

THE RELEVANCE OF GANDHI *

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I AM THANKFUL TO THE INDIAN COMMITTEE FOR CULTURAL FREEDOM for asking me to speak on this subject. And yet I must begin by saying that perhaps I am not the right person to speak on it, because, as you know, I happen to be deeply involved in the Gandhian movement at present. I would not be so involved if I did not believe that Gandhi was relevant to our problems, to our age. I am thus a very committed person and it may well be that because of this I cannot take a very critical attitude as some others might. I hope you will keep this in mind.

In considering the relevance of an individual or an idea, what is of great importance is the point of view from which one is looking at the question. What does one himself want? That is, what are one's own ideas and ideals? For a person having one type of ideas and pursuing one set of ideals and objectives Gandhi may be entirely irrelevant. On the other hand, for another person who is interested in other ideals, who cherishes other set of values of life, who has set himself other social, economic, political objectives Gandhi would be very deeply and intensely relevant. I shall illustrate this by a few examples which occur to me. There are certain individuals—in politics, or in public life, maybe even in the intellectual fields—who may not be concerned with ethical questions and moral values. They are of the view that as far as, let us say, politics and public affairs are concerned, as far as affairs of the state and questions of international relations are concerned, there is no room in these fields for any ethical considerations or ethical values. Obviously, Gandhi would be wholly irrelevant to them from that point of view. I personally believe that this question of human values is at the bottom of all philosophies of life, all the political isms, let us say, democracy, socialism and communism. I do not have to remind you of the recent attempt made in the communist world to give a human face to communism and of what happened in that particular instance. I am sure that to a man like Dubcek, Gandhi is *not* irrelevant, nor to all those who put up such a unique and marvelous opposition to one of the biggest military powers in the world. To the people of Czechoslovakia, to whom I am referring, Gandhi cannot be irrelevant. There may be some to whom human life is of no particular importance or significance. To them the life of the individual, or the individual himself, is just a means to an

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end, a pawn in the game of politics, or of power, or of something else. To such persons Gandhi would be, at least in this respect, irrelevant. On the other hand, there are those for whom—to use the humanist phrase—man is the measure of all things, for whom man is the centre of society and the main concern of all philosophies of life, all political theories, for whom, in other words, man is not a means but an end in himself. To such persons Gandhi would be very relevant.

We in India believe in and have accepted democracy. It may have many imperfections and shortcomings, but still it has withstood all the stresses and strains which a poor and backward country with a huge population like ours has to undergo. It has survived through all these for 21 years and more. There are some, though, to whom democracy is irrelevant, whose faith in democracy is very superficial and who use the concept and processes of democracy as a cover for something that is its very opposite—for them Gandhi would not be relevant.

So, you see, how the subjective quality of the individual who is considering the relevance of Gandhi is also very relevant. I happen to be an individual who believes in “man as the measure of all things,” who believes deeply in the humanist philosophy, though not in what some would call materialistic, rationalistic, humanistic (with which I have no quarrel). My own humanism is based on the belief in the universality and the supremacy of the human spirit. For a man like me, who believes in democracy deeply, and who would not sacrifice or want or let the freedom of man be sacrificed for anything—for the State, the glory of the party, or anything else—for me, and for these very reasons, Gandhi is very relevant.

This should serve as a kind of general statement of how I look upon the question of Gandhi's relevance to our age. You may be aware that many people have said, not only in India but in many parts of the world, that Gandhi was perhaps ahead of his time. He was specifically a prophet of the atomic age in which the engines of violence which man has invented for the first time in history threatens to destroy the whole of mankind. Gandhi not only preached non-violence as a philosophy and an ideal but practised it on a very colossal scale and did it, if not with complete success, with very great success. As long as there is this violence which threatens the very future of the human race, the relevance of Gandhi would continue. He will remain relevant till this danger of total annihilation of the human race is removed. I was quite surprised when I read, as some of you might have read, the epilogue in Volume II of Pyarelal's monumental *Mahatma Gandhi, the Last Phase*. General Douglas McArthur, if you please, describing Gandhi as one of those prophets who ‘lived far ahead of the time,’ said: ‘In the evolution of civilization, if it is to survive, all men cannot fail eventually to adopt his belief that the process of mass application of force to resolve contentious issues is fundamentally not only wrong but contains with-

in itself the germs of self-destruction.' Coming from a military leader of that stature the statement is rather remarkable. Sometimes military men are more acutely aware of the dangers of mass violence—not only mob violence but mass, organized violence in the name of nation or empire or ideology or what have you. I think the danger of such violence is appreciated oftentimes better by military men than by politicians or others. Mary Bethune, American Negro woman leader, said when Gandhi was assassinated (this is also from Pyarelal's Epilogue): "a great warm light has been extinguished. . . . His spirit, reached to the stars and sought to win a world without gun or bayonet or blood. . . . As we, mothers of the earth, stand in awesome fear of the roar of jet planes, the crash of atom bombs and the unknown horrors of germ warfare, we must turn our eyes in hope to the East, where the Sun of the Mahatma blazes." I know it no longer blazes in the East, but it did blaze at one time. The *New York Times*, certainly not an impractical idealist like some of us, said that "He has left as his heritage a spiritual force that must in God's good time prevail over arms and armaments and the dark doctrines of violence." All this eloquence might have been prompted by that great crucifixion, "another crucifixion," as Pearl Buck described it. It might be that this was only the outpouring of the anguished heart of the human race, but I do believe that what they said has a germ of truth, which has yet to be learnt by all those who are trying to find a way out of the dangers which threaten to overwhelm us. When I say us, I do not mean the Indian people alone but the people of the whole world.

Now, let us come to India and to our present-day problems. I am not a philosopher. To me the attraction of Gandhi was that of a revolutionary. It is this aspect of Gandhiji's life that first attracted me to him and that still attracts me to him. I was very much impressed by one experience through which I lived during the first non-Congress Ministry in my State. If you have given any serious thought to the problem of land reform in India, you will agree with me that after the abolition of the Zamindari system there has been hardly any worthwhile land reform in the country. That this has stood in the way of agricultural development was brought out not by a socialist or a communist, not by a Gandhian like me, but by Dr. Ladejinsky, a Ford Foundation specialist who was commissioned by the Planning Commission to make a report on the tenurial system in the country and their relation to the agricultural performance in the package programme areas. To those who may be interested in the question I would recommend this small report, which for some time had been suppressed by the Planning Commission because it was so adverse to the State Governments which were all Congress Governments at that time.

Keeping all this in mind I made a very simple suggestion to my friends in the Mahamaya Prasad Sinha Ministry. I told them that if they were

thinking of a radical land reform bill, they were welcome to make it as radical as they liked and they would have my support. But, I pointed out, a new legislation would take a long time. The drafting of the bill, the presentation to the Assembly, the reporting of the Select Committee, the discussions with the opposition parties—all this is time-consuming. Moreover, the coalition itself had within it parties which might not be prepared to go very far—parties, in fact, which were even more conservative than the Congress Party, at least on this question. Therefore, I suggested an alternative programme of action. I reminded them that there were on the statute books several enactments passed by the Congress administrations in the last 19 years. I pointed out the relevant ones and I said: “Why don’t you implement all these? If you do, you will have made a small revolution in the countryside in Bihar.” They are simple, ordinary things, like recording the homestead rights of Harijans and other landless people who had their huts built on the lands of landowners; the law gave them occupancy rights in the small plots of land on which their little huts were constructed; they could not be evicted from those lands. The only requirement was that they should be registered and brought on government records. They could be brought on record *suo moto* by officers without anybody having to apply. The fact of actual tenancy was easy to ascertain, for the whole village knows who is living where and on whose land. The relevant legislation was passed as far back as something like 1950 when Mr. Srikrishna Sinha was the Chief Minister. Take for another example the rights of sharecroppers, which is in all conscience a terrible problem. Similarly, the ceiling legislation is already something like five years old, and yet you would be surprised to know that not a single acre of land has yet been declared surplus and distributed to the landless in the State of Bihar. The Revenue Department during the Mahamaya Prasad Ministry said it was their calculation that the ceiling was so high and so much time had been given to the landowners to sell or transfer their land that not more than 67 thousand acres could be made available for redistribution. Well, if *benami*, bogus transfers had been made to servants, or to people who were dead, or to relations who did not exist, then it was for the government to detect evasions and bring the culprits to book. Again, take the Money Lenders Act. The highest rate of interest permissible in law is 12½ per cent, but 150 per cent interest is being charged even now in the tribal areas. It would appear that the poorer the farmer the higher is the interest he is made to pay to the moneylender. I said the laws were there and all that the Government had to do was implement them. Nothing was done. The Jana Sangh and Raja Saheb Kamakhya Narayan’s party, both of which were constituents of the coalition, kicked up such a terrific row that the government nearly broke on the issue and nothing was done. I am now very eagerly looking forward to what Mr. Jyoti Basu (I hope as the

leader of the largest party he is made the Chief Minister)* may do in West Bengal in the way of land reform. We in India have parliamentary democracy. A very large majority of the voters are farmers. Maybe they are only dwarf farmers, petty holders of an acre or half an acre, but nonetheless they have the mentality of property owners and I think that is one reason (if there are others it is for economists and sociologists to identify them) why India has been so backward in land reforms or even in enforcing those laws which were passed years ago.

Now, why did I bring all this up? Merely in order to show how this revolutionary leader, Gandhi, fashioned a tool of revolution, a method, which was independent of the State, independent of legislation, and by means of which you went directly to the people and brought about changes by changing the people. Any hack can write about the failure of this movement or that programme, but it will surprise you, if you look into the figures, that many times more land, more acreage of land, many times more area of land, has been redistributed through the movement of land gift, *Bhoodan*, than by land legislation in the whole country. In one or two States, legislation did perhaps go a little ahead of *Bhoodan*, but taking the country as a whole, five times, maybe even ten times, more land has been redistributed by *Bhoodan* than by legislation. We try to find out from the State Governments how much land had been redistributed to the landless. We keep on writing to them, but do not hear anything in reply because the record is so disappointing. I shall make another bold statement to you: As of today there is no political party in the country, no matter how radical it is, which has a more radical agrarian programme than, let us say, the *Gramdan* programme of Vinoba. You will not find even the most radical of the leftist parties, the left communist party, saying in its election manifesto in West Bengal that when it came to power it would abolish private ownership of land and vest it in the village community, the Gram Sabha. I am quite sure every socialist, every communist believes that the means of production should be socially owned, though not necessarily by the State, and socially controlled. But they just cannot put it down on paper because they fear they would not get votes. Even the half-acre-wallahs will say: "No, thank you. We are not such fools as to give you our votes so that you may take away our ownership rights." And, yet, you can go, as we have done, and persuade them voluntarily to sign a document (which is a legal document under *Gramdan* legislation), declaring that they surrender their ownership rights in land to the village community, the Gram Sabha. This radical change from private to community ownership is a very radical transformation. And it is taking place. In about seventy thousand villages in the country, if not more, the majority of the farmers, if not all, have agreed to do this. This may be a mere paper declaration, but it is a declaration made by them and attested

* This was said before the formation of the U. F. Ministry in West Bengal.

to by their signatures on pieces of paper. The next stage as provided by the law is the confirmation of the *Gramdan*. It is this character of Gandhi and his philosophy, and not only the philosophy but the methodology that he fashioned and placed before the world and used himself that has been an attraction to me. And I find that this seems to be working. Maybe in the Indian conditions, as far as land is concerned, this method is the only one which will succeed. This is a bold statement to make, but I do make it as a result of whatever I have been able to study and experience. Because an overwhelmingly large part of the electorate is made up of farmers, peasant proprietors, small or middle class (big are very few, as you know), redistribution of land through legislation is extremely difficult. Zamindari was abolished because there were only a few zamindaris. Industries might be nationalized because owners are few. But in this particular case it seems to me that Gandhi's method is the only method that is likely to succeed. Many socialists and communists have been of great help in this movement and we look forward to their continued cooperation.

I shall not talk on the theoretical level of how great a revolutionary Gandhi was. His whole life bears testimony to that. He kept on experimenting with what he called the Truth—continuously discovering, discarding, and improving. But my subject is not what Gandhi did, but what his relevance is to us today. And the relevance is here in actual practice in this very sensitive field of rural life, rural society. Bihar is 90 per cent rural, the whole of India is about 72 per cent rural; only 18 per cent is urban even now. In the sensitive field of the question of relationship of land to the rural people the relevance of Gandhi is still in action in this *Bhoodan-Gramdan* movement. I had reacted to *Bhoodan* in the same way in which my other colleagues in the Socialist Party had done at that time. Like them I thought it would take centuries. But I discovered that it would not take centuries, and it has not taken centuries. In fact, it has worked much faster than any other method. In spite of Mr. Nehru, in spite of the Planning Commission, in spite of the socialists, in spite of the communists, the government has made very little progress in this particular field. This seems to be the picture generally in the whole of Asia wherever change has been attempted to be brought about democratically. (Where there is dictatorship that is another matter; we are not discussing that at the moment).

Take our unemployment question, take our whole direction of industrialization, economic development and the rest of it and see where we are today. Take our system of education. Any one who really has his feet firmly planted on the Indian soil (he may have his head anywhere—in Moscow, in Washington, in London or in Paris) cannot say that Gandhi was irrelevant to the present conditions of India. And he will continue to be relevant, maybe for half a century, or even more. I was a critic of Gandhi in my socialist days—I still am a socialist of a sort—a voluntarian or a

communitarian socialist, if you please. But I am convinced that when Gandhi emphasized finding jobs for human hands before we found jobs for machines, he was looking at the development of our country from the people's point of view, from the human point of view, not from the econometrician's or the statistician's point of view. Unless our economic development takes this turn, we shall make little progress. I had hoped that after Dr. Gadgil's taking over the Planning Commission this would happen. I still have not lost hope, though I am very much disturbed by the trends that I notice. I feel that unless economic development is man-oriented rather than statistics-oriented, we would go further and further downhill. The situation in the country would become more and more disturbed and discontent among the people would mount. I do not know what directions it may find; our democracy may be threatened and anything may result from it.

Gandhiji is criticized for his suspicion of industrialism. He suspected that industrialism would completely distort human life and values of life. I may not go whole hog with him on this. But I would like to remind you that Gandhiji did not say that he was against science, against technology. After all, a seeker after truth that he was, he could not have been against science. He himself made experiments in fields you and I would hesitate to enter, and it was all a scientific approach. He was not against technology or science, nor against the machine. But he did not want the machine to become the master of man. What has happened in the Western society, including the communist society, is that technology, the machine has become the master. The London *Economist* in one of its recent issues visualized the development in the American society in the next few years. It is a picture which strikes terror into my heart—a society which is so over-mechanized, over-organized, over-centralized, so gigantic, so colossal, so far beyond the human scale that the autonomy of the individual is completely obliterated. It might nominally be democracy. But the man is not his own master; he cannot make choices; he feigns he makes them, but somebody else makes them for him. One begins to doubt whether there is any difference between totalitarianism so called and this kind of democracy. I certainly would not like to live in such a society. Man is almost anonymous in such a society. Maybe he has his own little circle of friends, or little community. But yet, on the whole, he is just nobody; he does not count for anything at all. These aspects of technology and of science, I think, are basically ethical. It revolves around the question whether one would inculcate an attitude of mind which does not put any kind of limit to wants. It sounds silly to talk about limitation of wants in a poor country like India. But take the United States or any of the prosperous countries. There is there an insatiable craving for more and more technology and the limitless expansion of human wants and an unending race between them. And the whole world becomes an unwilling victim of the technological Frankenstein that has been created.

I have here something from Schumacher which I shall read out to you: "I was recently in the United States and in meetings I heard this. They freely talk about the polarization of the population in the United States into three immense megalopolitan areas—one extending from Boston to Washington, a continuous built-up area of 60 million people; one around Chicago, another 60 million; and one of the West Coast from San Francisco to Santiago, again a continuous built-up with 60 million people, the rest of the country being left practically empty, deserted provincial towns and the land cultivated with huge tractors and combined harvesters and immense amounts of chemicals. If this is somebody's conception of the future of the United States, it is hardly a future worth having." I cannot agree more with Mr. Schumacher when he makes this statement. If the repeated technological explosion that is taking place is allowed to go unchecked, then I wonder if the American President, or even the whole American people, will be able to prevent the evolution of American life and society in this direction.

We have to ask ourselves if we in India would also like to develop into this kind of society. This is a matter of choice, a subjective thing. I happen to believe in the small community, not necessarily the small community that we have today but the agro-industrial community in which the amenities of life are provided, of course, but in which there is opportunity for cultural life and intellectual life and opportunity for self-development. What the limits of such a community should be in the matter of population and area may be a variable quantity, but nonetheless variable within bounds. I think the social sciences and the physical sciences have, for the first time in history, made it possible for man to really order his future. Enough is known about man, the individual, the society, groups, etc. to enable us to do this, as Julian Huxley says. But how is this going to happen, unless people understand where they want to go and unless they are able to control those who are making decisions for them? As at present they do not even know where the decisions are being made.

I have digressed a little, but the point I am making is that there is no virtue in bigness itself. Look at the way Delhi is growing. There must be a limit to the size if the city of Delhi is to be a city worth living in. I do not know whether anybody can control this.

This much about the relevance of Gandhi to technology, to science, to such questions as planning, employment, and so on. I am not saying that one must accept it in its entirety. It would be a very foolish person, a foolish Gandhian who were to seize every letter of Gandhi and try to put it into practice. There must be enough of originality to take from Gandhi what is worth taking and apply it to what we have today. I am quite sure that in the spheres which I have mentioned there is a very great deal which we can take. I spoke of the agricultural situation and the rural community. I shall conclude by saying a few words about business, industry and commerce.

We have, broadly speaking, three competing concepts. They overlap undoubtedly, but they can still be distinguished. One is that of private enterprise which, as industrialism develops the way it is developing at least in the United States and some of the other countries, becomes less and less private but nonetheless is there. At least the private profit element is certainly there even though the management is in the hands of a class of managers, who have hardly any ownership rights except perhaps as share-holders. The other is the democratic socialist concept and the third is the communist concept of industry. Now, here problems have also arisen which are very serious and deserve to be understood better and examined further. But I shall confine myself to the problems of our own country. Socialists who believe in the democratic method, not to speak of communists who, while making use of democracy, themselves say that they do not believe in it in all situations, always cry in Parliament for more and more nationalization. Nationalization is believed to be a kind of solution to the problems which capitalism in India has created. Now, some of the nationalized industries are doing well but most of the larger ones are not. This may be the fault of management, not the fault of nationalization itself. But all this argument does not go beyond the economic level. It is clear to me that the values of socialism, as I understood them when I was a socialist and as I understood them even today, are nowhere near realization in the nationalized sector. What is happening in the communist countries as well as in the socialist and the democratic socialist countries is that nationalization is followed by bureaucratism so that it becomes a kind of bureaucratic economy rather than a socialist economy. If you wish to call a bureaucratic economy a socialist economy just because ownership is vested in the nation I have no quarrel. But that is not my conception of socialist economy. You go to Jamshedpur and Rourkela which are not far from each other, one in the private sector and the other in the public sector. Except for that and except for the manner of distributing the surplus value, to use a Marxian phrase, what is the difference between the two? There isn't any surplus value in Rourkela for distribution, but one hopes there will be. It is our bureaucracy, I think, which is at fault and which is one of the great evils from which we suffer. I do believe that unless this whole bureaucratic system is radically transformed there is no future for our administration, for our government, for our industry or anything else. This, was, however, the case. Take the relationship between the employees and the management—there is no difference. At least in Jamshedpur there is one recognized union: the Tata Worker's Union. In Rourkela, on the other hand, there are five unions contending among themselves all the time and the management plays one against the other. Take again, the way the workers live, the way the managers and the technicians live, look at the townships that have been built, as to the question of the place of workers in the management—there is no difference. Here,

I think, every country, whether in the democratic world or in the communist world (I don't call it by any other name), has failed to solve the basic problems. The only country which perhaps is nearer a solution from my point of view is Yugoslavia although there too the League of Communists continues to be the final arbiter of the fate of the people. If you go a little deeper into the question of the performance of workers, including the technicians and others in the socialized or nationalized sector, you will find that there is a great deal to be desired.

I should like to share a reminiscence with you. When we formed the Congress Socialist Party in 1934 and framed its programme, I showed a copy to Gandhiji and asked for his opinion. He looked at it and pointing his finger at one of the items said: "This is after my own heart. If you people can really do this, I am all with you." And the item? It read: "From each according to his capacity and to each according to his needs." Now for me this is the ideal. True a long-range ideal, but nonetheless an ideal to work for. Unless you reach this ideal there is no socialism because either there will be coercion or there will be incentives, including monetary incentives. Stalin had to introduce Stakhanovism and use other methods. Even Tito had to accept the gap between the highest and the lowest. In the spheres in which the ethics of socialist economy is important and relevant, I do not know what else except Gandhi would be relevant. This is so because you cannot force any individual to give his best and take only what he needs. It has to be done willingly. It must come from within; it is an ethical behaviour and nothing else. I dare say that in the communist and socialist worlds there are idealists who are burning the candles of their lives at both ends for the cause. But I am not talking about a few idealists. I am talking of the generality of people. The common people have to accept it as the only right kind of conduct. We have not yet been able to find a practical way of implementing Gandhiji's concept of trusteeship which is applicable not only to the owners, but also to the workers. Every member of the society has to have this attitude of being a trustee. This means a responsible citizen, a responsible worker, a responsible manager. This means everyone discharges his responsibility of his own will and volition as if he was impelled from within and not because he draws a fat salary or because he dreads the sword hanging over his head. I do think that if the kind of values in the economic field that communism believes in have to be realized, they can only be realized by some method of voluntariness, which is the essence of trusteeship. How it is to be brought about I do not know, but I hope we will discover a way. If a whole State comes under *gramdan*, then we will have to face the problems of urban communities, the problems of industry and commerce and the problems of labour and so on. At the moment, however, we are groping in the dark. But it seems to me that here also Gandhi has a contribution to make. His guidelines were two: Conversion

and non-violent non-cooperation. Conversion means going to the people trying to persuade them. This is the opposite of applying force and is a perfectly democratic method. After all, the Communists won in West Bengal not because they threatened people into voting for them but because they persuaded them. Non-cooperation was to be applied when a great majority had been persuaded and only a few recalcitrants were left. But non-cooperation was wholly unlike a strike, a *gherao* or a *bundh* and, of course, was totally non-violent. These were the two methods Gandhi had indicated. But how he would have applied them in concrete situations—in regard, for example, to Ahmedabad millowners with whom he had a fight in his early days—I do not know.

While I have shared these thoughts with you I have been conscious that if my recent illness had not prevented my writing out the speech or even organizing my thoughts better, I would not have taken such a long time to outline them. But what I have said will have given you, I hope, some idea of why and in what way I consider Gandhi relevant to our age and our country and why I believe he will remain so relevant for many years to come.