitation of Wants**

It is only fair to say that Gandhiji's concept of economic development was not so much concerned with the raising of living standards as with the spiritual development of man. He was interested in economic development to the extent that it lifted the masses out of poverty for in his view "No one has ever suggested that grinding poverty can lead to anything else

than moral degradation” (*Mahatma Gandhi: His Life, Writings and Speeches* (Madras 1921, p. 350)). In this sense, his views are similar to Amartya Sen’s views on “empowerment”, enunciated seventy years later. But he certainly did not envisage a society in which industrialisation would make available a plethora of consumer goods for the masses and foster consumerism. A consumerism society is the very antithesis of everything that he stood for. His reading of Hindu scriptures as well as other religious and secular works had instilled in him deep reverence for frugality and asceticism. His central motto may be summed up as “Civilisation, in the real sense of the term, consists not in multiplication but in deliberate and voluntary restriction of wants.” This led him to iterate time and again that there was no salvation for India “unless the richly bedecked stripped themselves of their jewellery and held it in trust for the starving millions”. Gandhiji’s views may seem somewhat similar to the Protestant ethics of thrift but with this crucial difference that with the latter thrift was a means of capital accumulation for higher consumption levels in the future, whereas for Gandhiji frugality was a permanent desired state, not simply a postponement of present for higher consumption.

Thus, Gandhian precepts come directly into conflict with the modern capitalist as well as Marxian doctrines, both of which accord a critical role to capital accumulation in the growth process. Gandhiji deplored the profit motive for accumulation and even though he was opposed to the forcible expropriation of the means of production from capitalists, he felt that they should voluntarily renounce their assets to the state or continue to hold them only as “trustees” of society. The concept of “trusteeship” in Gandhiji’s economic writings has been extensively debated and we would not like to go into the entire debate here. What Gandhiji really meant by the concept was that capital would be owned, operated and managed for the benefit of society and not for the capitalist’ private gain. If capital is viewed in these terms, the usual conflicts between capitalists and workers over the splitting of their joint produce would cease to exist, since each would willingly concede the rights of the other to a fair return.

While Gandhiji certainly agreed with the socialist principle of universal brotherhood and income equality, the very concept of a violent class struggle was an anathema to his mode of thinking. He was equally critical of laissez-faire enthusiasts who in the tradition of Adam Smith believed in the ultimate good of society resulting from the selfish and relentless pursuit of individual economic gain. Trusteeship was a uniquely Gandhian golden mean between the ruthless acquisitive philosophy of capitalism and the destructive violent philosophy of communism.

### **Gandhian Influences on India’s Economic Policymaking**

Having taken a broad review of the important aspects of Gandhian economic thought, we will now try to assess the impact that his philosophy seems to have had on India’s planned industrialisation strategy in the post-independence era. In this context, it may be useful to distinguish three distinct phases of the Indian economy, guided by three differing economic philosophies. The first period is broadly the Nehruvian period (1947-1965), which encompassed the first three Five Year Plans, and in which the prevailing economic philosophy is usually viewed as a highly centralised system of planning but incorporating some scope for markets. The next phase that we distinguish is (1966-1984) which was the period characterised by a highly bureaucratised system of planning (the so-called *License Raj*), with considerable intervention in market forces and an inward looking industrialisation

policy. The last phase (1985 onwards) is the period of opening up of the economy, rapid dismantling of controls and a general movement in the direction of markets.

It is also interesting to juxtapose the actual changes in the economic policy framework with the evolution of Gandhian economics in the post- Gandhi phase. As *Myrdal (1968, Vol.2, p. 1215)* has pointed out, two distinct strands of Gandhian economics seem to have emerged – a rigid version maintaining Gandhiji’s original opposition to modern forms of industry and a more moderate version. The rigid version is best exemplified in the writings of Kumarappa (1984) who characterised a money-based capitalist economy as a “parasitic” economy and wanted the principle of “service (to others)” as the basis for a non-violent economy. The moderate view by contrast was not opposed to industrialisation as long as it did not interfere adversely with the village economy (see Narayan (1970), Pani (2002) etc.). We now proceed to analyse the influence of Gandhian ideas on the actual economic policy followed in post-Independent India.

**Phase 1 (1947-1965):** As is well known, the actual policy which emerged in the two decades post-independence was one based on aggressive Soviet-style modernisation with a heavy-industry tilt. This strategy was adopted largely under the influence of Nehruvian ideology with its emphasis on science and technology. Nehru’s economic ideas had always been in sharp conflict with those of Gandhiji, and as early as 1945, we find him writing to Gandhiji “it seems to me inevitable that modern means of transport as well as many other modern developments must continue.....if that is so inevitable a measure of heavy industry exists. How far that will fit in with a purely village society? The question of independence and protection from foreign aggression, both political and economic, has also to be considered in this context. I do not think it possible for India to be really independent, unless she is a technically advanced country”. (*Tendulkar 1962, Vol 7, pp. 15-16*). Nehru sought to assuage Gandhiji’s reservations about industrialisation by emphasising that many of its alleged evils (such as concentration of economic power and conspicuous consumption of the wealthy) would be kept in check by the principle of democratic socialism, which he (Nehru) proposed as the central guiding political philosophy in Independent India. Gandhiji however remained far from being assured. To a visiting American journalist, for example, he remarked as follows “Nehru wants industrialisation 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 industrialism and no amount of socialisation can eradicate them” (*Tendulkar (1954), Vol. 5, p.336*).

But even though Gandhiji was opposed to a highly centralised system of economic planning led by heavy industry, he was never an opponent of the capitalist order. He, as a matter of fact, favoured capitalist ownership and operations<sup>8</sup> but not an exclusive concern with profits.

But, however, different the outlooks of Gandhiji and Nehru on the issue of industrialisation, the latter had too much respect for his mentor’s views to ignore them altogether. An acceptance of the basic tenets of the *moderate* Gandhian strand of thought ( see above) seemed to provide an ideal compromise solution – a rapid industrialisation programme but one which protected the village handicrafts, especially khadi. This compromise also had an economic rationale – modernisation with its emphasis on capital intensive heavy industry just could not provide the increases in employment needed to absorb the rapidly growing labour force; the role of a reservoir for the unemployed could be played by the village industries.

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<sup>8</sup> This was of course strictly confined to domestic entrepreneurship. Gandhiji was opposed to foreign capital in general and by implication we can safely infer that he would have opposed the large scale entry of transnational corporations if these had existed during his days.

This rationale is succinctly expressed by Mahalanobis, the architect of India's Second Plan as follows: "in view of the meagerness of capital resources there is no possibility in the short run for creating much employment through the factory industries. Now consider the household or cottage industries. They require very little capital. About six or seven hundred rupees would get an artisan family started. With any given investment, employment possibilities would be ten or fifteen or even twenty times greater in comparison with corresponding factory industries (Mahalanobis (1955)). Thus, by paying a measure of respect to Gandhian concepts, the Indian planning process simultaneously became politically palatable to a wide spectrum of influential opinion as well as to the masses at large.

The Gandhian influence is most evident in the government's attitude to small scale industry. In this connection, it is interesting to observe that Gandhiji's original concerns for the village crafts were conveniently broadened by Indian planners to include not only urban crafts but also small scale unit as a whole. The official definition of small scale industry (SSI) used in India has undergone several successive changes. In 1973-74, the First SSI census for India defined a small scale unit as a unit with investment in plant and machinery less than Rs.7.5 lakhs. This limit was subsequently raised to Rs.35 lakhs in the 1987-88 Second SSI census. The most recent (Third) SSI Census has introduced a threefold distinction viz. between micro enterprises, small enterprises and medium enterprises. Micro enterprises are those with investment in plant & machinery below Rs.25 lakhs in the manufacturing sector (and below Rs.10 lakhs in the service sector); the corresponding figures for small enterprises is between Rs.25 lakhs and Rs.5 crores for manufacturing (between Rs.10 lakhs and Rs.2 crores for service enterprises) and that for medium enterprises between Rs.5 crores and Rs.10 crores (manufacturing) and between Rs.2 crores and Rs.5 crores (services).

The small scale sector as a whole was the beneficiary of a number of protective measures over the five decades since Independence – it was insulated from large scale industry competition by import restriction, by the prevailing licensing requirements for capacity expansion of large scale units under the MRTP Act as well as by reservation of certain lines of production (about 1,400 items of production were reserved for exclusive production by the small scale sector). Additionally several subsidies and concessions were granted to small scale industry and as a result this sector not only survived but even managed to flourish, accounting for about 40 percent of total manufacturing output today.

There were other features of the Gandhian system which found expression in the economic policies of this period. The Gandhian emphasis on austerity was reflected in the import restrictions on several items of luxury consumption, the curbs on production of goods in the so-called U-sector (upper sector) and high marginal rates of personal income taxation. Heavy corporate taxation was also partly an operationalisation of Gandhiji's trusteeship concept.

**Phase 2 (1966-1984):** Except for a brief interregnum (1977-80), this period was marked by a highly centralised Congress rule under the charismatic (if controversial) Indira Gandhi. Following her split with the so-called *Syndicate* in 1969, she tried to create a party apparatus based on personal loyalty to replace the elaborate and decentralised party structure that prevailed in the Nehru era (and which was taken over by the *Syndicate*). In a predominantly poor country with a large agricultural base, such a strategy (of cultivating personal loyalty) had to be based on the creation of vote banks among the poor (especially the rural poor), and sources of patronage among the industrial elites (for the mobilisation of electoral funds) (see Bardhan (1984), Chibber (1999), Hankla (2006) etc.). Thus, largely driven by political compulsions, Indira Gandhi nevertheless, adopted espoused three of Gandhiji's cherished

ideals viz. poverty alleviation, redistribution and *Swadeshi*. In all fairness, it must be emphasised that she did make sincere efforts to fulfill these objectives. Among her many initiatives, the following five deserve special mention:

- (i) Nationalisation of banks in 1969, with the objective of improving rural credit delivery and making a dent on rural poverty.
- (ii) The passage of the MRTP (Monopoly & Restrictive Trade Practices) Act in 1969, with the aim of controlling the power of big business.
- (iii) High rates of income taxation with the marginal rates of income tax well above 70 percent for the upper income brackets, and a peak rate of 97.75 percent.
- (iv) A strengthening of the import substitution strategy (initiated in the Nehru era) following the Balance of Payments crisis of 1973-74.
- (v) Special centrally sponsored schemes to alleviate rural poverty such as the *Garibi Hatao Programme* (or Poverty Removal Programme) launched in early 1970s and reinforced in 1975 via the *20 Points Programme*.

As mentioned above, there was an interregnum from 1977-80, when the country was ruled by a coalition government. This coalition government included several ministers with considerable affinity to Gandhiji's ideals. This was reflected in the launching of the IRDP (Integrated Rural Development Programme) in 1979, a massive poverty reduction programme with emphasis on providing subsidised credit to rural households below the poverty line (including small and marginal farmers, agricultural labourers, artisans, scheduled castes, physically handicapped etc.). There was also a deliberate attempt to shift the emphasis in the Sixth Five Year Plan (1980-84) from growth to employment and redistribution, with greater attention being paid to the production of basic and light consumer goods.

It is all too well known that very often many of the so-called "Gandhian" ideas were inspired by political considerations such as the widening of the electoral base. But even when the motives were less self-seeking, either the ideas did not go beyond the "slogan level" or their full implications were not properly worked out. As a result, the consequences were often quite unexpected and contrary to what Gandhiji himself would have envisaged.

**Disenchantment with Gandhian Economic Ideas:** While critics of Gandhian economic ideas were not uncommon in the 1930s and 1940s<sup>9</sup>, his great moral and political stature kept the criticisms subdued. Anyway, in the pre-Independence era such discussion naturally had to be purely academic. In the Nehruvian era certain aspects of Gandhiji's economic policies were viewed as being in conflict with the prevailing Nehru-Mahalanobis brand of democratic socialism, especially his views on industrialisation, technology, business houses and private property. But as we have mentioned above, this period was characterised more by a neglect of Gandhian ideas, (which were largely considered otiose) and by some concessions in the policy arena laced with a large measure of lip sympathy, rather than by any active criticism (see Natarajan (1962))<sup>10</sup>. However there was an incipient literature from the 1960s onwards, which started criticising Nehruvian ideas from a more market oriented perspective. Ironically,

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<sup>9</sup> Two prominent critics of this period are Sankaran Nair (1922) and Babasaheb Ambedkar (1940).

<sup>10</sup> Two particularly virulent criticisms of this period come from Shah (1963) and Lohia (1963), the first from an orthodox Marxian perspective, the second from a somewhat heterodox socialist perspective.



the aspects of Nehruvian policies which came in for the sharpest criticism viz. small scale industry protection and import substitution were precisely those which could be traced to Gandhian influences.

Firstly, the basic rationale that small scale industry deserves support on account of its lower capital intensity was challenged on empirical grounds by the studies of Dhar and Lydhall (1961) and Sandesara (1966). Both these studies cast grave doubts on the employment creating potential of small scale industry. For the market liberalisers of three decades later, these and other similar studies furnished an excellent illustration of well-intentioned Gandhian ideas producing results far from those expected.

This seemed to be a common failing in other areas too. The Gandhian concept of *Swadeshi* was invoked to afford massive and politically motivated protection to Indian large and small industry from foreign competition under the import substitution regime from 1956-1991. Firstly, it must be clarified that Gandhiji's concern was primarily protecting the weak native cottage industry from both domestic and foreign industrial competition. Secondly, while it was true that he often expressed a desire to see domestic entrepreneurship develop uninhibited by unfair competition from foreign industry in pre-Independent India, it is not clear whether he would have favoured the massive and complicated system of industrial tariffs, quotas and licenses which sprang up in the 1970s under the rubric of *domestic self sufficiency*. It is now generally agreed that the net result following from this latter policy has been an inefficient and high cost domestic industrial structure, not to mention the emergence of a black economy based on import duty evasion. As is well known, serious efforts to redress this situation were initiated after 1991 (see Srinivasan & Bhagwati (1999)).

Another market oriented criticism is directed towards the entire gamut of subsidies for the agriculture sector, which also has its moral justification in Gandhiji's concern for the rural masses. According to this line of criticism, this sector has been under taxed, has reaped heavy subsidies on inputs like fertilizers, credit, seeds and electricity and has been supported by generous purchase prices. It is further alleged that most of the benefits have not gone to the intended beneficiaries but have been reaped by middlemen and large farmers. On the other hand, these subsidies have strained the public exchequer and generated steep inflationary pressure which have aggravated poverty among the masses. Similar criticisms have also been voiced as regards the PDS (public distribution system) which was designed to insulate the urban poor from inflation in the commodities of basic consumption (the so-called *wage goods*).

**Phase 3 (1985-):** The complete abandonment of Gandhian economic concepts really begins with the onset of structural reforms, which were initiated hesitatingly in the mid-1980s, put on firm track in the early 1990s and moved into high gear after 1997. To the newly emerging affluent class in India (who have been the major beneficiaries of the reforms process), Gandhian concepts like indigenous /appropriate technology, frugality, Swadeshi, etc. have an anachronistic and archaic ring to them. Perhaps the clean break with these ideas was inevitable, and judged solely by the accolades piled upon the architects of the process by a dotting domestic and foreign media, the reforms have been a grand success. But it is being increasingly realised that behind the stratospheric growth rates there lies a reality far harsher than our policymakers are prepared to admit. Firstly, short term macroeconomic stability is being increasingly jeopardised by burgeoning capital inflows, a bubble like situation in the stockmarket and the appreciating exchange rate. Past experience has shown the futility of expecting a mere acceleration of economic reforms to alleviate these problems in any

significant manner. But the real threat is in the long run. Fundamental and endemic problems on the poverty, inequality, unemployment, corruption and natural resources fronts have not only remained unsolved in the reforms process, but have aggravated in an alarming fashion (see Nachane (2007)). The *trickle down effect*, on which the Indian reformers have placed so much faith in recent years, in particular, (if at all it exists), seem to be both protracted and slow. If bold and imaginative initiatives are not undertaken at this stage to address these issues, rising societal tensions and political compulsions will inexorably force a crisis unparalleled in our recent history.

## Conclusions

Our discussion clearly indicates that modern India has traveled far in a direction quite the opposite of the one the Father of the Nation would have advocated. In the early years of planning (Phase 1 above), there were some efforts (by and large, sincere and well-intentioned) to incorporate some Gandhian elements within the policy framework. Later, (in Phase 2 above), realising their potential for mass mobilisation, attempts were made to apply some of the Gandhian ideas, more often than not, with ulterior motives to produce results quite contrary to Gandhiji's original vision.

By the 1990s, however, even the lip service to Gandhian values was abandoned. Through a succession of cleverly crafted steps by the various regimes holding power in the last two decades, the nation has now been taken to a stage where it is impossible to retrace our steps and the contemporary Indian milieu is one in which the Mahatma would have felt hopelessly lost. It is a milieu in which, in spite of all the official rhetoric about *inclusive growth*, 255 million Indians live in stark poverty, 17,000 farmers commit suicide and the rulers wave their flags at the 46 Indian billionaires who have made it to the exclusive *Fortune 500 list*. This is certainly not the *Ram Rajya* that he dreamed of for his beloved land of birth. As long as no serious efforts are undertaken to ameliorate poverty, reduce inequality and raise employment, the annual *pilgrimage* by our rulers to Rajghat on 2 October will remain an elaborate and empty ritual.

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# Mahatma Gandhi and the Legacy of Democratic Decentralisation in India

Partha Nath Mukherji<sup>11</sup>

*Generations to come will scarce believe, that such a one as this ever in flesh and blood walked upon this earth. Albert Einstein*

## Introduction

Was Mahatma Gandhi a product of his milieu, and his relevance circumscribed by place and time? Was he an ordinary person who rose to extraordinary heights or a person extraordinary? These and similar questions invoke endless debate and discussion. It can be safely argued, however, that the same milieu of British colonialism, the two World Wars, of racism, of apartheid, produced many great personalities but only one Gandhi that the world recognised as unique personality.

I would like to submit that the relevance of Gandhi is best assessed not just in terms of his contextual responses to the objective conditions of his time and place for bringing about social transformation – like non-violent non-cooperation (*Satyagraha*) the spinning wheel (*charkha*), self-reliance (*swadeshi*), the communitarian village republic (*panchayati raj*), ‘wantlessness’ (*aparigraha*), unto the last (*antnyodaya*) and so on – but in terms of the conceptual and theoretical abstractions that lie embedded in these. If I were to single out some of the most significant abstractions of universal import which many in the world have come to recognise, these would be:

- The transformatory power of truth and non-violence in thought and deed (the non-violent revolt by Buddhist monks for restoration of democracy in Myanmar; the non-violent ouster of authoritarian regimes as in Iran and the Philippines; and other examples)
- The concept and theory of participatory democracy embedded in his vision of *Panchayati Raj*. This is a counter to the elitist representative democracy in the western formulation.
- The search for a non-exploitative technology, a cooperative mode of production and trusteeship that would make for an economic order commensurate with distributive and social justice.
- Emancipatory power of women and the rejection of social inequalities.
- Priority of preventive health care over prescriptive medication.
- Humankind as an integral part of Nature, and not apart from Nature. A principle that is invoked by ecologists and environmentalists the world over.

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- The primacy of obligations over rights. Rights as being embedded in one's obligation to the other.
- The paradigmatic alternative to the western concept of the nation and nation-state.

I shall restrict myself to the legacy of democratic decentralisation and the deepening of democracy in India, and presumably in the world,<sup>12</sup> that Gandhi bequeathed for the future. Embedded in his search for an ideal polity based on *panchayati raj* lies the formulation of participatory democracy. Like most of his ideas, participatory democracy is a contested terrain of clashing and competing interests and ideologies. I wish to demonstrate that in India, the dialectics of contestation over *panchayati raj*, has taken an irreversible, albeit a zig-zag direction, consistent with Gandhi's formulation of participatory democracy. My focus will be on rural India.

### **Indigenous Polity and Grassroots Democracy**

At a time when democracy was defined exclusively in terms of western representative democracy of the West (parliamentary or republican), Gandhi was for a democratic polity that would be 'centred' on the innumerable self-governing village communities, in which the individual will be the unit and 'every village will be republic or panchayat having full powers'. This would not 'exclude dependence on and willing help from neighbours or the world.' In such an arrangement 'there will be ever widening, never ascending circles.' (1946: 8-10) His vision was that of 'complete republic, independent of its neighbours for its vital wants and yet interdependent for many others in which dependence is a necessity...Non-violence with its technique of Satyagraha and non-cooperation will be the sanction of the village community.' (1942: 12) His elaborations, from time to time, on *gram swaraj* were so many attempts at an ongoing exercise to portray a holistic picture of the village republic 'though never realisable in its completeness.' (1946 (a): 16-17) Embedded in this romanticisation was the hard structural reality of rural governance that was native and indigenous to India's unparalleled complexity. During the Indian national movement, he spearheaded the establishment of village panchayats by the Congress Committee, and was fully aware of the problems these panchayats suffered from<sup>13</sup>.

Consistent with his bottom-up approach, he had proposed an alternative to the Westminster model:

There are seven hundred thousand villages in India each of which would be organised according to the will of the citizens, all of them voting. Then there would be seven hundred thousand votes. Each village, in other words, would have one vote. The villagers would elect the district administration; the district administrations would elect the provincial administration, and these in turn elect the President who is the head of the executive (Quoted by Mehta 1964: 43).

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<sup>12</sup> Scholars and political persons from several countries (like Pakistan, Afghanistan, Sri Lanka, South Africa, Brazil, Bolivia, and other countries) have evinced keen interest in the Indian experiment of democratic decentralisation.

<sup>13</sup> For details see my paper on 'Participatory Democratisation: Panchayati Raj and the Deepening of Indian Democracy' (2007: 9)

Gandhi believed that the real development of India was possible through its indigenous political system in which the centralised state would wield only such power as was not within the scope of lower tiers of participatory governance. The state was not the architect but the facilitator of development. More positively, he was for a multi-layered autonomous vertical integration of political institutions with its base as India's villages and its superstructure at the Centre – manifesting a descending level of power over the people as one moved from base to superstructure.<sup>14</sup>

In the post Second World War all-pervasive western paradigm of modernity, traditional values and institutions were regarded as obstacles to development, consequently, it was in opposition to Gandhi's ideals of *gram swaraj* and *panchayati raj*. India witnessed a contestation between forces of 'modern' representative democracy, and those convinced that the inadequacies of representative democracy could only be met by making democracy more participatory through the introduction of *panchayati raj*, transforming villages into 'units of self government'. The contestation begins with the writing of the Constitution for free India.

### **Draft Constitution and Willful Omission of Panchayati Raj**

Babasaheb Ambedkar, the architect of the Indian Constitution, had a polar opposite view of village republics. He found no merit in the mere survival of village republics that were the cause of 'the ruination of India'. They were nothing 'but a sink of localism, a den of ignorance and communalism.' (Constituent Assembly Debates 1989: 38) With an air of finality, he had concluded, 'I am glad that the Draft Constitution has discarded the village and adopted the individual as its unit.' (Ibid: 38)

The willful omission of the village panchayat from the architecture of the Indian polity met with a barrage of criticism, from the time the draft was tabled (4 November 1948) until a resolution had to be passed (22 November 1948). A host of distinguished members including, H. V. Kamath, Arum Chandra Guam, T. Parkas, K. Santana, Shebang All Sabena, Allude Krishnaswamy Ayyar, N. G. Ranga, M. Ananthasayanam Ayyangar, Mahavir Tyagi, K.T. Shah and others voiced their inability to accept this gross omission. Resolution after resolution for amendment was tabled. The points that recurrently echoed in the debate were: (i) Ambedkar's view about village republics was narrow and factually erroneous; (ii) far from villages being the cause of India's ruination, it was the villages that were ruined by colonial exploitation; (iii) the Constituent Assembly that was now engaged in scripting India's Constitution, owed its very existence to the rural masses who had contributed principally to the national movement for independence; (iv) none of the members of the Drafting Committee, except one, had participated in the freedom struggle, hence their inability to appreciate the contribution of the rural masses and their potential power to transform the country. (Ibid: 520-527)

The debates dwelled on issues of theoretical significance. Kamath posed the fundamental question: 'Now what is the State for? ...The ultimate conflict that has to be resolved is this: whether the individual is for the State or the State for the individual?' (Ibid: 221) Ranga asked, 'Sir, do we want centralisation or decentralisation? Mahatma Gandhi has pleaded over a period of thirty years for decentralisation.' He went on to add, 'Sir, one of the most important consequences of over centralisation and strengthening of the Central Government

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<sup>14</sup> In western technical parlance this is known as the principle of subsidiarity.

would be handing over power not to the Central Government but to the Central Secretariat.’ (Ibid 350)

When Gandhi came to learn of this willful omission, his trite observation was:

I must confess that I have not been able to follow the proceedings of the Constituent Assembly (the correspondent) says that there is no mention of or direction about village panchayat and decentralisation in the fore-shadowed Constitution. It is certainly an omission calling for immediate attention if our independence is to reflect the people’s voice. The greater the power of the panchayat, the better for the people.’ (Quoted by Mehta 1964: 43)

Finally, Ambedkar very graciously accepted the following historic resolution moved by K. Santhanam on 22 November:

That after Article 31, the following article be added: ‘31-A. *The State shall take steps to organise village panchayats and endow them with such powers and authority as may be necessary to enable them to function as units of self-government*’ (Constituent Assembly Debates 1989: 520; emphasis added).

### **Failed Experiments and Renewed Faith in Participatory Democratisation**

Clearly the nationalist elite were divided in their conviction over the efficacy of the role and capacity of grassroots village-level democracy in bringing about rapid economic transformation. No less a person than Jawaharlal Nehru preferred to maintain silence during this heated debate. Steeped in the history of India that he himself had authored, he seemed trapped between the ambiguities of western modernity, and the prospects embedded in a rich civilisational heritage. The traumatic Partition of the sub-continent (India–Pakistan) contained a stark warning for the future. It is understandable that he veered towards a centralised democratic state to keep the nation in tact and make it the agency of rapid economic development. His approach was eclectic. He spoke of a ‘third way’, ‘which takes the best of formally existing systems – the Russian, the American and others – and seeks to create something suited to one’s own history and philosophy.’ (Frankel 2005: 3, citing Karanjia)

Impatient for change, he went in a big way for mega-projects: multipurpose hydel projects, land reforms, irrigation schemes, modern agricultural inputs etc. to boost Indian agriculture. He put a lot of expectations in the US model of Community Development Programme (CDP) and National Extension Service (NES) and forged a partnership with the USA to bring about rapid rural transformation through people’s cooperation. Once this experiment conclusively failed, his mind was clear on the primacy that Gandhi had accorded to village-centred development and village-oriented polity. His decision to create a new Ministry of Community Development, Panchayati Raj and Cooperation (18 September 1956) with S. K. Dey at its helm, testified the new resolve with which democratic decentralisation would be pursued. He never looked back thereafter.

In 1957, Pandit Govind Ballabh Pant, Chairman of the Committee on Plan Projects appointed a high-level Committee under the Chairmanship of Balvantrai Mehta, a veteran Gandhian and Congressman. The Committee was mandated: (a) to review the Community Development



Programme and the National Extension Service, and (b) to evolve a system of local self-government. The Committee concluded:

Development cannot progress without responsibility and power. Community development can be real only when the community understands its problems, realises its responsibilities, exercises necessary powers *through its chosen representatives* and maintains a constant and intelligent vigilance on local administration. (Cited in Mehta 1978: 2-3; emphasis added)

It goes to the credit of Dey that he put in place the three-tier structure of sub-State level administration in a very short period of time. The *Panchayat Samiti* became the strategic level for the formulation of the District Plan. The decentralised administrative system hereafter would be formally under elected bodies. The State of Rajasthan became the first to adopt the new scheme (2 October 1959) followed closely by Andhra Pradesh.

The qualitative changes brought about in the administrative and governing structure sought actually to *delegate* power to elected representatives of the Panchayati Raj institutions for the effective *implementation* of the Community Development Programme, *not yet in their formulation*. The development model consisted of an *intensive phase* with heavy resource flow from the Central government; to be followed by a *less intensive phase* with the expectation that heightened people's involvement will be matched by a reduced contribution from the Centre, eventually paving the way for self-sustaining development. Reality proved otherwise. This made Balwantrai Mehta to observe that a further change had to take place '*from a government programme with people's participation to a people's programme with government participation*'. (cited in Wadhvani and Mishra 1996: 173)

In spite of the fact that by 1959 'all the States had passed the panchayat acts and by the mid-1960s panchayats were established throughout India...local administration resisted devolution of functions and powers', and regular elections were not taking place. (Kaushik 2005: 80-81) Mathew attributes this lapse on the electoral front to the fear of ascendancy of *panchayat* leadership. (Mathew 2001: 183-184)

### **Continuity in Gandhian Praxis: Sarvodaya Movement**

After Gandhi's death in 1948, the newly constituted Sarva Seva Sangh, under the leadership of Vinoba Bhave, was committed to carry forward the programme of rural reconstruction and the creation of a *sarvodaya samaj*.<sup>15</sup> The movement came into limelight in the context of the fierce armed Telengana, anti-feudal struggle led by the Communist Party of India. The armed agrarian movement had to succumb to the intervention of the Indian army employed to integrate the feudatory province of Hyderabad (then under the titular rule of the Nizam) with the Indian State. The concept of voluntary gift of land for removing landlessness – *bhoodan* – was given shape and content by Vinoba when he received the first land gift of 100 acres from Ramchandra Reddy in Village Pochampalli in April 1951.<sup>16</sup>

The momentum gained in the *bhoodan* movement developed into a collective initiative for voluntary pooling of land gifts in villages for self-government (*gramdan*) through *gram*

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<sup>15</sup> Sarvodaya literally means 'welfare of all'. *Samaj* refers to 'society'. Sarvodaya Samaj is thus an ideal society in which the 'welfare of all' is guaranteed.

<sup>16</sup> For details on the *bhoodan-gramdan* sarvodaya movement see my paper 'Sarvodaya after Gandhi.' (Mukherji 1986).

*sabhas* (village assemblies). The movement attracted nationalist freedom fighters like Jayaprakash Narayan, Balvantrai Mehta and others. Millions of acres of lands in gift (*bhoodan*) and thousands of village-in-gifts (*gramdan*) became unmanageable for the movement to control even as the government dragged its feet over lands to be redistributed. The All India Panchayat Parishad (AIPP) under the leadership of Jayaprakash Narayan received support from Nehru, and the Ministry of Community Development and Panchayati Raj and Cooperation. It consistently pressed for legislation that would make Article 40 of the Constitution mandatory.

### **Reverse Swing towards Centralisation and Authoritarianism**

The regime after Nehru did not subscribe to democratic decentralisation. On 24 January 1966, the day Indira Gandhi assumed office as Prime Minister, the Ministry of Community Development, Panchayati Raj and Cooperation was 'closed and merged with the extensive empire of the Ministry of Food, Agriculture and Irrigation. (Dey 1982: 89)

The new agricultural strategy relied on centrally-sponsored programmes such as, 'Intensive Agricultural District Programme, Small Farmers Development Agency, Drought Prone Area Programme, Intensive Tribal Development Programme, etc. downgrading the Ministry of Community Development into a department under the Ministry of Food and Agriculture.' (Kaushik 2005: 81)

Indira Gandhi's regime spanning 24 January 1966 till 24 March 1977, followed a continuous policy of centralisation of power, culminating ultimately in the National Emergency and imposition of the President's Rule on 25 June 1975. The convincing defeat of the Congress Party in the General Elections after the withdrawal of the Emergency was a lesson for Indira Gandhi and the country that democracy in India had come to stay.

### **Restoration of Democracy and the Process of Democratic Decentralisation**

Immediately on assumption of power by the then opposition Janata Party, the process of decentralisation was revived with the Asoka Mehta Committee reopening the subject.

The most significant feature of the Committee's report was the linking of 'institutions of democratic decentralisation with socially motivated economic development.' (Mehta 1978: 6) In contrast to the key importance given to the block-level Panchayat Samiti by Balvantrai Mehta in the formulation of district plans, it was suggested that 'the district should be the first point of decentralisation, under popular supervision, below the State level.' (Ibid: 178)

The dissenting note by the veteran Gandhian Siddharaj Dhadda pointed out that the 'very foundation of the structure of Panchayati Raj was missing.' (Mehta 1978: 173) The 'purpose of decentralisation was not merely to help development, however it is defined, but the creation of an integrated structure of self-governing institutions from the village and small town onwards, to the national level in order to enable people to manage their own affairs.' (Mehta 1978: 173) Dhadda was invoking the principle of subsidiarity, which Gandhi had spelt out for *gram swaraj*.

The distinguished Marxist leader Namboodiripad could not ‘think of PRIs<sup>17</sup> as anything other than the integral parts of the country’s administration with no difference between what are called “development” and “regulatory” functions.’ (cited in Kaushik 2005: 103) He observed, ‘I am afraid that the ghost of the earlier idea that PRIs should be completely divorced from all regulatory functions is haunting my colleagues.’ (cited in Kaushik 2005: 104) He, too, was for nothing short of comprehensive devolutionary democracy.

### **Article 40 Vindicated**

The pragmatist in Rajiv Gandhi, successor to Indira Gandhi as Prime Minister, finally vindicated the Gandhian position. He was confronted with a straightforward question: How is it that only ten per cent of the enormous revenue of the State reached the village for the uplift of the poor beneficiaries? His answer was forthright:

If we continue to devise schemes from above large sections of the populations will be left high and dry, and flow of benefits from development will pass over their heads like water on a ducks back, for it is not possible for government agencies to reach each and every individual and to guide him and tell him to do this or that. (cited in Bandyopadhyay 2004: 148)

He argued that it was quite ‘apparent that if our district administration is not sufficiently responsive, the basic reason [was] that *it [was] not sufficiently representative.*’ (cited in Bandyopadhyay 2004: 150 emphasis added)

When the 73<sup>rd</sup> and 74<sup>th</sup> amendments to the Constitution were enacted, India had created history in democratic practice and governance. For the first time the institutionalised organs of participatory democracy constituted the *third stratum* of the Indian state, empowered by affirmative action requiring one-third representation of elected women members and functionaries, and the representation of *dalits*<sup>18</sup> in proportion to their population in the region. The structural requirement enabling them to shape as agents of their destiny and that of the nation was met. What they needed now was only to comprehend and realise the power that is vested in them to surmount the cultural, political and class barriers that come in the way.

### **Prospects and Challenges for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century**

In the past 13 years, almost all states, with the notable exception of Jammu and Kashmir, have gone through the process of electing the PRI functionaries conforming to the 73<sup>rd</sup> Amendment at least once. Elections have taken place in 504 District Panchayats (*Zila Parishads*), 5,912 Block *Panchayat Samitis* and 231,630 *Gram (Village) Panchayats*. Corresponding to each of these tiers of sub-State governance, 1,581; 145,412; and 2,971,446 – a total of 3,132,673 – representatives have been directly elected from their respective constituencies. More than a million of these are women and above 800,000 belong to the Scheduled Castes (*dalits*) and the Scheduled Tribes. The Houses of Parliament have elected 800 members, whilst the 28 States and two Union Territories have elected 4,508 members. The sheer size of the elected members from the village panchayats to the national parliament is a staggering 3,137,754. (Mathew 2003: 20) Democracy in India has reached a new threshold, unprecedented in the world.

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<sup>17</sup> PRIs refer to Panchayati Raj Institutions.

<sup>18</sup> Ex-untouchable castes.

Yet devolution of power is easier enacted than promulgated. The problem of devolution takes two forms. *First*, when out of the list of 29 subjects (Ghosh 2000: 37) that have been recommended for devolution by the XI Schedule of the Constitution, there is a wide variation between States on the number of subjects *actually* devolved (administrative devolution). *Second*, when the financial resources of the local governments are incommensurate with the administrative responsibilities reposed on them (fiscal devolution). As of now, eight States and one Union Territory, in letter, if not all in spirit, have devolved all the 29 subjects to the panchayati raj institutions.<sup>19</sup> (Ministry of Panchayati Raj 2006)

We cannot remain oblivious to the numerous problems that confront the world's largest and most complex democracy. It is not within the scope of this presentation to get into these. I shall mention only 12 challenges to our system of local self-government, if only to keep us anchored to reality.

- (1) There is the factor of the local political economy and the high probability of elite capture of resources.
- (2) Central and State-level political elite feel threatened having to vie with the local political elite, trying to win support from a common constituency.
- (3) The non-elected resource-rich NGOs/INGOs with their primary accountability to the donors operate within *panchayat* jurisdictions as competing structures of influence and power.
- (4) There are State and central-level projects that bypass the authority of the PRIs.
- (5) Problems of accountability and transparency often associated with rent-seeking behaviour characterise many functionaries at all levels.
- (6) *Gram sabhas*, which are the fundamental units of direct democracy, are often convened at irregular intervals with poor attendance.
- (7) There is the problem of what is known as 'proxy panchayats', where the husband/male members of the family act on behalf of the elected women representatives.
- (8) Social-institutional barriers often inhibit the role of *dalits* (the Scheduled Castes) and the Scheduled Tribes in the *Panchayati Raj* system.
- (9) A resistant bureaucracy is tardy in implementing devolution of power.
- (10) Political and economic clientelism in an iniquitous agrarian and caste structure perpetuates the role of dominant powers.
- (11) There are problems relating to ambiguities in the distribution and sharing of power at the various sub-State levels.

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<sup>19</sup> The states are Andhra Pradesh, Gujarat, Haryana, Himachal Pradesh, Karnataka, Kerala, Rajasthan and West Bengal. The Union Territory is: Dadra and Nagar Haveli.

- (12) Most importantly, there are problems of poverty, illiteracy and malnutrition that provide structural barriers to the improvement in life-chances of the deprived and marginal groups.

In conclusion, the dialectics of contestation has entered a new phase after the constitutional breakthrough. The *process* of contestations that I have highlighted in the presentation points to the resultant, irreversible ascendance of the *forces* of *gram swaraj*. It must be distinguished from the wave of decentralisation in many developing countries prompted by structural adjustment programmes since the 1980s that seek efficient service delivery as its main objective. Decentralisation per se is not necessarily democratisation. Neither *deconcentration* nor *delegation* of power is a sufficient condition for effective democratisation. What is important is real *devolution* of power to the constitutionally-elected representatives at the level of local self-government.

Had Babasaheb Ambedkar been with us today, he would have been pleased to note that the serious apprehensions he had nurtured about *panchayati raj* at the time of drafting the Constitution, no longer remain in the same measure. Had Gandhi been alive he would remind us that if only the people were able to hold on steadfastly to truth, non-violence and love the process would be so much the easier.

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